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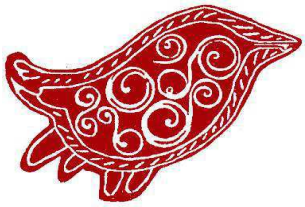

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West Cork Vernacular Furniture Makers:
Comparative analysis of field studies in a coastal community (Part II)

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JAMES WOLFE, FURNITURE MAKER

'You could say he built a man's cradle and his coffin, and anything else that he'd need in between,'[1] was how Bill Wolfe described his late father's work. Transcripts of discussions with Bill Wolfe (a practising carpenter and house builder from Upper Glandore) demonstrate how oral history recordings can be a valuable link with past tradesmen and their work, when the furniture that they made is no longer positively identifiable.

Bill Wolfe is one of several woodworkers in the field study area whose forefathers passed down the skills of their trade through the generations. Up until relatively recently he owned several pieces of furniture that had been made by his predecessors. Lack of space eventually led him to build three bonfires and unceremoniously burn the furniture made by his great-grandfather and father. This in itself is not an unusual tale. Much of the painted pine furniture built for rural houses is eventually burnt once 'the moth' (woodworm) is diagnosed, or is sold to the 'travellers' for eventual export. Often it happens that pieces get burnt when houses are redecorated and spruced up for 'the Stations'.[2] The thing that was exceptional about Bill Wolfe burning so many pieces of interesting furniture was that he himself is a carpenter, and as such has a well-trained eye for detail combined with a sharp memory. His description of one particular piece, a high-backed settle, is notable:

> Well, what was in the old [family] home in Cregg, that I got the job of clearing in about 1976/77 was the settle, and there was twenty-one panels in the back of that and they were made of wreck wood, and there was the matching dresser ... I meant to hold on to the back of the settle but I am careless about everything.

He described and sketched for me how the back of the settle was arranged in three horizontal rows of differently shaped panels; 'You had the hexagonal ones on top, the rectangular in the middle and the other ones down below.'[3] The description was particularly interesting, since no high-backed *ornate* settles of this type had turned up during field studies in this area (although they were traditional in other areas, notably in Co. Waterford). Probably the explanation for such an obviously time-consuming and conspicuous piece of work is that such a fine piece of furniture standing in a carpenter's own kitchen was bound to generate more work by example. James Wolfe, the great-grandfather who made this piece, was unusual in being primarily

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Fig. 1. 'Carpenter's Chair' painted in its original black finish, with finely turned front legs and curved, 'sabre' back legs. Note the 'Cupid's Bow' outline cut beneath the wide back rest, and the central rail with its symmetrical shape. Probably made by James Wolfe (senior).

a furniture maker, unlike other woodworkers in the area, who took on multifarious types of woodwork as well as furniture making.

Bill Wolfe kept all the old hand tools which had been passed down to him. Examination of this tool-kit revealed several telling clues as to how their past owners had worked. The tools were passed down through the generations and used by and probably added to by Bill's father, also called James Wolfe. Amongst them was a set of six long-handled augers, of varying sizes, from one quarter of an inch to one and a quarter inches in diameter, suitable for a chairmaker to use for drilling holes for legs, and for pegging mortice and tenon joints. Also there were about fifteen wooden moulding planes, each with a different profile for making up mouldings and shaping edges, some of which looked home-made, as well as a two-foot long wooden jointer and a rosewood combination plane, which together would have been able to tackle most jobs demanded of furniture making. The presence of long-handled turning chisels indicated that one of the two Jameses had owned a lathe, perhaps to turn the unusual front legs of some of the chairs found near Glandore during field studies (see fig. 1). Several more of these tools were home-made; the presence of two such 'sliding bevels' emphasized the fact that built-in furniture was a common undertaking. And in the words of the late Danny Burke, '. . . every house in the parish was crooked as the ram's horns, how did they manage to build in furniture at all?!'[4]

A slate-cutter's tool amongst the collection was hand-forged, perhaps by the local blacksmith, and would have been vital for cutting and laying slate roofs, which became popular in this area in the nineteenth century, due to the close proximity of a slate quarry at Benduff.[5]

Bill Wolfe's father, James Wolfe 'junior', was particularly adept at wood graining and decorative paint finishes. His set of graining rollers and flexible steel combs were still with his other tools, although they are seldom used now. One high-backed settle discovered in a house near Glandore has been beautifully grained to imitate oak by James Wolfe junior for 'the stations', about forty-five years ago' (according to its owner), and bore witness to his particular skill.

