



## Irish country furniture and furnishings 1700-2000

by Claudia Kinmonth, Cork, Cork University Press, 2020, 547 pp., Colour illustrations, €39.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78205-404-4

Gillian O'Brien

To cite this article: Gillian O'Brien (2021): Irish country furniture and furnishings 1700-2000, Folk Life, DOI: [10.1080/04308778.2021.1969770](https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1969770)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1969770>



Published online: 03 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Irish country furniture and furnishings 1700-2000**, by Claudia Kinmonth, Cork, Cork University Press, 2020, 547 pp., Colour illustrations, €39.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78205-404-4

Claudia Kinmonth's monumental *Irish Country Furniture and Fittings* makes a hugely significant contribution to our understanding of Irish rural and domestic life, material culture and craftsmanship. It is a weighty tome running to over 500 pages and it is lavishly illustrated, with almost all of the 446 images in colour. The publishers, Cork University Press, have done a magnificent job, not only producing a beautiful volume, but pricing it competitively, unlike many academic publishers.

Each of the ten chapters in the book is dedicated to one element of the interior of the home or a type of furniture. An indicator of the level of detail in the book is evident by simply looking at the subdivisions within the chapters – the chapter on stools and chairs has seventeen subheadings including hedge chairs, comb-back chairs, *súgán* chairs and chairs made of straw. And there are chapters devoted to dressers, beds, tables among others.

*Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings* is the results of decades of research and fieldwork. It grew from Kinmonth's previous books, *Irish Country Furniture* (Yale University Press, 1993) and *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (Yale University Press, 2006) and it expands greatly on both. The book highlights the importance of material culture to our understanding of the social and cultural history of Ireland and it's a fine example of interdisciplinary work with art, literature, poetry, travel writing and folklore among the sources mined by Kinmonth. The book is also a salutary lesson in what has already been lost. Many of the photographs of furniture and the interiors of homes were taken in the 1980s and much of what was recorded then has since been lost.

The book focuses largely on domestic rural furniture and many readers (not only those in Ireland) may feel a twinge of recognition as they move through the book. Great ingenuity and resourcefulness is evident, whether that was using parts salvaged from shipwrecks as was done with wood from the wreck of the steamer *Asian* in 1945 which was transformed into stools. Butter boxes were repurposed as tool boxes, seats and sewing boxes while flour sacks became bedding, tablecloths and babies' nappies. Great craftsmanship is also apparent and, when known, Kinmonth names the maker – an act of remembrance when so many have been forgotten. It's important to have the names of William O'Neill, wheelwright, Tomás MacDhurcain, joiner, Thomas Murphy, furniture-maker among others written into the record. While the book is focused primarily on Irish vernacular furniture, at times Kinmonth also considers how these sit within a broader international framework.

*Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings* is in part an exploration of Irish Catholicism, not in the church and cathedral sense, but in the faith and community sense. The importance of the Stations – when the local priest and neighbours descended for a mass in the home – to rural communities is highlighted. It was vital to have the house looking spick and span and the good china out for the occasion and this often involved months of preparation where walls were whitewashed and all woodwork repainted in anticipation of the Station. Holy shelves and shrines were commonplace and generally found in the kitchen. The shelves were often home to a collection of painted plaster statues of religious figures, bottles of holy water,

St Bridget's crosses and a votive candle (or electric light). All of that will be familiar to many. Much less familiar will be the remarkable God-in-a-Bottle where crucifixes were erected in a bottle which was then filled with water.

In Padraic Colum's *An Old Woman of the Roads* (1907), one of many poems quoted, the old woman thinks wistfully of 'A dresser filled with shining delph,/Speckled and white and blue and brown!' (182) It is one of the great strengths of Kinmonth's evocative writing and photography that the ordinary is rendered extraordinary, that value and meaning is placed on objects not just in how they function but also in what they mean and have meant over time. Value is placed on the everyday, not on the exceptional.

The book is footnoted, but there is no separate bibliography because, as Kinmonth notes, 'the number of publications devoted to Irish vernacular furniture can be counted on the fingers of one hand' (473). Kinmonth has drawn on the work of E. Estyn Evans, Patricia Lysaght, Caoimhín Ó Danachair and Nicholas Loughnan among others, but it is in the decades of fieldwork, the days and months spent scouring the country in search of noggins, stillions, creepie stools and the like that make this such a singular and significant book. The prose is scholarly and accessible and there is no doubt that *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings* is the definitive book on the subject. Hopefully, it will inspire a new generation of scholars who can build on this great interdisciplinary achievement.

Gillian O'Brien  
*Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK*  
 [g.p.obrien@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:g.p.obrien@ljmu.ac.uk)

© 2021 Gillian O'Brien  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1969770>

