MATERIAL HISTORY IN GREAT BRITAIN: PRESENT DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE TRENDS

by Alexander Fenton

The study of material history in Great Britain and Ireland has a number of roots. Linguistic atlas work in England and Scotland, including Northern Ireland, has provided one kind of possible methodological base, and the collection and discussion of terms referring to things has also contributed concretely to the subject, as can be seen from publications of recent years such as *The Linguistic Atlas of Scotland, A Word Geography of England*, and *Patterns in the Folk Speech of the British Isles*.[1] Obviously the emphasis of such writings is linguistic, and their reflection of material history is a secondary matter. Distributional patterns suggested by variant words for a material object often remain to be tested by direct examination of the distribution of the object, largely because there have not been specialists in material history until recently and because they are few on the ground. The same name need not apply to the same thing everywhere and easy assumptions of equivalence of distribution should not be made without testing both linguistic and material evidence.

In this respect Scotland is especially fortunate in having its two great dictionaries, *The Scottish National Dictionary*, now complete in ten volumes, and the *Dictionary of the Old Scottish Tongue*, published up to the letter "P." The former covers the period from 1700 to the present; the latter works backwards from 1700, when Scots was more of a national language. Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* is an important equivalent for England, complemented by the great ten-volume (plus Supplement) *New English Dictionary*. Whereas the atlases, based as they are on postal questionnaires and field recording, provide an approach for gathering material data as well, the dictionaries can be regarded more as a direct means of getting at sources. In fact, they are to be seen as basic research tools in material history. The two Scottish dictionaries give variant forms of the head words, indicate where these words are used, provide referenced examples of the words used in context, and add etymologies. The illustrative sources for the *Scottish National Dictionary*, for example, range over the whole stratum of published material (as well as oral sources), which means that sources not much used and often not much considered for historical purposes can be got at. These include the considerable body of often ephemeral "sketch-book" literature, the reminiscences of octogenarians published locally for local consumption, much of it produced by local authors whose local knowledge is very accurate and can be of much value in relation to the material aspects of culture. This can usually be accepted at face value by academics because the authors, writing for a local public, are unlikely to invent detail that their audience knows to be inaccurate. Details of everyday food, for example, and the furnishings and equipment of the living rooms of houses, are the kinds of things that can come through clearly from such sources. Amongst the best of them, to quote a couple of examples, are John Firth's *Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish* and the Aberdeenshire writer William Alexander's *Johnny Gibb o'Gushetneuk*.[2]

Dictionaries, on the scale discussed, provide, through variants in the forms and senses of words, data for distributional studies. The etymologies add a time scale, so that two of the cornerstones of material history studies, those of time and space, begin to be satisfied, and diffusional patterns can be indicated. To take one example, there is in Gaelic and in Irish a word, *sòrn*, which refers to the fireplace or the flue of a fire. Later it came to apply to the flue of a corn-drying kiln and this sense remains in Gaelic. In Shetland, the *sinnie*, a small, four-sided form of kiln inside a barn, preserves a form of the Gaelic name. Further afield, the corn-kiln of the Faroe Islands is the *sodn-hús* (*rn* regularly changes to *dn* in Faroese words), and in Iceland the *sofn-hus* was used as long as cereal crops were grown there. Here is evidence of the early spread of the Gaelic word. The material side is covered by recent survivals and by archaeological finds. At Freswick in Caithness there is a four-sided kiln in a Viking settlement, dated to about 1270 or earlier; at Jarlshof in Shetland a circular kiln, of fourteenth to fifteenth century date; in Thjorsardalur in South West Iceland, at Gröf í Oræfum, a circular kiln dated to 1362, very like the circular type of Orkney and south Shetland. The linguistic and material evidence gives two good grounds for the belief that the corn-kiln got to the Faroes and Iceland by way of northern Scotland, and not that it reached the north of Scotland from Scandinavia, as could be too readily assumed.[3]

Linguistics and lexicography are seen as major bases and data banks for British material history. No less important has been the subject of historical geography. From the "school" of H.J. Fleure, himself much influenced by French historical geographers like P. Vidal de la Blache and J. Brunhes, came Iorwerth Peate, the founder and first curator of the Welsh Folk Museum, Estyn Evans, whose books on the *Mourne Country, Irish Heritage* (dedicated to Fleure), and *Irish Folk Ways* are pioneering textbooks in material history and who was instrumental in the founding of the Ulster Folk Museum, and George Thompson, first director of the Ulster Folk Museum.[4] Geraint Jenkins, Keeper of the Department of Material Culture in the Welsh Folk Museum, is also a historical geographer by training. In concrete terms this means that patterns of settlement, house types, means of transport, and so on, have figured prominently in the literature, whether in articles or books, much of it produced by the staffs of open-air and folk museums.