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Apparently there used to be wooden templates hung up amongst the collection in the workshop: 'the only templates he had was to put the backs and the hind legs on chairs. There were about three different ones.'[6] (An example is shown as fig. 5 in part 1). When asked if they were his father's, he replied that they could have belonged to either his father or his great-grandfather originally. About great-grandfather James he said: 'the most of what he did was making household furniture, cupboards and dressers and settles, tables and all that kind of stuff, chairs'.[7] James Wolfe junior's woodworking skills sounded quite diverse; however he served his 'time' (apprenticeship) with his uncle in Leap, Danny Dempsey, who was more of a wheelwright than a carpenter:

> I'd say it was the time anyway when they were keeping things going rather than making them. It was patching, more than starting from scratch and he worked at that kind of stuff, starting about 1927 I suppose until about 1951 ... making windows, car wheels (cart wheels) and coffins. I did see my father making cradles ...[8]

He went on to say that the reason he made so many different types of things was because there weren't many carpenters around at the time, so anything that was wanted, they would make. When Bill's father got married he built a shop for his wife to run in Upper Glandore, which sold groceries as well as 'the meal and the pig ration'. It still stands, and was built of Swedish pine, which during the twenties was being imported in considerable quantities for building work.[9]

Field studies in a specific area near Glandore unearthed a quantity of carefully constructed and well-proportioned pieces of furniture that showed all the signs of having been made by the same man (see figs 1, 2 & 3). The dressers in particular were quite different in style to those found on the *west* side of Poulgorm Bridge around Union Hall. It is highly likely that they were the work of Bill's great-grandfather, James Wolfe. Examination of his old moulding planes certainly showed that he had the right equipment to produce ornately planed wide mouldings, with the same favourite

Fig. 2. High fronted pine dresser, with two drawers instead of doors below the work surface, painted in pale green and cream. Its facia board is decorated with hearts and cupid's bows cut out with a bow saw and carefully bevelled behind to allow maximum light to fall onto the top row of ware. Both symbols are found repeatedly on West Cork furniture.

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hand-planed profile repeated like a signature (or literally a trade mark) alongside the display shelves of each dresser. The four dressers also had decoration along the facia boards, each one varying according to size, but often incorporating a romantic combination of hearts and cupids' bows.

Whoever had made these special dressers had taken extra trouble to carve out on each the backs of the pierced shapes, allowing maximum light to fall through onto the precious ware on display on the top shelf behind (see fig. 2). It seems that if a dresser and a settle were built at the same time in a house, they would often be made to match each other (as with fig. 2), not only by having the same painted or grained finish, but often by repeating the same motif or symbol of decoration.[10] The persistent survival of these mid-nineteenth-century pieces is a credit to their maker, reinforcing the likelihood of their having been made by a man who specialized in just furniture making, producing dressers, settles and chairs that being perfectly constructed have withstood the hard wear of the best part of one and a half centuries.

THE COAKLEY CARPENTERS

'In forty or fifty years time they won't be asking how long it took me to make it,'[11] is what the carpenter Cornelius Coakley said about the dresser that he had just built into the parlour wall of a farmhouse, north of Leap. No one can remember exactly how old he was when he died, but it was about forty years ago, as a bachelor in his eighties. The one thing that everyone remembers about the Coakley family (who were all carpenters of various sorts) was that 'they were terrible slow'[12] at their work, hence the quote above from Con Coakley, who despite the pace, built a particularly decorative dresser in the farmhouse where James Tobin grew up. An interesting point concerning this dresser, which dates from around the turn of the century, is that it was built with a high front, in the style that in West Cork had by that time been largely superseded by low-fronted dressers in the neighbouring Union Hall area. The disparity of basic structure between the two areas suggests that each carpenter built in his own style and in his own patch. Con Coakley has used the heart motifs which are so popular near Glandore (see fig. 2) but this time the hearts are upside down. (The significance of the use of upside down hearts is unclear, but it has cropped up on other Co. Cork dressers).

Most case furniture built around the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would have been built within the room it was intended for, and frequently built in as part of the fabric of the house, saving timber. This often means that it cannot be taken out without substantial alteration. It also means that the carpenter had to spend all his time, while building the furniture or the staircase, in the house with the family. Traditionally this meant sharing meals with the householders, eating lunch together every day and probably having an evening meal too. These meals were an important part of the payment for the job, as well as being an accepted way of working. Con Coakley lived with his brother, John; locally they had a reputation for being the best family of carpenters in the country, but John Coakley was forced to give up the trade because he couldn't bear to eat in other people's houses; he could only eat at home.

