

***Canadian Country Furniture, 1675-1950.* By Michael S. Bird. (Toronto: Stoddart, 1994. forward by Howard Pain, introduction by Claudia Kinmonth. Pp. 403, photographs, endnotes, glossary, acknowledgments, bibliography, index, \$75.00, ISBN 1-55046-087- 0 cloth.)**

Walter Peddle

Volume 19, numéro 2, 1997

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087699ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087699ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Peddle, W. (1997). Compte rendu de [*Canadian Country Furniture, 1675-1950.* By Michael S. Bird. (Toronto: Stoddart, 1994. forward by Howard Pain, introduction by Claudia Kinmonth. Pp. 403, photographs, endnotes, glossary, acknowledgments, bibliography, index, \$75.00, ISBN 1-55046-087- 0 cloth.)]. *Ethnologies*, 19(2), 169–172. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087699ar>

folklorists, thereby developing greater awareness and understanding of “how carefully organised” (p. 58) were the beliefs he encountered. As he was to observe in 1926, then as a figure of medical authority in his capacity as editor of the *Caledonian Medical Journal*, the physician must recognize that he did not deal “with the individual vivid imagination of the garrulous old woman who repeats [a belief], but that she is a retailer and not a manufacturer” (p. 58). These insightful comments preface nine articles “On Scottish Folk-Medicine,” published for the first time in 1926-31 from Rorie’s 1908 M.D. thesis of the same title.

As Buchan believes, these writings therefore reveal David Rorie as an important, sympathetic and astute recorder of Scottish lore, a physician who genuinely cared for his patients in both senses of the word. This volume not only adds to a scholarly understanding of Scottish beliefs and customs up to the 1930s; it would also prove useful to medical and health professionals who might wish to reflect on the value of quiet humility as displayed by its writer. As David Rorie himself implies (p. 58), physicians cannot assume uncritical or passive compliance with their wishes in communities maintaining strong traditional beliefs and a healthy disrespect for scientific authority:

When the doctor cures,
The sun sees it.
But when he kills,
The earth hides it. (p. 113)

JENNIFER J. CONNOR
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario

Canadian Country Furniture, 1675-1950. By Michael S. Bird. (Toronto: Stoddart, 1994. forward by Howard Pain, introduction by Claudia Kinmonth. Pp. 403, photographs, endnotes, glossary, acknowledgments, bibliography, index, \$75.00, ISBN 1-55046-087-0 cloth.)

Michael Bird has accomplished the daunting task of surveying Canadian regional furniture from Newfoundland to British Columbia and imparting his findings through the vehicle of a coffee table book. *Canadian Country Furniture, 1675-1950* is an impressive photographic inventory of examples of furniture drawn from a wide cross-section of forms, periods, styles and geographic areas. It is organized by region, i.e. Atlantic Provinces, Quebec, Ontario and Western Provinces, and it includes a relatively large number of items from such ethnic communities as the Hutterites, Mennonites, and

Doukhobors, each of which has made significant contributions to Canada's diverse furniture heritage.

This book is not an inventory of typical examples. According to the author, the subjects were selected to support the thesis that furniture is a blend of two qualities: utility and beauty.

Most would agree that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. What is aesthetically pleasing varies from one individual or group to another. This reality, however, is not sufficiently reflected in the author's inventory. Perhaps not surprisingly, considering the content of Mr. Bird's previously published books which deal with objects of folk art and other decorated items, *Canadian Country Furniture* offers a feast of highly embellished furniture and only a mere taste, for instance, of the relatively chaste furnishings which some collectors and cultural groups consider to be aesthetically pleasing. Nevertheless, I suspect that, like myself, most will find the objects he has chosen wonderful to behold, and will be grateful for the offering.

Mr. Bird's book could have made a greater contribution to the understanding of Canadian country furniture if it had offered significantly more contextual content. Illustrations, including paintings and sketches of house interiors and community settings, as well as more information about such important issues as the traditional use of both the furniture and the rooms in which it was used, would have enhanced understanding of and appreciation for the furniture shown in the book. This also would have served to increase awareness of the fact that, due to different historical, geographic and economic realities, the traditionally made furniture of each Canadian region (even sub-region, for that matter) is distinct. Let us consider briefly, for example, Newfoundland and Ontario.

To begin with, Newfoundland fishers' dwellings required some furniture forms which were different from those needed for Ontario farmhouses. Furthermore, locally available building materials in Newfoundland were limited mainly to balsam fir and white birch, whereas a wider variety of both softwoods and hardwoods were available in Ontario. Even though a Newfoundland product might look very similar in form to an Ontario product, it might be built using different construction techniques and enhanced with a different kind of finish and decoration. Just as important, similar looking items from these two regions often were used and valued differently.