Within this background it is true to say that material history has been developed in recent years primarily

on a museum base, as indicated by the editorship of the main journals. Peate's journal *Gwerin* ran from 1956 to 1962. It was succeeded by the British journal *Folk Life* in 1963. In Ulster, *Ulster Folk Life* was started in 1955 by a voluntary body, the Ulster Folklife Society, and was later taken over by the Ulster Folk Museum, reflecting a trend towards greater professionalism.[5] Its editors have been, and are, geographers. *Scottish Studies*, the journal of the School of Scottish Studies of Edinburgh University, includes material history in its ambit and was for a time edited by Wreford Watson, who runs the Centre of Canadian Studies in Edinburgh University. At present, therefore, there are three British journals with a primary concern for material history, all of them much influenced by the human geographers. The title indexes show the main headings to be landscape and settlement, the dwelling house and the materials with which it is built and roofed, fuel, food, clothing, cultivation, harvesting and other aspects of farming, fishing, occupations, crafts and rural industries, transport and trade, and a few regional studies.

In this context it is relevant to note specialist groups. The Vernacular Architecture Group, founded in the 1950s, has published a *Bibliography of Vernacular Architecture*[6] and now has its journal, *Vernacular Architecture*. The School of Architecture of Manchester University has a distinguished record of publication of volumes on vernacular buildings. In Scotland the recently formed Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group publishes a *Newsletter* which has grown into journal status, and it has also produced two booklets: *Building Construction in Scotland: Some Historical and Regional Aspects* and *Clay Buildings in North East Scotland.*[7] Further booklets on Highland houses and on hearth types, both with obvious potential relevance to buildings erected in the early days of settlement in Canada, are to appear in 1979. There is good reason for the emphasis currently being laid on vernacular buildings in Scotland as a major part of material history studies. Buildings are the most enduring of man's artifacts. Tools and implements may die out and be replaced, but buildings remain and may go farther back in time in the landscape than anything else made by man. At the same time, buildings are not static. They are subject to change and decay and require maintenance and restoration. In a period of economic prosperity they may be extended in size. They may be adapted to house equipment such as the threshing mill that spread after 1786. Each change is a pointer not only to the history of the building, but also to the circumstances that produced the change. It is a major part of material history studies to observe, record, and interpret such changes, as Pierre Rastoul sought to do in "La chaumière québecoise,"[8] looking at his material, within Canada, in both diachronic and synchronic terms. (In this context the work of another geographer, Gwyn Meirion-Jones, on Breton houses is also relevant.[9]) It is also of interest to see Rastoul's use of statistics, for different periods, to analyze the proportion of thatched to planked and other types of roofs, the relationship between roofing material and building size, and the material of which the chimney was constructed in relation to roofing and walling materials. An assemblage of features, such as walling, roofing, and chimney materials, can be a basis for diagnosing cultural or ethnic origins. In this case, though all the features discussed by Rastoul are found in Scotland, it happens that wooden chimneys, often bound around with straw rope, were normal on thatched roofs in Scotland whereas the Quebec examples are of stone (related to plank roofs) or of cob (*bousillage*) or earth (related to thatched roofs). Thus if other criteria were lacking, the researcher would have to turn to other parts of Europe to seek comparable assemblages.

Of all material history subjects, it is probably in the area of vernacular buildings that the greatest number of actual books are to be found in Britain, not forgetting Peate's major work on *The Welsh House*.[10] The number of general books on material history is still, however, small. Those by Estyn Evans, mentioned above, were pioneering ventures. I.F. Grant's *Highland Folkways*[11] is in the same category. Peate's most recent work, *Tradition & Folk Life: A Welsh View*,[12] is a very personal book that treats the house, hearth, home, costume, social life, music and dance, play, folklore, the countryside, and language. The Life and Traditions series, at present being published by Dent & Sons, now covers several areas of Britain, in eight volumes or so.[13] The series is designed to include a large number of photographs with a relatively brief text. When and if completed, however, it will provide coverage for the whole country in a way that has never before been achieved.

In terms of an academic discipline, however, it is necessary to go further. There is, as yet, little in the way of deliberately written textbooks for the teaching of material history, and indeed there is very little teaching of the subject in British universities. The Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies, part of the School of English in the University of Leeds, teaches material aspects of culture as part of its general range. It began in 1960–61 to offer courses in folk life studies. A two-year undergraduate option is available, as well as graduate courses, including a one-year post-graduate diploma course and, from 1970, M.A. dissertations in Folk Life Studies. Of ninety-four theses and dissertations submitted between 1961 and 1970, about thirty-five percent dealt primarily with aspects of material history.[14]

In Dublin, the Folk Lore Institute, now a university department under Bo Almqvist, has one member of staff, Caomhín Ó Danachair, who plays a prominent role in material history. Also in Dublin is A.T. Lucas, the recently retired Director of the National Museum of Ireland, whose wide-ranging work on many aspects of Irish material history is based on a detailed knowledge of early documents allied with keen field observation and recording. A bibliography of his writings can be found in his festschrift, *Folk & Farm*.[15]