Con Coakley was often employed to build furniture as well as frequently to

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Fig. 3. High-backed, open frame settle probably made by James Wolfe (senior). Note the subtle outline of the cupid's bow beneath the centre of the seat.

redecorate all the painted furniture and woodwork before 'the Stations' came round. His clients apparently used to worry that he might not finish the job in time for the service; because he was so slow, he'd be working away until the very last minute, and then would be out through the back door or he'd hide in a cupboard when the priest arrived! His father and grandfather before him were carpenters, so his tools had all been handed down and James Tobin can remember them being almost worn out with age and use. Apparently when he'd built the furniture he used to wait until no one was about and do the graining secretly late at night, presumably to keep his technique and therefore the demand for his work to himself.[13]

Con Coakley's father (again of the same name), was a wheelwright[14] as well as a furniture maker. The influence of the wheelwright's trade on the resulting furniture is clearly illustrated in a cradle that he made for the birth of James Tobin's grandmother, Maggie Hayes (see fig. 4). The two rockers under each end of this cradle were recycled from two of the outer curved sections of a wheel, known as 'felloes'. They were made of elm, and being the correct length and curve probably needed no adaptation to serve this purpose. The extra holes where the spokes used to be driven into the felloes remain. This careful re-use of cart components illustrates the need to use each piece of timber economically and is mentioned by George Sturt when he writes of the spokes being re-sold at a penny a piece for use as ladder rungs, once they had been removed from worn-out wheels.[15]

The rest of the cradle is solidly built of pine, with a framed up construction (pegged, through mortice and tenon joints) enclosing a series of panels. Instead of using a separate 'applied moulding' to surround the panels and hold them in position, Con Coakley chamfered and rebated the frame, simultaneously decorating it while making it lighter as he would do when building the body of a cart. The four corners of the frame were shaped with the spokeshave to form (originally) pointed finials, which could be grasped to rock the cradle. The 'hood' which rises over the infant's head, and presumably provides draught protection and shadow, has an arched facia board which has been given a finishing touch with a simple incised line, worked with a scratch stock.[16]

The traditional sharing of a family cradle means that this example had been passed down through the family from one generation to the next; each time a baby was born the cradle would be lent to the household for a year or two and then returned once more to be stored for future use. So this cradle had been used by the Hayeses, the Sweetnams, two

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Fig. 4. Family cradle made of pine with elm rockers (re-used wheel felloes) by joiner, wheelwright and furniture maker Con Coakley, from north of Leap. Outside dimensions; 36" long by 36" high by 20" wide (tips of rockers).

generations of Tobins and the Frenches. The last family that used it, about twenty years ago, had painted it blue and white. Inside, on either side of the arched front, the leather straps for keeping the child in place remain.[17] Apparently this cradle survived for so long because there is some sort of superstition attached to having a new cradle built – I was introduced to a number of people who had been rocked in it as babies – and an old one is always preferred if possible. As elsewhere in Ireland many people making furniture were wheelwrights by trade, like Con Coakley senior.

WHEELWRIGHTS AND BLACKSMITHS

The effects of advancing technology on local furniture design

When compared to rural England, many fundamental cultural aspects of life have remained virtually unaltered here, up until the last quarter of a century or so when factors such as the involvement of the rural population with the EEC and the government's housing grants have had a dramatic effect on the way people live. A quarter of a century ago the local creamery was attended by two dozen or so horse or donkey-drawn vehicles, mainly flat carts or 'cars' as they are commonly known, used to transport the churns of milk to be exchanged for skimmed milk and butter. By 1988 all the vehicles were either tractors or cars with trailers at the creamery, except one horse and cart and one donkey and cart. As dirt roads were improved and metalled, farmers were heard to complain that their horses' hooves slipped on the smooth surface, especially on the steeper hills, and the horseshoes wore out faster. Wooden cartwheels were gradually replaced by rubber car tyres, making the carts less uncomfortable.

This change over in transport technology was necessarily accompanied by a change in the occupations of those people who previously were busily employed building and repairing carts and cartwheels. There would be little point in training an apprentice to do the work when he would find more employment as a garage mechanic. Likewise the decline in the number of horses using the roads resulted in a rapid reduction in the number of farriers and blacksmiths. In many areas of Ireland now it is common to find a blacksmith whose forge is a portable set of tools in the back of a car, since horses are no longer taken to him to be 'shod hot', but instead sets of ready-made shoes in twelve different sizes are hammered into shape on an anvil cold, and fitted cold (a practice that was previously considered second-rate). The repercussions to these changes are widespread; as the wheelwright becomes redundant so

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do his other woodworking skills; why pay a man to build a kitchen dresser when a fitted kitchen can be bought mass-produced for a fraction of the price? A contributory factor in the decline of the wheelwright was the scarcity of blacksmiths who would previously have been called upon to make and fit the steel band that runs around the outside of the wheel.

