

The History of the Sligo/Tuam Chair
with examples from the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life
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The Sligo/Tuam chairs will be forming part of a major exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life in 2021. My research, dating back to 2013, will be updated after that time.

Introduction

This research was completed in 2013 as part of the BA in Heritage Studies degree at GMIT Mayo Campus, whilst undertaking voluntary work at the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life, alongside Curator Rosa Meehan. The aim of the research project was to discover historical information on the Sligo/Tuam Chair.

The Sligo/Tuam Chair is a distinctive three-legged, straight backed, triangular-seated chair, with or without arms, that is predominantly found in the western region of Ireland. It is not a common chair yet its manufacture has endured to the modern day.

The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) – Country Life in County Mayo holds the National Folklife Collection; objects that represent the material culture of the traditional way of life in Ireland, from the period 1850-1950.

Furniture that was typically found in the traditional rural Irish home is known as vernacular furniture. In the past, homes of Irish people were much smaller and had much less furniture than we do today. In addition, centuries of poverty and a lack of timber supply, due to the depletion of Irish forests, resulted in a less-developed tradition of furniture making in Ireland.

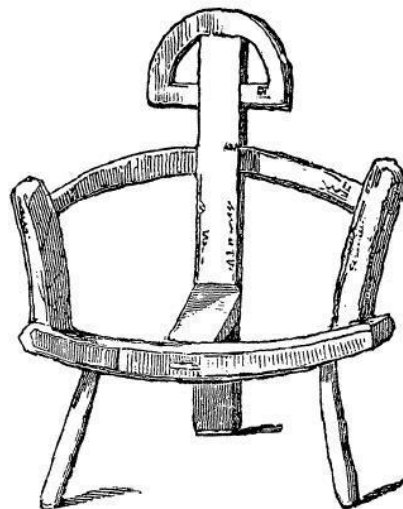
Settlers from Britain and Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries brought the skills of furniture construction that influenced later Irish furniture makers. The 19th century saw a growth in Irish furniture making that had not been known earlier. As a result, Irish vernacular furniture is often classified by the style of the regional variation, rather than

its age. Most Irish furniture was made from easily accessible materials with styles that were influenced from mainland Europe.

Different types of seating brought people near to the hearth, which was the focal point of an Irish house. Three-legged chairs and stools were common because they provided stability on uneven floors.

Documentary Evidence

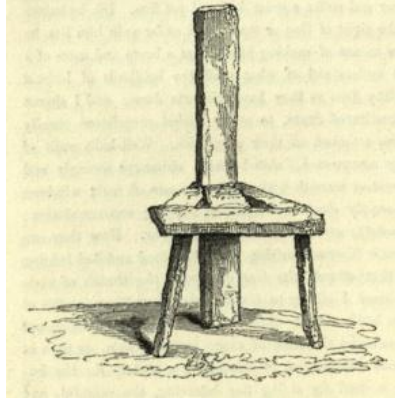
The oldest documentary evidence of the Sligo/Tuam Chair is from *The Dublin Penny Journal* of 1832. It is described as “an ancient oak chair” from the village of “Drumcliffe” in County Sligo, a derivation of the “creepy”. The writer added that the chair no longer existed, having “been used for firing during a severe winter, being deemed by its owner as a useless and inappropriate article of luxury”. This supports Evans’ claim that furniture was often burned for fuel.



ANCIENT IRISH CHAIR.

Another early written reference is from a travelogue by Mr & Mrs Hall, first published in 1841, of a three-legged chair seen in a house at Erriff at the head of “Killery Bay” in County Galway, described as “a singularly primitive chair, very commonly used throughout Connaught” (Figure 2). The geographical provenance is important, especially as the accompanying image is a style that has continued to the present day. The writer describes the chair as being “roughly made of elm, the pieces being nailed together”, though other evidence shows there are no nails used in this chair. The claim

that “There is evidence that this piece of furniture has undergone little change during the last eight or ten centuries”, is not supported with any fact, but must have been the belief at the time.



