

Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700–2000 by Claudia Kinmonth

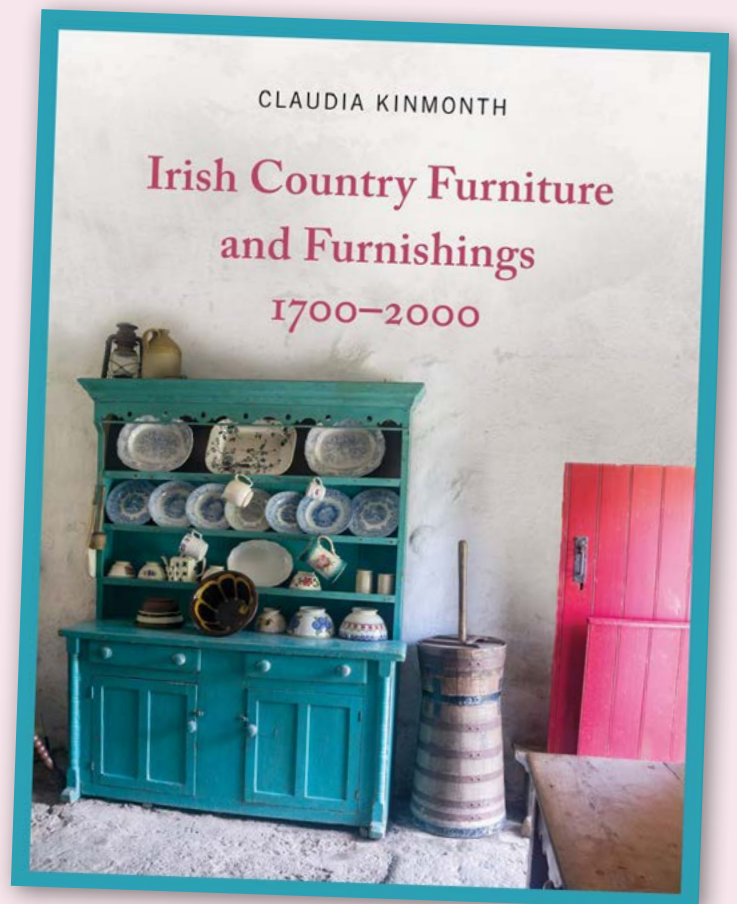
Cork University Press, 2020.

Claudia Kinmonth's extensive research on Irish country furniture was first published in 1993. Ireland has changed dramatically in the twenty eight years between that book's publication and this new, expanded reprint from Cork University Press, but the conditions and principles that shaped traditional furniture making in rural Ireland are more relevant than ever in a contemporary world of housing pressures and environmental crisis.

This book outlines a material culture marked by poverty and scarcity where timber and textiles were at a premium and so were carefully used and recycled; where the resources of the natural environment such as rush, straw and sally (willow) were skillfully deployed; and where the cramped space of Irish cottages led to ingenious solutions and a range of multi-purpose furniture – settle and press beds, hanging tables, even dressers that incorporated chicken coops.

The poverty of Ireland's past was always relative as this book demonstrates. Throughout the text Kinmonth makes distinctions between the near destitute living conditions of those who lacked even the most basic items of furniture, and the more affluent circumstances of strong farmers, which allowed not just furniture such as dressers and ware presses (cupboards), but even whole rooms (the parlour, or 'good room'), to be set aside for the aesthetic display of ceramics and other prized items. This careful attention to divergent material conditions ensures that this study of the vernacular furnishings of Irish rural homes is rarely nostalgic. That said, the furniture described by Kinmonth and the way of life it served is now largely historic, if not yet fully museumified, and many of the examples illustrated are now housed in collections such as the National Museum of Ireland, the Ulster Folk Museum, Bunratty Folk Park and the Irish Agricultural Museum.

The book, however, is focussed on Irish Country furniture as a living tradition and is concerned to map the conditions that shaped the making of this furniture in terms



of the materials used; the skills involved in its production; its mostly anonymous makers; the characteristic features of different furnishings; the fashion for different types of finish; and finally, the placement and use of different items of furniture within the home. The content is organized according to furniture type and use, beginning with a chapter on stools and chairs, with other sections devoted to settles, dressers, beds and tables. The fantastic, adaptable morphologies of some Irish vernacular furniture at times wreaks havoc with this attempt at coherence. There's also a frequent slippage between discussion of furniture and its accessories or contents – it's difficult to describe beds without considering the nature of the bedding used to dress them, or to properly explain the distinct characteristics of Irish dressers without outlining the 'ware' they displayed. This new version of the book more directly acknowledges that a study of furniture leads inevitably to a consideration of a host of smaller furnishings, most notably in a new chapter which itemises a range of vessels and other objects crafted from metal, wood, ceramics and textiles.


This material history is gathered through Kinmonth's impressive field research, undertaken from the late 1980s onwards, recording Irish rural interiors and their furnishings before they disappeared into dereliction or the antiques trade. The author's direct research is supplemented by a wide range of sources: Poor Inquiry reports from the nineteenth century; questionnaires about furniture and other material possessions conducted by the Department of Irish Folklore and the Ulster Folk

and Transport Museum in the mid-twentieth century; travelogues; memoirs of country life; and popular verse; to name just a sample. These rich and varied accounts offer an engaging sense of the individual lives shaped by this material culture: the carpenter forced to abandon his trade because he was too shy to eat with other families (p. 28); the family who discarded their 'Carberry' settle, with its integrated hanging table, when the table developed the bad habit of crashing down on the heads of those seated below it (p. 144); and the GAA player who, rather than washing and bleaching the label to disguise the fact that his shorts were made from a flour bag, proudly displayed its "Pride of Erin" logo on "a certain part of his anatomy" (p. 457).

Many historic paintings, prints and drawings illustrate the placement and use of vernacular Irish furniture within traditional interiors. Another publication by Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (2006, Yale University Press), was devoted to these visual sources, highlighting the value of Irish genre scenes in their realistic depictions of material culture and countering the dismissal of these artworks as sentimental presentations of 'stage Irishness'. This new edition of *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings* benefits from this research and includes many of these images among its illustrations. It also reproduces numerous colour photographs, mostly taken by Kinmonth herself in the course of her field research. This lavish illustration ensures

that the points made in the text are frequently reinforced with visual demonstrations. A good example is the contrast of a historic and contemporary sùgán chair on p. 102 (fig. 9.3). This photograph reveals a remarkable stability of form, but the size difference between the two chairs suggests not just a different use (one designed for the hearth, the other for the table), but even a different type of user (given the taller stature of contemporary Irish bodies).

While this expanded reprint enhances Kinmonth's earlier book in many ways, the continued omission of a bibliography seems a lost opportunity; it would be useful to encounter the wealth of sources cited in the text as a whole, in addition to the footnotes. The new foreword by Professor Louis M. Cullen offers historical context, but Kinmonth herself might have spoken at greater length, and with more reflexivity, about her aims and approach in returning to, expanding, and updating her earlier work in this new publication. But perhaps it's unreasonable to ask more of a book that's so generously filled with the knowledge arising from decades of research.

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