DICK AND JOHNNY BRIEN

One of only a few carpenters working until recently in Union Hall is Diarmuid Donovan (now no longer full-time). His work covered everything from building houses and slating roofs to plastering and making furniture. He comes from a family that always worked in Union Hall as woodworkers of various types. His uncle, Johnny Brien, worked from a stone-built workshop which survives only a few yards from the sea. Johnny Brien built furniture – settles, dressers and chairs – some of which have survived and are still identifiable in local houses. He used to walk everywhere with his bag of tools to each job; sometimes he would be fetched home from work in the family's donkey and cart.

Johnny Brien's father, Dick Brien, used the same workshop, but did a wide variety of work from building work to furniture making. Amongst the surviving collection of tools are the templates used by Dick to draw out felloes and spokes for cartwheels, along with various other wheelwright's implements. Dick Brien worked during the turn of the last century when fish was still being salted and put in barrels by the fishermen at Union Hall pier. Although he was not specifically a cooper by trade, he had a number of special cooper's planes with which he could repair the barrels and fit their lids, if required. He also farmed and kept a number of cows. Dick Brien was buried in Myross churchyard where his headstone bears his name but no dates; according to Diarmuid Donovan, he died in the early 1930s, aged about eighty.

Both Dick and Johnny Brien made cartwheels, an occupation requiring considerable forward planning; the elm for the hubs would have to be roughed out and set aside to season for a year, before it could be finally shaped and used. The spokes were made of oak and the felloes of elm. Diarmuid Donovan served his time in Skibbereen and was also taught how to make wheels. He can remember that whole trees used to be kept immersed in the bay for six months or so to wash the sap out of them before seasoning, after which they were cut up with a two-man pit saw. Some of the driftwood that arrived with the tide was made use of as well.[18]

Johnny Brien taught his nephew how to make coffins out of elm, cutting long kerfs across the grain, and then using the steam from a kettle to form the bends. Unlike many other coffin-makers, they apparently would never make a coffin before a person had died. The glue they used was made of cows' horns and hooves and had to be used while hot ('animal' or 'Scotch' glue); it was also useful thinned down to use as a sealing coat ('size') before painting; they probably made it themselves. Johnny Brien was an expert at mixing paint and doing special imitative effects; he could make a wooden fireplace look so like marble that you might not be able to tell the difference without touching it. He left Diarmuid some of his special recipes when he died.[19] His tools he made himself; he made the body of a plane and got the blacksmith to make the blades. In later

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years he worked as the local postman in the mornings, and still worked in this workshop in the afternoons. He died in his seventies in 1952 or 1953.[20]

THE O'SULLIVAN FAMILY

(SKIBBEREEN CARRIAGE MAKERS)

We all left school when we were fourteen years of age, and we never went to high school, never went to anything, only into the workshop the minute we'd come home. And one of us would be turning the grinding-stone ... and another one of us would be with the saw, and the oldest brother would be nailing the bottom down in the car ...[21]

John O'Sullivan was born in 1915 into a family who were all skilled tradesmen of various descriptions. His grandfather was a boatbuilder and carpenter. His father, Michael O'Sullivan, was Clerk of Works for the local council as well as a maker of anything in wood: carriages, coaches, carts and wheels, coffins, staircases, roofs, wheelbarrows, and of course furniture; he was also an expert carver. John O'Sullivan's son has also learn carriage making and carries on the trade today. John talks of the skill being passed through the generations which he says '... was in every one of their hands ... all my uncles were tradesmen, woodworkers and smiths, blacksmiths.'[22] He had a clear memory for details and the way of life they used to lead:

... sure we were with our father in the workshop since we were seven years. I was roofing houses, myself and my brothers, at twelve years of age ... My father would go out with us, start us off, just mark the first pair of patterns on the rafters, get two boxes or chairs and we'd do all the rest, he'd go away then and let us at it ...[23]

Michael O'Sullivan (John's father) used to travel by pony and trap (which he had made himself) to all the different sites in the area for which he was overseer; as far west of Skibbereen as Ballydehob and Hare Island and as far east as Leap and Drinagh. He had three ponies which he used on alternate days for these long journeys, and in 1927 he was one of the first in Skibbereen to buy a motor-car. He served his apprenticeship in Skibbereen with a man by the name of Donoghue and stayed in the area, but his brothers, Pat and Denis, like thousands of other tradesmen, emigrated to America 'in the White Star Liner.'[24] Amongst his tools, Michael O'Sullivan had a treadle lathe which

he made up himself out of old cogs and things. He worked it with his foot, there wasn't any electricity or a bit, and we had two oil lamps hanging in the workshop when we used to work by night.[25] This he used to turn stair rods and newel posts and ornamentation for furniture; he used to turn the little banisters and then we'd split 'em down with the saw and put a piece on either side of the dresser ...[26]

When John O'Sullivan was asked about the type of furniture that he made when he was young, and working for his father, he described an average day's work in the workshop while his father was out overseeing other jobs:

