



# *Knights and Castles*

## A History of Irish Furniture

BY JAMES PEILL

I first met Desmond FitzGerald, the romantically titled Knight of Glin, during my university vacation in the summer of 1993. A year later, I found myself in the hall at Glin Castle, his family seat on the banks of the river Shannon in County Limerick. It was probably there that I first became aware of Irish furniture and its idiosyncratic flavor. When three years later I joined the furniture department at Christie's, London (for many years Desmond was the Christie's representative in London), Desmond and I were already friends, and it was not long before he asked me if I would be interested in helping him write a book about Irish furniture. This was no off-the-cuff invitation, but a deep desire on Desmond's part to bring to birth a book that had been in gestation for longer than I had been alive.

Desmond, who is president of the Irish Georgian Society, a governor of the National Gallery of Ireland, and onetime deputy keeper of the furniture and woodwork department at the Victoria & Albert Museum, has written widely on Irish architecture, gardens and decorative arts. When he approached me about writing this book there had long been a gaping hole on the shelves of furniture enthusiasts waiting to be filled by a history of Irish furniture. With this in mind, he had been collecting images of Irish furniture gleaned from auction house catalogues, dealers, and visits to houses across Ireland; his archive at Glin now comprises around 2,000 images. The resulting publication, due out in spring 2007, is *Irish Furniture*, the first book devoted to a survey of Irish furniture and wood carving from the earliest times to the union of Ireland with Great Britain in 1800.

The first part of the book provides an illustrated chronological history of Irish furniture

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**Fig. 1:** The hall at Glin Castle, County Limerick, showing an Irish mahogany serving table with the FitzMaurice and Moore arms, circa 1750, flanked by a pair of Irish mahogany dining chairs, circa 1750. The portrait by Heroman van der Mij (1684–1741), circa 1740, is of John FitzGerald, twentieth Knight of Glin being handed a challenge to a duel. Photography by Dara McGrath.



**Fig. 2:** One of a pair of Irish mahogany side chairs, circa 1750, at Glin Castle, County Limerick. Photography by Dara McGrath.



and interior carving, interspersed with contemporary inventories, letters, diaries and newspaper advertisements. It also considers the influence of Irish craftsmen in the colonies of America. The second half of the book is a pictorial catalogue of the different types of surviving furniture, including chairs, stools, baroque sideboards, elegant tea and games-tables, bookcases, and an array of mirrors. An index compiled by John Rogers lists Irish furniture-makers and craftsmen of the eighteenth century.

Irish furniture made during the first seventy-five years of the eighteenth century is the most easily recognizable. It can be identified by certain idiosyncrasies that differentiate it from English furniture of the same period, though Irish furniture sometimes appears to be retarded and behind prevailing fashions in England. Details peculiar to Irish furniture of

this time frame can be summed up thus: The carving on the aprons of card, tea, and side tables, stools, blanket chests and bottle-stands has low relief foliated detail that often incorporates eagles' heads, winged birds, rosettes, oak-leaved festoons, and tassels that are usually centered on grotesque lions' masks, goblin heads, baskets of flowers, and scallop shells. These details are in relief against a ground incised with a large-meshed dotted trellis or lozenge pattern often punched in the center. Solid background punching, such as usually appears on gesso work, is also often found. Cabriole legs are frequently emphasized by further masks, acanthus leaves, or cabochon shells. The shell motif is particularly common on chairs, settees, and tables. Chairs often have backs and seat-rails of oak veneered with mahogany, and stretchers were usual even after they had gone out of fashion in England.

Furniture motifs popular during the reigns of Queen Anne and the early Georges were retained in Ireland long after they were out-of-date in England, and coupled with often bizarre carving, give some pieces an almost sinister animal life. As if to further emphasize the animal nature of this furniture, another characteristic is the muscle or fetlock just above the square-shaped paw or webbed claw-and-ball foot. Often this little bulge is acanthus-decorated and frequently the leaf crawls further up the leg. Stylized hairs or imbrication occasionally take the place of the acanthus.

Not all Irish furniture of this date shows such elaboration; a plainer and often more elegant type existed concurrently, perhaps intended for secondary rooms or slightly less grand establishments. A long table, its moulded apron centered with a shell, embellished only with corner fretwork, and with plain straight legs, suggests a place in the dining room of a rural squire. Neat little tea tables with dished tops, some with tripartite or trifid feet bring to mind the world of provincial gossip. An armchair shows all the delight in serpentine curves that Hogarth popularized with his "line of beauty" theories about the ideal "s" shaped line. Plain card tables with flowing cabriole legs fall into this subcategory, the most common decorated with a shell and incorporating a little drawer for counters in the apron. Others are semicircular with three folding leaves, and the most ingenious had a reversible top hiding a backgammon board, a draughts board, and draw-out candle stands.

The mahogany serving table in the hall at Glin (Fig. 1) displays many of the characteristics outlined above, although it is in a more naïve style, and was probably made in Cork or Limerick, circa 1750. Its diaper pattern apron is centered by the FitzMaurice and Moore arms flanked by great swags of foliage. The legs are clearly carved from a solid block of mahogany and there is no hint of a curve before they terminate in squared paw feet. Their tops are headed by weird lion masks



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**Fig. 3:** A giltwood pier glass by Francis and John Booker, circa 1750, at Glin Castle, County Limerick. Photography by Dara McGrath.

