



**IRISH COUNTRY FURNITURE AND FURNISHINGS 1700-2000**

CLAUDIA KINMONTH  
Cork University Press, 2020  
pp 576 fully illustrated h/b  
€39 ISBN: 978-1-78205-405-4  
Peter Pearson

Claudia Kinmonth's original book on Irish country furniture, published in 1993, is a much-treasured record of the tables and chairs, dressers and settle-beds, and all of the ephemera of life, that one would once have found in an Irish cottage or farmhouse. She has now brought out a new, updated, all-colour version with many more illustrations and insights into the past lives of Irish rural dwellers.

The widespread disappearance of Irish vernacular buildings along with their traditional furnishings has been highlighted and a good deal written about over the past seventy years, but as the years go by more and more of this invaluable and attractive heritage continues to vanish. To find an authentic, unaltered or even a well-restored thatched cottage is a rarity. Perhaps it can be explained in this way: that the vision of poverty is so etched into the national memory that most Irish people prefer modern buildings and new flat-pack furniture. I have met older people in the country who were embarrassed by

the survival of a mud-walled cottage, with a large open fireplace, adjoining their later farmhouse.

This beautifully produced book records the interiors of many such dwellings and shows the context of the furniture – be it sùgán chair, cradle or salt box. The reproduction of early paintings and drawings, mostly 19th-century, show the pieces in their natural setting, in daily use. Old photographs, for instance, from the Lawrence collection and many more recent images taken by the author complement the text and bring us into an all but vanished world. The subject is a vast one and it has to be said that Kinmonth has been persistently terrier-like in following up every possible lead and knocking on strangers' doors to discover unusual items, so that the book presents us with a very thorough overall picture of Irish country furniture.

Fascinating chapters deal with the issue of 18th- and 19th-century timber shortages throughout Ireland and the need for the thrifty recycling of materials, especially the flotsam and jetsam of shipwreck which coastal dwellers made great use of. Masts and spars were often used to support the mud or stone canopy of a hearth and shipwrecked boards might end up as part of dressers or chairs.

A great deal of attention is given to the materials used and to the resourcefulness of people. For instance, the so-called hedge chairs were made from locally sourced timber found in the hedgerows and are quirky in form and beautiful to look at. We learn that three-legged stools and chairs were more suited to a rough, uneven floor of earth or stone and that straw, briers and bog deal were used for weaving and to make rope and twine.

The most prized items of such furniture were the dresser and the settle, some of which were given as part of a marriage dowry. A well-furnished dresser was considered to be a status symbol.

We are indebted to Claudia Kinmonth for this inspirational book which is appealing on so many levels and will make the reader want to see collections of the real things, the best of which are on view in the Irish Agricultural Museum in Wexford and the National Museum in Mayo.

Peter Pearson is a writer and artist.

**THE BEST ADDRESS IN TOWN: HENRIETTA STREET, DUBLIN AND ITS FIRST RESIDENTS, 1720-80**

MELANIE HAYES  
Four Courts Press, 2020  
pp 294 fully illustrated h/b  
€30.00 ISBN: 978-1-84682-847-8  
William Laffan

Developed on a greenfield site to the north-east of the city by the enterprising banker Luke Gardiner, Henrietta Street rapidly became home to Georgian Dublin's political, military and ecclesiastical elites. Over three decades from about 1730, ever grander houses were built on the sloping site, many of truly palatial proportions. A marketing coup for Gardiner was attracting as the first resident Hugh Boulter, the Archbishop of Armagh.

The acquisition of a Henrietta Street townhouse with the chance to be a neighbour of the primate and a growing number of peers, was the clearest statement possible of one's