"a singularly primitive chair"

(Hall, 1841, Plate No. 15)

J. Lizzie Cloud was an independent American artist and writer who travelled in Connemara in the 1870s and 80s. In 1879 she published an article describing “a curious three-legged chair” in “the smallest place two human beings ever contrived to exist in”. This point is interesting because it indicates that status was not an issue in ownership of the chair. Though the article is illustrated it does not include the Sligo/Tuam Chair, however in 1878/9 she also produced an oil painting that includes the chair in the background, revealing her familiarity with it.

A Folklore Society of Ireland journal article of 1964 refers to a chair now in the possession of the NMI – Country Life. It also contains illustrations of the two types of Sligo/Tuam Chairs, with and without arms. The article is significant as it describes the only evidence found of folklore associated with the chair, coming from Tom Durkan of Tourmakeady in Co Mayo, a carpenter and *seanchaí*. He describes the chair as being “the same as Saint Joseph used to make”, and that, “the seven woods of the Cross” were used, being:

- *Fuinseóg*: Ash
- *Fearnóg*: Alder
- *Beitheóg*: Birch
- *Ailmeóg*: Elm

- *Learóg*: Larch
- *Saileóg*: Willow
- *Driseóg*: Briar

The Briar was used for “the dowels, pegs or tree-nails which took the place of nails”. Despite this folklore, no chairs have been found to be made of a combination of these seven woods; all are made of one type of wood, usually oak, ash or pine. Tom Durkan’s description as a *seanchaí*, an Irish storyteller, is perhaps significant here.

A significant find was a reference in 1979 to an English oak chair that bears a striking resemblance to the Sligo/Tuam Chair. Chinnery believes that “Three-legged chairs were possibly the most numerous type during the sixteenth century”. He says low-back armchairs are fairly common, but this version, a “crude form” made by a joiner is comparatively rare.

More common in areas of England and Wales are triangular “turned chairs” that appear to be more refined versions of the joiner’s “crude form”. These sixteenth and seventeenth century chairs are also found in Northern Europe and Scandinavia. The widespread existence of three-legged chairs Europe-wide is an interesting development in the origins of the Sligo/Tuam Chair, indicating that perhaps it did not derive from a stool at all.

Loughnan, in *Irish Country Furniture*, acknowledges that the Sligo Chair is distinctive in Ireland in both construction and shape, and attributes its origins to Flemish and Dutch vernacular furniture of the sixteenth century, though he does not provide any evidence for this. He concedes that how and why it became established as an Irish vernacular chair is pure speculation. His Sligo Chair image comes from a private collection, and he notes that it has remnants of red-lead paint. Though both Cotton and Kinmonth mention the importance of painted Irish vernacular furniture, as yet no other mention has been made of painted Sligo/Tuam chairs.

Bernard Cotton accessed one of the Sligo Chairs in the NMI collection in his article of 1989. Cotton contends that “The ‘throne’-like appearance of this design may owe its origins in ancient forms of Irish seating which had high ritual significance”, however

this appears to be conjecture. He more convincingly ascribes its design to the seventeenth century chair making tradition in England and Wales as suggested by Chinney. Cotton dates this armchair as c. 1820.

Kinmonth in *Irish Country Furniture 1700 – 1950* discusses Sligo Chairs in detail, mostly referencing those in the NMI collection. She mentions that the first reproductions of these chairs were made for W. B. Yeats' tower house, Thoor Ballylee, in County Galway. Yeats refers to this in a letter to Maud Gonne in 1918:

“We hope to be in Ballylee in a month and there I dream of making a house that may encourage people to avoid ugly manufactured things... Except a few very important things imported as models we should get all made in Galway or Limerick. I am told that our neighbours are pleased that we are not getting grand things but old Irish furniture.”

Kinmonth notes that the backs of the reproduction armchairs are “disappointingly straight”, as opposed to a natural curve of wood that is usually used.

Artistic evidence

In *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, Claudia Kinmonth chose Irish genre paintings “for what they say about how people lived”. The paintings, whilst not interpreted as strictly historical documents, provide a contemporary view into Irish ‘cabins’ and the depictions of furniture, their arrangement and use. Kinmonth discovered two artists who used Sligo/Tuam Chairs in their work: J. Lizzie Cloud, whose sole painting was already discussed, and Howard Helmick.