... a kitchen table now, my father would send me into the workshop and he'd say 'make a kitchen table there for a man from Hare Island and put a drawer in one end of it' and then there would be another man from somewhere else and he'd want a kitchen table without any drawer, and the table with the drawer was twenty-five shillings and the one without the drawer was twenty-two and six ... we'd cut out the legs with the handsaw

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out of the timber and plane all the timber (there was no planing machine) and we'd have to have that table finished in the evening when my father would come back, in one day . . .[27]

John said every piece of furniture that they made would be signed underneath in pencil. He related many memories concerning furniture building and the way they went about it. One particularly revealing point was raised concerning the construction of 'Carpenter's chairs', which they made in much the same style and with the same use of templates as in the Glandore area (see fig. 1 for example). Michael O'Sullivan's workshop sounded well-equipped when compared to others in the Union Hall and Leap area, and his machinery included a hand-operated morticing machine. Made of cast-iron and operated in a way similar to a large guillotine, it enabled the slow work of chopping out mortices in chair legs to be speeded up considerably. So much so that the job of assembling the chairs would be done in batches of half a dozen at a time within the space of a day. The following is a description of a type of furniture now rarely found outside museums, but a century ago commonplace in rural Irish homes:

> . . . the great dresser, gay with willow-pattern plates, with dishes of various shapes and colours and here and there a jug . . . In the lower part of the dresser, instead of cupboards was a long coop in which were sitting hens; it seems to me that they sat there perpetually except when two geese took their place in early spring.[28]

When shown a drawing of a 'chicken-coop dresser', John O'Sullivan described how when he was a small boy he used to go around to all the houses with his father, where they were working. He said in nearly every one there would be what he called a 'coom':

> 'T would be about six feet long at the lower end of the kitchen . . . made like a press in the bottom, and then there was two rows for two rows of hens . . . and little sliding doors in it where the hens go in . . . the little laths were beautiful, about an inch and a quarter wide and they'd be beaded lovely around . . . and that was stained like any nice bit of furniture.

The fact that very few of these 'cooms' have survived to be examined today (except in museums and pine dealers' yards) adds value to such detailed description from someone old enough to remember them. John O'Sullivan mentioned that it was these 'cooms' that were often the first things to be thrown out when the furniture was updated. It helps establish that they were a common aspect of rural furnishings until the first quarter of the twentieth century, in the West Carbery area.[29]

TIM McCARTHY

During this carpenter's tragically short life his work was not only prolific but individual, with the result that several positively attributable pieces have survived to be examined (see figs. 5 & 6). His mother was born and raised on Rabbit Island. He was born in 1915, and died in 1942 of tuberculosis, a disease which continued to claim many lives in Ireland well into this century.[30] At seventeen he left school to serve his time with the late Mick Donovan (a carpenter of Union Hall, whose past work shows some strong similarities) and in Skibbereen with Denis O'Driscoll. The lack of public transport at that time meant he had to stay in Skibbereen and return home only at weekends. Once his apprenticeship was over he began working in his home

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Fig. 5. Tim McCarthy (1915-1942), carpenter and prolific furniture maker of Cooscroneen, Union Hall. His work was characterized by curved door panels and his use of new materials.

Fig. 6. Glazed top dresser of a style made popular in the 1930s, when many of the older open-fronted dressers had glass doors added to their fronts. Note the use of plywood panels with arched tops, and bevelled drawer fronts, characteristic of the work of its maker, Tim McCarthy.

parish of Union Hall, teaming up with various masons. Together they'd do houses, himself doing the carpentry and furnishing. He had his own workshop behind Fuller's shop in the main street and according to his late sister he made such things as kitchen tables, cupboards and presses, some of which she kept.

His style of furniture is characterized by various idiomatic details, reflecting with clarity the changing mood of the period in which they were made (see fig. 6). His technique was still traditional, i.e. cutting through mortice and tenon joints by hand and building dressers which follow the same basic shape that had already evolved and become popular in the area. His style is identifiable by his favoured use of the shallow curving arch for the tops of door panels and his method of bending the surrounding mouldings by the application of repeated saw kerfs across the inside of the curve (similar in principle to the way the shoulder of a

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coffin is kerfed on the inside to enable it to be bent without splitting). His use of plywood and glass are characteristic of these pieces; whereas other carpenters working around the same time might still have been using diagonal 'tongued and grooved' boards to fill in panels, Tim McCarthy usually used plywood. His dressers invariably had glass doors closing on the display shelves of the upper half, and although other dressers made during the '30s follow this same trend towards cleanliness and labour-saving design, his carry the same arched curves at the tops of each glass panel (see fig. 6). He built corner cupboards and overmantel mirrors in a similar style and according to his sister most of the pieces that left his workshop were stained with a dark-brown coloured varnish.[31]

