

Book Reviews

Suggestions for reviews should be sent to Wolf Burchard at the Metropolitan Museum, 1000 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10028, USA (email: Wolf.Burchard@metmuseum.org; telephone + 1 212 650 2208).

CLAUDIA KINMONTH, *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700–2000* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020). 547 pp., 446 col. ill. us. ISBN 978-178205-405-4. £35

Claudia Kinmonth has devoted her professional life to this subject and this book reflects the extensive and deep knowledge that comes from persistent work in what might be considered a



difficult field. Even for members who are wedded inalienably to the high style furniture of Chippendale or Riesener, there is much to be learned from it in terms of careful, almost archaeological, fieldwork and the steady accumulation of interlinked areas of information in the absence of archive sources. The author first published on this subject in 1993 (*Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950*, published by Yale University Press), following that with *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* in 2006 (also a Yale publication). To call the current book, however, a second edition of the 1993 publication would not reflect the depth of additional research and fieldwork that is evident here. It is not only a study of surviving rural furniture but also of the social history of the people who owned and made it, their lives, for the most part, constrained by poverty but enlivened by ingenuity and an indomitable wish to bring some convenience and visual pleasure into even the simplest homes.

The book is weighty and is divided into ten chapters, discussing not only furniture types as one might expect, but also the topics of 'The Hearth and the Shrine' and 'Small Furnishings and Utensils', both of which contain material that badly needed to be recorded and explored before it disappears entirely with the relentless modernization that reflects the (happily) more affluent conditions of modern rural Ireland.

Such furniture, especially that with the vibrant painted finishes popular in the last century, is ripe for the creation of a beautifully photographed picture book with romantically nostalgic captions. This book is far from that. It is rigorous in recording whatever can be known of the many pieces illustrated and of the society that made and used them, and the author draws on archaeological and ethnographic methods of careful, systematic recording to create her authoritative account of these subjects. What was clearly extensive fieldwork, including many interviews with the last generation to use and make such furniture, has produced not only physical descriptions (these benefiting from the author's early training as a cabinet-maker) but also solid background information, with more makers' names than one might expect.

The extent of sources used is wide, from official reports on social conditions instigated by the British government to poetry and popular songs, via the expected sources of inventories, accounts of travellers or (but only occasionally) bills for furniture. Some offer descriptions of furniture, others are more reflective, as in J. M. Synge's comment on furniture in the Aran Islands at the turn of the twentieth century, which he sees as seeming 'to exist as a natural link between the people and the world that is about them'.

The book looks at the full range of rural furniture, from the simplest home-made pieces (such as stools made from butter boxes) to 'carpenter's furniture' with clear influence of metropolitan fashions interpreted with a time lapse. It introduces us to a variety of makers

(including wheelwrights and tinkers) and techniques (including straw mats and straw (*súgán*) chairs — or even 'Beauty Board' (Formica) added to early tables in the 1950s). Mass-produced furniture understandably plays a small part in this study but the factory-made Windsor chairs of the early twentieth century, made by the Wilson Brothers of Athlone, with their characteristic double stretchers, are included. The author draws parallels with traditions elsewhere, particularly in Wales and Scotland, linked to Ireland both geographically and historically.

Attention is given not only to recording the minute details of furniture but also to recording its usage. We learn of traditions of placement of individual items of furniture such as the settle or the bed in relation to the hearth and of arrangements of decorative items that are as considered as arrangements in more fashionable interiors, including 'whamelled' or upturned bowls on a dresser or decorative arrangements of glass fishing floats on dressers in coastal communities.

There is a good gazetteer of museum collections of country furniture and even a map of Ireland which reminds us not only of the counties but also of the four historic provinces that often provide geographic limits for certain features. The glossary lists both English and Irish terms.

Inevitably, there are difficulties in managing such a large body of information and fiercer editing might have reduced some of the repetition, found in captions in particular, that can seem irksome if you are reading the book entire but are clearly useful if it is used as a reference book. Repetition is a small price

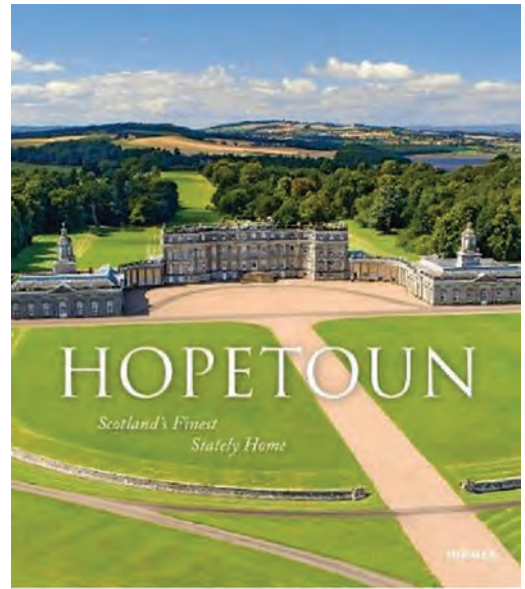
to pay for the knowledge imparted.

The author excuses herself from a bibliography, citing the lack of general publications except her own. Sources can be traced through the footnotes, but a list of the most used ones would have been useful. In contrast, her acknowledgements are a rich source of information. Whereas one usually skips this section or skims it lightly, these pages are worth reading with attention, as an introduction to the many people currently working on aspects of Irish interiors and their material culture. Mostly we are grateful to the author for her persistence in seeking out surviving pieces and fostering a relationship of trust and understanding with the owners that has allowed her to photograph and record these fragile interiors. This work requires particular determination and we value its results.

SARAH MEDLAM

COUNTESS OF HOPETOUN, POLLY FEVERSHAM, LEO SCHMIDT (eds), *Hopetoun, Scotland's Finest Stately Home*, with contributions from Anne Bantelmann-Betz, Peter Burman, Christopher Dingwall, Asita Farnusch, John Hardy, James Holloway, Lord Alexander Hope, Earl of Hopetoun, David Jones, Alexandra Skedzuhn-Safir and Christopher Martin Vogtherr. Photographs by Frank Dalton and Claire Takacs (Munich: Hirmer, 2020). 240 pp., 209 col. illus. ISBN 978-3-7774-3439-1. £49.95; \$50; €51.30

After spending a rewarding day at Hopetoun in September 2019, this generously illustrated monograph, and particularly David Jones's account of the furniture, stimulated my recollection of



this outstanding Scottish great house. Following my visit, I contacted the archivist, who kindly shared the 1703 bill from London-based Huguenot cabinet-maker Jean Guilbaud, Jean Pelletier's son-in-law, for overmantel glasses. I hoped that the spectacular set of mirror, table and *torchères* on ebonized and giltwood stands, beautifully japanned with flowers, attributed to Guilbaud by Gervase Jackson-Stops when exhibited in *Courts and Colonies*, New York, 1988/89, would be included.

In a spectacular setting designed by Scottish architects William Bruce and the Adam brothers between 1723 and 1756 for the 1st Earl of Hopetoun, furnishings were made locally in Edinburgh. Suppliers may have included Jacques and Henri Hieu and Daniel Le Gagett, French cabinet-makers licensed to set up in the Scottish metropolis in the late seventeenth century. Other local makers worked at Newhailes nearby before contributing to Hopetoun. William Strachan, carver, provided picture