Howard Helmick was an American painter who had a studio in Ireland in the 1870s and 80s. Kinmonth analysed over 20 of Helmick's works of Irish interiors, five of which depict the Sligo/Tuam Chair. All five portray the same armchair, perhaps indicating that Helmick owned a version that he used as a prop. In a 2012 essay Kinmonth revealed an extra two works featuring the Sligo/Tuam chair.

Helmick's 1882 work, “*A Difference of Opinion*”, with the Sligo/Tuam armchair prominently to the left front. This image shows the tusk tenon in the middle of the back board of the chair, described earlier as a medieval feature. The armchair that Helmick

depicts, with six lathe-turned supports in the arms, are not found on any known surviving examples. Kinmonth thinks this is evidence of a “specific and elegant variation”. The lathe-turned supports perhaps also provide another connection to the British three-legged turned armchair.

Kinmonth’s discovery of more Helmick works show that he also painted the arm-less version of the Sligo/Tuam chair, including the painting “The Knotty Point” from 1877.

The National Museum of Ireland Collection

The NMI has twelve Sligo/Tuam Chairs in its collection, along with a modern reproduction. One chair, in addition to the reproduction, is on public display at NMI – Collins Barracks, and two chairs are on public display at the NMI – Country Life. The remaining nine chairs are in conservation storage at NMI – Country Life. Each chair is designated with a reference number beginning F:xxxx, indicating the year the chair was accessioned by the NMI, not the age of the chair itself.

F1931:114

This chair, on display at NMI – Collins Barracks, was presented to the NMI by Mr Colm Ó Lochlainn in 1931. It was made for Ó Lochlainn by carpenter and *seanchaí* from Tourmakeady East in Co Mayo, Tom Durkan. It replaced an older chair that Durkan had given Ó Lochlainn in 1914 that had subsequently succumbed to wood-worm.



F1931.114

(Image: Barbara Barclay, courtesy of NMI, 2013)

Ó Lochlainn mentions that Durkan owned a steel punch with his name, ‘T. DURKAN’, that he had used in the shipyards in Scotland, and “boasted that he could ‘write his name with one blow of the hammer’”. Durkan used this punch to ‘sign’ his chairs, still visible on the chair in the NMI collection.

F:1931.116

This chair, on display at NMI – Country Life, was presented to the NMI by E.R. Richards-Orpen, who had originally received it from Dr Thomas Costello of Tuam in Co Galway. A letter from Dr Costello in 1943 indicates that the chair was made by Tom Hughes of Cloonkeely, Tuam.



F:1931.116

(Image: Barbara Barclay, courtesy of NMI, 2013)

F:1943.247

This armchair is in conservation storage at NMI – Country Life. NMI accession notes reveal that it was purchased for £10 from Dr Thomas Costello, Tuam, in 1943. Dr Costello described it as “a chair of somewhat different make to the two you have which I believe shows the evolution of the arms of these chairs... it was made by the same man Hughes”. He is referring to Tom Hughes who made the chair F:1931.116.



F1943.247

(Image: Barbara Barclay, courtesy of NMI, 2013)

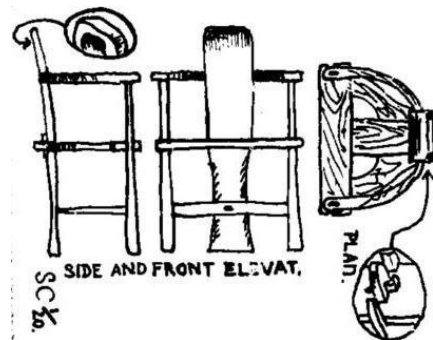
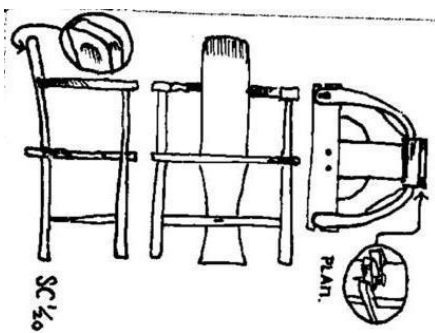
F:1953.1 and F:1953.2

These two identical armchairs made of ash are from the Tuam area of Co Galway and were loaned by the IFC in 1953 . Both are at NMI – Country Life: F1953.1 is on display, and F1953.2 is in conservation storage. Accession notes state that they were in new condition, and that no nails are used, all tenons are pegged. Their index cards feature delicate line drawings . Unfortunately no other details are known.



