

REVIEWS - COMPTES RENDUS

Joan MacKinnon, A Checklist of Toronto Cabinet and Chair Makers, 1800-1865, National Museum of Man Mercury Series (History Division Paper No. 11), Ottawa, 1975. 203 pp., 4 plates. \$2.50

In publishing this first comprehensive checklist of Toronto cabinet and chairmakers (1800-1865), the National Museum of Man makes a contribution at three levels of scholarship: local history, economic history, and material history. The Canadian cabinetmaker, unlike the potter and glass-maker, gave significant competition to the importer of furniture, and this from an early date. His place in the economic history of his region is important; it is equally important in the history of the decorative arts in Canada. Toronto, in the 19th century, became one of the chief furniture-making centres in the country. Yet until now, no detailed list of her cabinetmakers has been available.

Any mention of Toronto furniture brings Jacques & Hay immediately to mind. Jacques & Hay were the largest cabinet firm in the country; theirs is easily the best known name in the history of Canadian furniture. Miss MacKinnon, the compiler of this checklist, quotes the Globe in 1866 as saying there was "scarcely a house in the whole of Canada" that did not have "some....product of their workshops". There was, perhaps, no place to mention it, but this spreading of Jacques & Hay furniture throughout the land was effected by a well-organized system of agents who promoted huge trade sales, such as those held each season in Montreal, over a period of years. The contemporary accounts of the Montreal sales alone would give a detailed picture of Jacques & Hay furniture. In Quebec City as many as 2,000 Jacques & Hay chairs were sometimes offered at a time. The cabinetmakers in other parts of Canada had to contend not only with the imports from England and the United States but with those from Ontario as well. Stylistically, too, Jacques & Hay furniture must have had its impact on what was produced elsewhere in competition with it.

But the checklist is in no way limited to the major firms. It is made up of some 500 names, including the early, struggling craftsmen, some of whom survived in business only briefly and some of whom ended up in potter's

field. The makers of the 87½-cent washstands and the painters of fancy chairs have their place.

One aspect of the study that catches the attention of anyone concerned with the broader aspect of Canadian furniture is the evidence that should not be lost sight of -- that cabinetmakers shifted the scene of their operations within Canada itself, a fact that must be taken into consideration when attributions are attempted. The presence of English and American immigrant-cabinetmakers is to be expected, but here we also see that Montreal cabinetmakers moved on to Toronto and Toronto-trained men became an influence in Montreal. H.J. Williams, working in Toronto from the 1830s, is undoubtedly the same H.J. Williams who was in Montreal in the 1820s. James Thomson, whom Miss MacKinnon traces in Toronto to the end of 1857, is the James Thomson who was later to be one of Montreal's leading cabinet men. His Montreal obituary cited his Toronto experience. The so-called vernacular style in furniture was more stabilized in country or isolated districts; in cities there was a constant intermingling of a variety of influences.

One valid criticism may be made of this otherwise well researched checklist; full references to sources are very often omitted. A checklist is a tool for further research, and the whole idea of references is that the user should be able to put a finger immediately and precisely on the source. To give the year only for a newspaper advertisement is, for example, not enough (see the entries for Charles Connor, E.B. Gilbert or Harvey Gilbert). Full references should always be given, and this is especially essential when new ground is being broken.

This one criticism aside, the checklist, with its appendices of Jacques & Hay workmen and its bibliography, represents a welcome extension of knowledge. A study of it bears out the claim made in 1858, and quoted in regard to Jacques & Hay, that we had "workmen in Canada competent to make the very best use of the beautiful woods which nature has given us".

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