THE 'CARBERY SETTLE'

So far much emphasis has been placed on the way carpenters had to economize with their materials; the importance of 'wreck timber' and driftwood as well as the designs of specific pieces bear witness to this. The small size of many of the houses surveyed (as well as evidence that they were consistently smaller in the nineteenth century) is another factor that influenced furniture design. The combination of these two constraints plus the ingenuity of local carpenters resulted in my discovery of a piece of furniture which seems to have been peculiar to this district. As a result of hearing the older people describing so frequently a complex piece of furniture which sounded totally unfamiliar, I was determined to track down an existing example. Having visited without success every house that I was told used to have such a piece, I eventually discovered one thanks to a local pine dealer who remembered that he had been asked to strip it of its green paint and wax it (see fig. 7).

The one surviving example consists of an open-framed settle (of a typical local design) incorporating a detachable 'falling table'. Accounts varied as to how the table was usually fixed to the centre of the settle back. In this case it can be removed entirely and folded flat for storage, perhaps behind the settle, by means of two dowels that project from either side of the rear of the table top, and rest into the back of the settle, into a slot on the left and a round mortice on the right. Thus the entire table top can be easily removed from the settle (using the same principle employed on old wooden towel rails). The descriptions of other such pieces added up to a falling table that was permanently hinged onto the back of the settle, and when not being used was fixed in a vertical position via a wooden clip or leather fastener onto the ceiling joist. This meant that the height of the ceiling dictated the optimum length of the table.

The advantages of such a dual purpose piece of furniture are numerous: a carpenter would find it easier to fix such a table to the wooden back of the settle than to a crumbly masonry wall. It provides an additional table to the kitchen table, and in one house at least it was the only one. The table itself required no subframe beneath the top, and only one (hinged) leg instead of four, thereby saving timber. The settle could still be used as a place to sleep one person or to sit several people in its customary fireside position. When used with the table down it provided seating for two, on either side of the hinged end, obviating the need for extra chairs. Unlike its Wexford counterpart, the 'settle-table', it does not require moving away from the wall to be used. It probably took comparatively little time

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Fig. 7. 'The Carbery Settle', maker unknown, a design typical of and peculiar to the Carbery area of West Cork. Stripped of its original paintwork.

to construct, and it is possible that falling tables might also have been made as later additions to existing settles. The 'falling table' with its single hinged leg used to be a familiar part of farmhouse furnishings in every county of Ireland (under various names and guises) but the settle combined with it became a design peculiar to the East and West Carberies. Most dual-purpose designs lack something when compared to their single purpose parents, and the so-called 'Carbery settle' did have its drawbacks. The single leg on the table hinges freely beneath the table surface (by means of dowels at the top of the leg, which rotate within two blocks fixed to the underside of the table top) finding its own equilibrium when lowered to the ground, and thus requiring no additional timber to stabilize it. In a farm kitchen near Union Hall, where several people were sitting round their 'Carbery settle'[32] to eat, they were suddenly disturbed by the entrance of some fighting dogs; their instant reaction, knowing that the table leg was not fixed, was to hold on to the table to prevent the leg being knocked out of position and the food being

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dropped onto the floor. This particular table which fastened by means of a clip to one of the ceiling joists, was finally removed because the clip was unsafe and the table used literally to fall onto the heads of people relaxing on the settle.

It became apparent that the older generations of local people could remember 'falling tables'[33] and 'Carbery settles' being quite common in houses in the parish. They were found in the very smallest houses, where they would have been the only table. Also they were used in the larger (predominantly Protestant-owned) farmhouses, where they employed men on the land and needed extra table space when they all ate together, at the end of the day's work on the farm. Individual descriptions of the ways they were fastened up, and the construction of the hinge mechanisms varied; it seems that some had metal (blacksmith-made) attachments, but more often they were of wood. Their tops were nearly always scrubbed, like the main kitchen tables, and because they needed no 'skirt' beneath the top, they could be four inches or so lower than the kitchen table.

One woman told me that she remembered seeing a falling table near the fire, which when lowered for use revealed a cupboard set into the wall, in which was kept the ware. Discussing these variations on the theme with John O'Sullivan (the aforementioned retired carpenter from Skibbereen), he remembered a combination of a cupboard, the front of which was formed by a table and two long benches, which all individually could be lowered to the floor, with hinged legs, and the ware in the cupboard was then revealed on display. He drew a rough sketch of it, mentioning how clever it was that when the table and benches folded up to form cupboard doors, the under side of them had been carefully arranged to look like panelled doors, beneath which was a single long drawer.