Mr. Bird does, however, identify and thoroughly discuss a major contributor to regional distinctiveness. He correctly attributes the vast range of styles and influences evident in Canadian country furniture to the various cultural and religious communities which make up the Canadian social fabric. He invests much time informing his readers about these groups, often including in his information why each group came to Canada, how it got here and where its members ultimately settled. However, his discussion under the heading of "Styles and Influences" mentions little about the central role of each source country's regional furniture in providing initial models for the various Canadian

regional products. Instead, he lists only general fashionable furniture styles, claiming they served as either remote or immediate inspiration for country furniture made in Canada.

Just as Canada has different geographic regions which have produced distinctive furniture, so too have the countries from whence Canada's early settlers came. For the most part, it is the traditionally made furniture of these home regions, not the furniture reflecting more general and fashionable styles, that served as initial models for Canadian country furniture. My own ongoing investigation of furniture design transmission from Great Britain to Newfoundland clearly supports this view.

To be fair to the author, thoroughly researched information about regional furniture-making traditions is either scarce or simply unavailable. Because such furniture generally has been considered relatively unimportant, study of it has either not yet begun or is in its infancy. In Britain, for example, serious study of regional furniture has been underway for only about a dozen years.

Not surprisingly, a dearth of accurate information has led to the dissemination of numerous erroneous statements concerning North American regional and country furniture. For example, under the heading of "Archaic Tendencies", the author informs his readers that a particular type of spindle back chair, which he refers to as a "carver", was based upon a form popular in Britain and New England in the seventeenth century. He further claims that this chair was still made in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia well into the nineteenth century. He concludes that the long survival of this type of chair is an example of an "extreme retardataire phenomenon" (p. 28).

In fact, this type of chair was first introduced into North America during the seventeenth century from England. It continued to be made well into the nineteenth century, not only in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, but also in both the Northwest and the Southwest regions of England as well as in New England. Its lasting popularity had little to do with any sort of archaic tendency. It simply was very durable, relatively easy to make and had a pleasing appearance.

Ironically, Mr. Bird may partly have based his assumption on ones made in my own books, the last of which was published in 1984. These, in turn, were based on assumptions expressed in at least several earlier American publications. Fortunately, since that time, British regional furniture has received a great deal of scholarly attention from British furniture history specialists. Many of the results of this attention have been published either in the yearly journals of the (British) Regional Furniture Society or in various other publications by individual members of that Society. North American furniture historians would be wise to familiarize themselves with this ongoing work.

Despite the lack of contextual content and the author's apparent unfamiliarity with some of the latest research concerning regional furniture-making issues, *Canadian Country Furniture* is a joy to browse through. The

book provides a feast of sumptuous material for the furniture connoisseur and, as an inventory, makes a valuable contribution to our awareness and appreciation of Canada's furniture heritage.

WALTER PEDDLE
Newfoundland Museum
St. John's, Newfoundland

Popular Cultures: Rock Music, Sport and the Politics of Pleasure.

By David Rowe. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995. Pp. viii + 184, index, bibliography, ISBN 0-8039-7701-8 pbk.)

Reflecting the inherent snobbishness of academics (p. 5), David Rowe attempts to discuss the dynamics of popular music and sport in a highly theoretical and ultimately complex fashion, as if to legitimize his involvement with these "lowbrow" cultural forms. Unfortunately, his attempts to make his work resonate with erudition exemplify what Edward Said claims to be plaguing most current theoretical discourse: "There is oppositional debate without real opposition. In this setting, even Marxism has often been accommodated to the wild exigencies of rhetoric while surrendering its true radical prerogatives" (Said 1989: 581). The initial excitement one feels about reading a work whose very title suggests an encounter with culture's Dionysian qualities is negated by a text scattered with adept observations that are quickly undermined by Rowe's empty theoretical posturing.

What Rowe attempts to do with *Popular Cultures* is to critically analyze the slippery concept of popular culture. After offering some less useful definitions of the term, he suggests that popular culture is "shifting sets of social and cultural relations, meanings and texts which in varying ways emerge as contemporary forms of pleasure, leisure, style and identity, and which are linked to personal and expressive politics, aesthetic address and cultural economy" (p. 8). Considering the dynamic nature of popular culture, Rowe wishes to investigate the question of whether or not "popular culture function[s] as a means by which people can hold material and ideological oppression at bay, or does it activate and reinforce that oppression?" (p. 8). Aware of the tremendous range of popular culture, Rowe decides to focus on two fundamental components — rock music and sport — to clarify this initial query. Of importance here is that this book is not an elucidation of rock music and sport, but rather rock and sport are vehicles used to acquire an understanding of popular culture. The problematic nature of *Popular Cultures* is clearly reflected in this methodological approach. The two primary aspects of the book, rock music and sport, are a means to an end, and are poorly