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Knowing our noggins: rare Irish wooden vessels rediscovered

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ABSTRACT

This illustrated essay highlights a neglected item of Irish material folk culture, the humble noggin, the most complex and one of the smallest vessels in a range of wooden containers widely used in former times. Like many such items, a close look at the noggin reveals many important details about the practical quotidian and aesthetic concerns of their users. Proverbial idioms also show how central the noggin was in people's lives. An extended and more fully referenced version of this essay titled: 'Noggins, "the nicest work of all": traditional Irish wooden vessels for eating and drinking' may be found in *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies: Journal of the Irish Georgian Society*, vol. XVIII, 2015, pp. 130–151. The original short version of this article was the 2016 winner of the Paul Johnston Bursary for the best essay on the Irish Decorative Arts, from The Irish Antique Dealers' Association.

KEYWORDS

Noggin; container; material culture; furniture; design; wooden; cooper; staves; Ireland; food; drink; vessel; cup; mug; diet

It is exciting to shed new light on a previously neglected area of Irish craftsmanship. Like re-encountering a long lost friend, uncovering new information can be richly rewarding. This process was reawakened for me¹ with a present from Nicholas Loughnan (an antique dealer from Youghal, Co. Cork, Ireland) of a woven noggin, a traditional wooden vessel. And while similar vessels are found in America and Europe, the characteristically Irish noggins that were once so common are now exceptionally rare.

The Irish noggin is distinctive and subtle in shape. Initially perhaps, one wouldn't notice that its sides were slightly conical, widening slightly towards the rim. Used for both eating or drinking, and typically able to hold a pint or two, the craftsman had to make the noggin watertight and functional. Most noggins were circular in plan, but a few were oval. Some were turned on a lathe from a single block of unseasoned wood. However, most surviving examples were staved, made from a circle of about 7 to 11 upright pieces of wood or staves, fitting side by side, and held tightly on the outside by hoops of metal or wood (Figure 1, left and centre). The slightly raised base was a single oak disc that fitted in a groove cut around the inside of the staves, where they were at their thickest. Each stave was angled to fit snugly against its neighbour, with one stave left longer to form an upright handle. The handle widens at the top to provide good grip, and typically has a slant on the top edge, enabling it to sit securely upside-down, to dry cleanly after washing (Figure 2).

The intended use of each noggin influenced other subtleties about its shape. For comfort, and when intended as a drinking vessel, the rim was tapered smoothly to a thin feather edge, except just beside the raised handle, where the staves were left thick for strength (Figure 1, centre).

Of the two types of staved noggins, the most robust and durable were those made by the cooper or cask maker. Accustomed to making a huge range of open topped vessels usually bound with iron hoops,



Figure 1. The three main types of c.1 pint noggins. Left to right: Iron hoops on eight oak staves by a cooper; woven ash hoop of seven 'fingers' on 13 oak staves by a noggin-weaver (from Co. Meath); light coloured lathe-turned from a single piece of willow, by a turner. Average sizes: 12.7–15.5 cm diameter, average heights to tops of handles: 16.5 cm.



Figure 2. The author's oak staved noggin with woven ash band of five 'fingers', shown resting on its stave handle as if to drain or display with tape for scale.

for farm use (feeding troughs, wash tubs, pails for water or for milking), the noggin was the smallest of the cooper's range. All his vessels had to be conical, so the binding iron hoops would tighten on the staves as he tapped them on. Heavy and robust, these cooper-made noggins were probably the most expensive on the market, made to last decades and to withstand rough use. In contrast, the turners made lathe-turned noggins, which were lightweight and faster to produce. Each using a single block of unseasoned green timber (surviving examples are often of willow), these would have been fragile and prone to split if roughly handled (Figure 1, right).

The most impressively complex and intricate type of Irish staved noggin was made with no metal or glue, by a specialist known in nineteenth-century Ireland as ‘a “noggin weaver” because of the artistic finish of the wooden hooping. The wooden hoop was a broad band, the full depth of the vessel and cleverly woven together at the junction.’² And this was the type of noggin I received as a present.