CONCLUSION

Having looked closely at a broad cross-section of woodworkers who were in various ways linked with furniture making in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, certain themes have arisen. Clearly, until relatively recently, carpentry was a trade that ran in families. Nearly all the carpenters surveyed had fathers and grandfathers also involved with woodwork. Wheelwrights and cartwrights were as common along the coast as boat-builders, and often they combined both trades. Their success depended on close cooperation with and proximity to a blacksmith, and both trades survived until the introduction of motor-cars since the twenties forced them to look elsewhere for work. The decline of the blacksmith paralleled the decrease in numbers of working horses. Even so the tradition was so strong that it has by no means died out entirely. The furniture made by these tradesmen typically reflected the skills taught to them as apprentices, and the tools of their original trade left their distinctive marks on the pieces that they made. The wheelwright's furniture is identifiable because he often used a spoke-shave in the place of a bow-saw, preferring to chamfer the styles and rails around panels rather than use a selection of moulding planes.

Michael O'Sullivan of Skibbereen, the successful overseer and Clerk of Works for the Council, whose workshop was far better equipped, provided a contrast. His scope for variety was inevitably widened, and his varied selection of tools was reflected in the furniture he produced. Even a home-made treadle lathe

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was a rare piece of equipment towards the end of the nineteenth century, and probably considered quite a luxury, used as it was for decorative purposes. It has been demonstrated that the study of the tools themselves, when the carpenter has died, can be as useful a source of information as an attributable piece of furniture. The presence of long-handled chisels amongst the tools belonging to great-grandfather James Wolfe from Cregg provided a clue to the maker of some extraordinary chairs with lathe-turned legs from that area.

It has also been shown that woodworkers make good observers of furniture.[34] Although only about half the carpenters surveyed served their time with their own parents, there was a strong inclination for them to continue the trade of their father. This made good sense in a poor family, when the price of a set of specialist tools might easily form the stumbling-block to a new career. Variation in design of dressers, for instance, show relationships between one maker and another, which after detailed research turned out to be because they had been linked by apprenticeships, or had worked for the same mason; thus patterns of style emerge in a way comparable to the generations in a family. This helps explain why the furniture of the westerly Union Hall and Myross parishes have distinct characteristics which contrast with the pieces found to the east in the Glandore area. Underlying this dichotomy is the fact that the lack of a bridge between the two regions until the late nineteenth century separated the population sufficiently to give birth to two contrasting and separated communities. It is often said that the Glandore area migrated towards Rosscarbery for its closest main market needs, while Union Hall found Skibbereen to be more convenient. A wider survey would no doubt reveal further interesting pockets of isolated trends, influenced in similar ways by such unexpected factors as physical geography, as well as by the individual furniture makers.

Perhaps one of the least anticipated discoveries was the high percentage of furniture adorned with some sort of decoration, within an area which suffered such extreme hardship during the famine and subsequent grinding poverty. Admittedly the decoration is not on the ornate scale of furniture from comparatively prosperous Co. Wexford, where considerable time was lavished on carving, applying mouldings and generally producing pieces that were ostentatiously ornate. There is far less of the Georgian style neo-classical influence in the Carberies than for instance further north in Co. Clare (where, as in the south-east, the furniture tends to be more lavishly decorated).

However this locally restrained and ingenious use of pierced facia boards and curved edges, combined with the strong instinct to follow function with form, first and foremost, is a refreshing change from the comparatively austere and puritanical approach of the Ulster furniture makers, or even the overly ornate synthesis of classical elements displayed on some vernacular furniture from Co. Limerick. The influence of the acute shortage of timber and space (and money) on furniture design in this region has also made its mark by the sparse minimalism of most of the furniture. Its functionalism and the ergonomic relationship with its domestic environment result in fewer pieces being made, as well as predominance of dual-purpose pieces and built-in pieces (Carbery settles,

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chicken-coop dressers, settle-beds etc.).

The field studies revealed patterns of design often limited to tiny areas, almost ignoring what was being made only a few miles up the road. The fact that certain ingenious designs that are usual in other areas (the Wexford settle-table for example) do not occur in the Carberies can be explained by the poor inland communications and thus inter-relationships during the nineteenth century. Design transmission has emerged as having been particularly poor within Ireland as a whole when compared to international similarities in design.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Transcript No. 8702; Upper Glandore; Discussions with Bill Wolfe (carpenter); 22 Dec. 1987, p. 4; Bill Wolfe describing the work of his father James Wolfe.

2 This is when (Roman Catholic) Mass is said in the houses of the parish rather than in the church, in rotation. In Union Hall Parish the Stations can be expected to come around to a particular house about every eight or nine years. Because the local community is invited to attend, the redecoration can be fairly extravagant; getting rid of furniture that is considered old and tatty and replacing it with new, is a common routine.