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**Fig. 4:** A mahogany serving table, circa 1750, probably supplied to the fifth Earl of Antrim (1713–1775) for Glenarm Castle, County Antrim. Private collection; photography by James Fennell.

making a meal of acanthus leaves. On either side of the table is a pair of mahogany chairs that each appear to have two top rails where the solid vase-shaped splat is joined to the scrolled stiles by a wavy rail. This feature is often seen on Irish chairs, as is the waved and flattened stretcher seen on the pair of “back stools” (Fig. 2) now at Glin. The stretcher is usually fixed to the back legs with little wedged pegs, visible on the underside.

In the library at Glin is a rigidly Palladian pier glass (Fig. 3) that bears the label of Francis and John Booker of Essex Bridge, Dublin. Together with their father, John, the

Bookers were probably the most celebrated mirror makers of eighteenth-century Dublin. This pier glass must date from soon after their father’s death in 1750 as its ornament shows no hint of the rococo flourishes that adorn their later work.

One of the best examples of Irish furniture is a mahogany serving table, or sideboard, (Fig. 4) probably supplied to Alexander McDonnell, fifth Earl of Antrim (1713–1775) for Glenarm Castle, County Antrim, which was rebuilt circa 1750 as a new home for his family following a disastrous fire at Ballymagarry House (near the old McDonnell seat at Dunluce). It is possible

that the table was one of five mahogany tables listed in May 1750 as saved from Ballymagarry. However, it is more likely to date from after the fire, when Glenarm was furnished.<sup>1</sup> The apron is profusely carved with Jupiter’s eagle heads issuing from cornucopia beside a Bacchic lion mask flanked by swags of flowers. The ground is covered in dotted lozenge trellis. The lion mask is headed by a section of rope, a feature that appears on other Irish side tables, the meaning of which remains unclear. This lion mask was the subject of an enchanting memory by Lady Jane McDonnell, later Lady Clinton (d. 1953), in her memoir, *Happy Hours in an*



*Irish Home* (1938). Reminiscing about her childhood at Glenarm in the 1860s she recalled a sideboard in the dining room: “After kissing the head of the great carved animal on the huge mahogany sideboard...that animal and I shared a secret. He had a long brown shiny tongue hanging out, and I imagined it might be chocolate, so one day I gave it a surreptitious lick, and I remember now the horrid disappointment when I tasted the nasty salt of furniture polish.”

In the red drawing-room (Fig. 5) of Castlewellan House, County Kildare, built between 1719 and 1729 by the Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, William Conolly

(1662-1729), is Lady Louisa Conolly’s monumental bureau cabinet made circa 1760 (she was married to William Conolly’s great nephew, Tom Conolly). Behind a pair of shaped panelled doors with rococo carved flourishes is a fitted interior with marquetry detailing and alphabet letters on the pigeonholes and sliding file drawers above. The tripartite form of the serpentine chest section with three columns of drawers is common to Irish furniture. The Castlewellan cabinet is one of a known group of four that includes one from Castlewellan, County Down, one at Temple Newsam House, Leeds, and another recently acquired by the Ulster Museum, Belfast.<sup>2</sup>

Newbridge House, County Dublin, built between 1749 and 1750 for Archbishop Charles Cobbe, is one of the few eighteenth-century Irish houses that still retains much of its original contents. After Thomas Cobbe, the archbishop’s son, inherited the house, a satinwood and marquetry pier table (Fig. 6) was almost certainly supplied to him in 1790 by cabinetmaker John Wisdom of Dublin for the newly refurbished drawing room. The 1783–1814 Newbridge accounts record a payment on 20 August 1790 for “A table of satinwood from J. Wisdom £5.13.9.” The table top of radiating satinwood veneers with a yew-wood scalloped edge is cen-



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**Fig. 5:** The red drawing-room at Castletown, County Kildare, showing Lady Louisa Conolly's mahogany bureau cabinet, circa 1760. Photography by James Fennell.

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**Fig. 6:** A satinwood, yew wood, and marquetry pier table by John Wisdom, circa 1790, at Newbridge House, County Dublin. Photography by David Mees, courtesy of Hugh Cobbe.

tered by a fluted fan motif and stands on square tapering "herm" legs. Listed in 1821 in the "Large Drawing-Room" as one of "4 Half-round Pier Tables" it has remained in the room to the present day.

The Newbridge table is a good example of how styles had evolved by the end of the eighteenth century so that they were virtually indistinguishable from their English counterparts. By then cabinetmakers from both Ireland and England were using the same furniture pattern books and fashionable styles emanating from London were eagerly sought by Irish clientele, with cabinet

makers quick to meet the demand. However, for the greater part of the eighteenth-century, the Irish furniture that was made, with its extravagantly carved features, enjoys a unique place in furniture history. @

*Irish Furniture* by the Knight of Glin and James Peill, is lavishly illustrated with over 500 images (100 b/w, 400 color) and showing many pieces for the first time. It will be published by Yale University Press in March 2007. For more information call 203.432.0960 or visit [www.yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/home.asp](http://www.yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/home.asp).

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1 Information kindly supplied by the Hon. Hector McDonnell.

2 The Castlewellsan cabinet was sold anonymously, Christie's, London, 30 November 2000, lot 100. The Temple Newsam cabinet is illustrated in C. Gilbert, *Furniture at Temple Newsam House and Lotherton Hall* (Leeds, 1978), 42-44, cat. no. 29. The Ulster Museum cabinet is illustrated in "Burton Park, Sussex," *Country Life* (18 July 1936): 72.