An insight into its construction comes from the 1950s when archaeologist Professor Estyn Evans wrote about Ireland’s crafts that ‘the nicest work of all was done by the noggin weavers ... The bands were made of ash, the wood being beetled [malleted] after soaking in water.’³

As a practical furniture historian I was naturally intrigued by the secret technical methods used by the noggin weaver. Using 3D X-ray instrumentation (generously made available by the University of Limerick), I examined the interwoven wide 3 mm thick ash band minutely from every angle. The results revealed that the band was gradually tapered at each end where it overlapped. One end converged into five ‘fingers’ with spade or arrow-shaped tips (Figure 3). Near the other end were five D-shaped holes cut neatly into its thickness. Both ends had a series of minute ledges and slopes incorporated, so once the dampened arrow heads were pushed carefully into the D-holes, they interlocked closely, and shrunk to fit even more tightly as the outer hoop dried.

The nineteenth-century phrase, ‘there’s no time for hooping noggins’, suggests that the preparation and assembly was a protracted process, especially since the resulting vessel lacked glue and had to be watertight. The secrets of this highly skilled trade, like others, was passed down through generations. The appearance of the interlocks is decorative, some with U-shapes, others with V-shapes, or ogees, and probably unique to each family of makers. The identities of most rural craftsmen, who rarely signed their work, often become lost through time. One noggin seller, William Kelly, advertised noggins for sale and ‘Hollow turning done on the shortest notice’ from a Dublin shop in 1808; another was Peter Kelly, a noggin-weaver listed in a debtor’s court in Monaghan (1821); and a third, John Cronin, was remembered in the 1940s as making noggins in Tipperary.⁴ In the future collectors may be able to identify the makers or regional origins of the noggins in the way we can identify Irish dresser designs today.

Archaeology shows noggins dating back to Viking times in Ireland. Research into the English word noggin indicates the term migrated to Ireland with the Tudor plantations, along with methods of dairying, and the Irish terms *noigín* and *noigean* and *gogán* resulted. *Naigín* or Naggin is a word still used to describe a measure, or amount of spirit, and the two words are thus related. Early c. eighteenth-century inventories of so called ‘big houses’ (where they were listed in use in kitchens), orphanages and prisons provide written evidence of their wide usage, and we know emigrants carried them on their long voyages to the New World.

In the Irish farmhouse or cabin, in lieu of a table people placed their boiled potatoes in a basket on top of the three-legged pot. A noggin of buttermilk (the by-product of butter making) was the centrepiece of the basket, and each potato was dipped into it as they ate. It is now possible to recognize in paintings which type of noggin is used, like the large woven noggin in Topham’s watercolour of 1844 (Figure 4).⁵ Travelling writers from that period also describe similar traditions. The most humble households shared noggins or had one each, which was added proudly to the dresser’s display, explaining one verse from an anonymous poem ‘Thady O’Brady’, c.1800:

Three noggins, three mugs, a bowl and two jugs,
A crock and a pan something lesser,
A red fourpenny glass, to draw at for mass,
Nailed up to a clean little dresser.⁶

The insult ‘what number was on your noggin when you were in the poorhouse?’ reflects the admission procedure when each person was given a card ‘with the number of his noggin thereon’, in 1830s Dublin. One metal hooped noggin in the Ulster Folk Museum is stamped ‘2V’ on its handle, which may reflect such an institutional use. Other phrases also bear testimony to their widespread use. To ‘take a stave out of their noggin’ was to curb someone’s behaviour. Putting up with hard use was to be ‘knocked about like a borrowed noggin among a wheen of tinkers’. Sometimes early texts reflect their specific uses. Hence ‘she saw me putting my head into a noggin of sweet-milk



Figure 3. The author's woven noggin detail of U-shaped ash interlocks. The five 'fingers' taper in from the right side.

and she ... hit me over the head and made me drop the mouthful I had back into the pail again.' In Irish, one finds *tá a ghogán is a spunóg aige* – he has his bite and sup, and *tá a sháith ina ghogán go scríobaidh sé é*,⁷ – he has enough in his noggin until he scrapes it (he is very busy). Another interesting phrase is *tá sé ar ghogán an phionta* – he's on the pint noggin – means that someone is about to expire,⁸ and finally, the slightly backhanded blessing, *Nár thaga súiche ar do loine mura ndéantá ach gogán sa tseachtain*,⁹ may no soot touch your churn dash, if you were to make only a noggin [of butter] a week.