3 Transcript No. 8702; Bill Wolfe; 22 Dec. 1987, p. 12.

4 Discussions with Danny Burke, retired schoolteacher, since sadly deceased. CK Notebook No. 3, 15.1.88, p. 45.

5 Thatched houses are not now a feature of the landscape in this area, unlike in many other parts of Ireland. I do not know of any thatchers working in this vicinity, and according to the late Danny Burke, the last thatched houses were re-roofed with slate by the 1930s. Slate is cheaper to maintain than thatch.

6 Transcript No. 8702; Bill Wolfe; 22 Dec. 1987, p. 3.

7 Ibid., p. 1.

8 Ibid., p. 3.

9 Ibid., p. 5.

10 All of them were built with the 'older style' of high front, leaving a gap beneath the cupboards or drawers, and each carried precisely the same unusual profile on the shoulder (the part of the shelf sides where they widen to meet the work surface).

11 CK Notebook No. 3. Discussions with James Tobin about Con Coakley, north of Leap; 16.1.88, p. 46.

12 CK Notebook No. 3, loc.cit. p. 46.

13 CK Notebook No. 3. loc.cit. p. 46.

14 G. Ewart Evans. *Where beards wag all; the relevance of the oral tradition* (London 1970) p. 27: 'The wheelwright's craft, owing to the prominence given to it by George Sturt and others, has become almost the classical craft of the old country community ... local variations in the craft and in the craftterms are worth recording and local customs linked to the craft are in themselves informative.'

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15 George Sturt, *The wheelwright's shop* (Cambridge University Press 1934) p. 96.

16 See Gertrude Jekyll. *Old English household life: some account of objects and country folk* (London 1925, 1975) pp. 67 & 73; There is a photograph here of a wooden cradle, 'of seventeenth century design', with panelled sides and posts surmounted by handles which is very similar in method of construction to Con Coakley senior's (see fig. 4). Jekyll says; 'It was from a cottage ... Its solid head tells of the need of protection against draught'. Her example is likely to originate from south-west Surrey.

17 See I.F. Grant, *Highland folk ways* (Routledge, 1961, 1975) p. 176, who explains that in the Scottish Highlands, by comparison 'There were always two knobs at each *side* and a length of plaited wool was carried across the cradle ... to hold in the baby. Cradles used to be handed down and the women would boast of how many babies had been reared in them.' See also F. Carragher 'Irish cradles, an introductory look' in *Regional furniture* 6 (1992).

18 CK Notebook, No. 3; Discussions with Diarmuid Donovan of Union Hall; 9.1.88, pp. 25-27.

19 Unfortunately Diarmuid Donovan was unable to find these.

20 CK Notebook No. 3, loc.cit., pp. 25-27.

21 Transcript No. 8804; John O'Sullivan, born 1915; 9.1.88, p. 24.

22 Ibid. p. 6.

23 Ibid. p. 3.

24 Ibid. p. 22.

25 Ibid. p. 4.

26 A dresser that I noticed had this type of split-turned decoration applied to the sides of the base, thus described, was in the Inniskeen Folk Museum in Co. Louth. Obviously, one only finds this feature where the maker has had access to a lathe (comparatively rarely).

27 Transcript No. 8804; loc.cit. p. 3.

28 Mary Carbery, *The farm by Lough Gur* (Cork & Dublin 1937, reprinted 1982) p. 21.

29 Transcript No. 8804; loc.cit. pp. 20-21. Subsequent research shows they were commonplace in other parts of Ireland too; see C. Kinmonth *Irish country furniture 1700 - 1950* (Yale University Press, 1993, 1995) pp. 118 - 124, figs. 181-190.

30 F. S. L. Lyons *Ireland since the famine* (Fontana 1973) p. 79. It was not until 1908 that the Local Government Board (formerly the Poor Law Commissioners) passed a number of Acts on Public Health, including the Tuberculosis Prevention (Ireland) Act, setting up and supervising hospitals for the treatment of the disease.

31 CK Notebook No. 3; 14.1.88, pp. 36-37.

32 The term 'Carbery Settle' is one that I gave to this singularly unusual piece of furniture, mainly because of its complexity, for eaase of reference. Since I discovered this piece of furniture while carrying out field studies in the West Carbery (East) and East Carbery (West) baronies, and the example illustrated originated from a farmhouse near the town of Rosscarbery, I felt the name 'Carbery Settle' to be particularly appropriate.

33 See E. E. Evans. *Irish folk ways* (London 1957) p. 88; also Alan Gailey, 'Kitchen furniture', *Ulster folklife* vol. 12 (1966) 23-25.

34 'Craftsmen are completely reliable informants when they discuss their own work. Their craft, after a lifetime's application to it, is in their bones and they do not go wrong in describing it ...' (E. E. Evans, op.cit., 27).

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