F1953.1 and F1953.2

(Image: Barbara Barclay, courtesy of NMI, 2013)

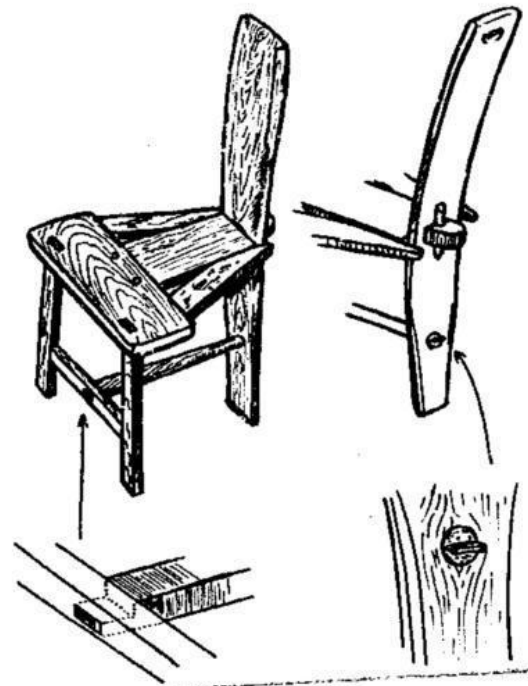


Index cards for F1953.1 and F1953.2

(Image: Courtesy of NMI, 2013)

F:1956.22

This ash chair is from the Tuam area of County Galway and was presented to the NMI by the IFC in 1956. It is in conservation storage at NMI – Country Life. The index card drawings clearly show the morticed and tenoned joints and the tusk tenon on the back panel. The chair features on the NMI website as part of their ‘Documentation Discoveries’ Five Year Inventory Project.



F1956.22

(Image: Barbara Barclay, courtesy of NMI, 2013)

F:2000.99 / F:2000.100 / F2000.101 / F:2000.107 / F:2000.112 / F:2000.113

No provenance or information on how they were accessioned to the collection is currently available on these Sligo/Tuam chairs. The six chairs are now all in conservation storage at NMI – Country Life.

However it was discovered that one of the chairs, F:2000.107, is the same chair that was investigated by Bernard Cotton in his article of 1989. He had given the date of the chair, as *c.* 1820, but had not given it any provenance. It is possible that when Cotton examined the chair there was more information available. If he is correct about the age then this chair is most likely to be the oldest in the collection. It also has remnants of red paint; the only chair in the collection to show any trace of paint.



F:2000.107

(Image: Barbara Barclay, courtesy of NMI, 2013)

Conclusion

The Sligo/Tuam Chair is believed by many to have evolved from the three-legged stool known as the “creepie”, a term also known in Scotland. However the chair also has similarities with sixteenth century three-legged low-back turned armchairs from England and Wales, and retains medieval features such as morticed and tenoned joints. It is believed that the chair arrived in Ireland via planted settlers. The use of paint is a feature of Irish vernacular furniture and two Sligo/Tuam Chairs were found to have red paint remains.

The tradition of ownership of furniture was more widespread after the period of the Great Famine than before, and the more substantial pieces of furniture were probably owned by the so-called ‘strong farmers’. However ownership of the Sligo/Tuam Chair appears to be widespread in the western area of the country, irrelevant of status.

The Sligo/Tuam Chair comes in two basic forms, with and without arms. Illustrations and surviving examples show slight differences in design. There was not enough evidence from the chairs in the NMI collection to detect regional variations, but as vernacular furniture, variations may have been changes made by the local craftsmen who made them.

As for whether they are Sligo Chairs or Tuam Chairs? Irish vernacular furniture was named by its region rather than age. The earliest reference to the chair is from Sligo, yet the tradition of production of the chair appears to have endured around Tuam in Galway. Many of the chairs in the NMI collection that have provenance are from the Tuam area, but this is probably more a reflection of where the chairs were being produced when they were being collected. “Sligo Chair” is perhaps more encompassing as it has an older usage, however if provenance from Tuam is known then it would be more correct to use that term.

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