Figure 4. Detail from F.W. Topham (1808–1877), 'Irish Peasants in a Cottage', watercolour, signed and dated Ballycrickawn 1844, private collection. The centrepiece of the basket of potatoes is a large woven noggin probably of buttermilk, its pale ash band slightly lower than the dark oak rim. Each potato was dipped into the noggin to 'kitchen' or flavour the meal.

Artists familiar with noggins used them symbolically to represent hunger. This can be seen in John J. Barker's *Irish Immigrants* c.1847, where an empty noggin lies in the centre foreground of a portrait of an impoverished family.¹⁰

Because noggins were used for milk as well as for food such as porridge or stirabout, they apparently 'had to be scrubbed twice'. Heather or special fine white sand was used for scouring them clean and shining the metal hoops, and the distinct concavity between these hoops bears testimony to this labour. Great pride was taken in having a display of 'snow white noggins' meticulously clean, typically displayed upside-down, resting on their stave handles on the dresser (Figures 2 and 5). By the early twentieth century, when alternative vessels of tin, earthenware and Delft pottery increasingly flooded the market, the cooper, turner and noggin weaver could no longer compete. The noggin lingered into the dawn of the twentieth century in peripheral places such as the Aran Islands. There playwright Synge described 'tiny wooden barrels that are still much used here in the place of earthenware'.¹¹

The widespread use of the Irish noggin was probably the cause of its demise. Once so ubiquitous they were not generally prized items and their poor storage is probably the main reason that they have not survived. The noggin does not do well in our modern, warm living environments and where they have been stored in overly dry conditions, they have fallen apart through shrinkage.

By the mid-twentieth century the Irish noggin had become a nostalgic memory. Only a few dozen noggins can be found in museums and some private collections around Ireland. Conservation can be a challenge, as originally when washed regularly and kept in the comparatively damp environment of the thatched house, shrinkage was not a problem. Anyone fortunate enough to obtain a woven Irish noggin now, would be wise to store it in similar conditions; a barn, outhouse or shaded garden shed is ideal, or a well-ventilated back pantry. Very occasionally still, a noggin comes onto the market in Ireland and one might expect to pay more for a good one than the price of a decent dresser.

Now with full appreciation of scarcity and its special place throughout Irish society, a noggin is a sound investment and worth preserving. Compared to most Irish vernacular furniture, where anything as intricate as a dovetail is a seldom seen, woven noggins emerge as more impressively intricate, as well as more rare, than the dressers which were purpose-built to display them.



Figure 5. Henry Vizetelly (1820–1894), detail of ‘Ned M’Keown’s Kitchen’ tiny engraving from W. Carleton’s *Traits & Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1824). Two hooped noggins are visible, on the far left, resting upside-down on their staves, to dry and be displayed on the dresser.

Notes

1. C. Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950* (Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 195 and 197–198.
2. Manuscripts of H. C. Hart, MRIA. Carrablagh, quoted in M. Traynor, *The English Dialect of Donegal. A Glossary. Incorporating the Collections of H. C. Hart etc.* (Royal Irish Academy, 1953), p. 198.
3. E. Estyn Evans, ‘Gleanings from Co. Cavan’, *Ulster Folklife*, 26 (1945), 2. Also Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 74–75, fig. 22.
4. Supplement to *The Dublin Weekly Register*, vol. 4, 1st Dec., 1821, ‘Peter Kelly, Late of Sacrinion, Noggin-maker’, unpaginated. IFC, Ms. vol. 691, Co. Tipperary (12.21.1940), 293.
5. C. Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (Yale University Press, 2006), p. 19, fig.17.
6. N. Ó Dónaill, Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla (Irish English Dictionary), <http://www.teanglann.ie/ga/fgb/gogán> [accessed 16 March 2017].

7. S. Ó hEochaidh, *Sean-chainnt Theilinn* (Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1955), p. 96.
8. J.N. Hamilton, *The Irish of Tory Island* (Belfast, 1974), p. 287.
9. T.S. Ó Máille/D. Uí Bhraonáin, *Seanfhocla Chonnacht* (Cois Life, 2010 [1948]), p. 188.
10. B. Rooney, ed. *Creating History. Stories of Ireland in Art* (Irish Academic Press, 2016), pp. 180–181.
11. J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands* (Maunsel, 1907), p. 18.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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