In Scotland, the School of Scottish Studies of Edinburgh University includes material history in its teaching courses and in its field research programmes, but the subject is not systematically exploited. This is to a great extent left to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, in particular its Country Life Section. In 1975 a link with the Scottish History Department of Edinburgh University was established when I was asked to organize an examinable option in Scottish material culture for final year students. *Scottish Country Life*,[16] a by-product of the first lectures, was conceived as a textbook that could be used for academic purposes, with full references and a general bibliography for further work. It is nevertheless intended to be a general book, covering all of Scotland and trying to view the different regions in relation to each other. It was also seen as the precursor to a series of detailed regional studies of which the first, *The Northern Isles, Orkney and Shetland*, appeared in 1978.[17] This covers a comparable range of material — the face of the land, tilling the soil, harvesting, threshing, drying and grinding the grain, root crops, the shieling, dairy products, everyday food, farm houses and steadings, fuel for the fire, transport and, to some extent, the farming community — but also goes beyond those subjects to deal with the sea, fishing, and fowling. It goes into very much greater detail than *Scottish Country Life* and uses language and dialect as a means of placing the material studied in its Scottish and wider northern European context.

It is worth considering why the Scottish History Department took material history aboard, even if only as an option. It is chiefly because rural history, in recent years, has become very much a subject in its own right. J.A. Symon, in his book on *Scottish Farming, Past and Present*,[18] listed 200-odd books on Scottish agriculture down to 1850. Few of these are concerned with history as we understand it, but rather with farming practice, usually at the period when they were written. They are, therefore, source books, but not history books. The same is true of works on farming written down to 1916, as recorded in Mitchell and Cash's *Bibliography of Scottish Topography*, and there is indeed very little on farming or material history generally in Hancock's similar *Bibliography*, which takes us down to 1950.[19] The main products of the 1916–50 period were I.F. Grant's *Everyday Life on an Old Highland Farm*, her *Social and Economic Development of Scotland to 1803*, and Henry Hamilton's *Industrial Revolution in Scotland*.[20]

A useful indicator of changing fashions in academic work is the post-graduate thesis which, though the work of a young scholar at the start of his career, may reflect in the choice of subject the ideas of senior scholars who are his supervisors. Between 1901 and 1970 there were 290 theses on Scottish history in Edinburgh University. Of these, only eighteen dealt with any kind of rural history and only five of the eighteen were done before 1950. About half of the eighteen dealt with the Highlands or with crofting; amongst those that have had wider importance are J.E. Handley's "Scottish Farming in the Eighteenth Century," E. Third's "Changing Rural Geography of the Scottish Lowlands 1700–1820," I. Adam's "Division of Commonty," G. Houstoun's "History of the Scottish Farm Worker 1800–1850," and R. Dodgshon's "Agricultural Change in Roxburghshire and Berwickshire," the first regionally directed thesis.

An increasing number of articles on rural history also appeared in the *Scottish Historical Review* between 1950 and 1970: sixty-six in all. These include studies of transhumance, the mobility of tenants, cultivating implements and techniques, houses, and townships.

However, the main change has been post-1970. During the 1970–78 period there have been twenty-eight theses on aspects of rural history compared with five theses in 1901–50 and thirteen theses in 1950–70; there is an increasing number of journals, and more of the older ones are being increasingly utilized for the publication of relevant material: the *Transactions* of local societies, *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, *Agricultural History Review*, *Folk Life*, *Scottish Studies*, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, *Economic History Review*, *Industrial Archaeology*, *Northern Scotland*, and *Newsletter* of the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group.

There is no doubt of the quickening of the pace since 1970. This is in part due to the greater availability of private records, estate papers and the like, on loan to or deposited in the Register House and the record offices in Shetland and Orkney. The National Register of Archives (Scotland) has also been surveying private records, making their location and nature readily available to prospective scholars. There is certainly more source material available now for material history than there has ever been; but this does not explain why what was available before was not exploited for this purpose. The Testamentary Inventories, for example, have been long available and were much used for genealogical purposes, but they remain to be studied as a primary source of material history, stuffed with details of furnishings, fittings, dress, textiles, and personal accoutrements as well as stocks of animals and of crops. It seems as if no one had even considered using them in this way until recent years. However, it was as a by-product of this increasing tempo that the special course in material culture was established, and with the availability of students comes the possibility of exploring such sources in depth for the purposes of material history.

Another factor is the Country Life Archive in the National Museum. Started in 1959, it has now grown to a considerable size and is becoming increasingly used by teachers and students for research projects. It is in the purest sense of the concept a material history archive, the contents of which are as follows:

1. *General:* the general shape of the land, overall surveys and views, the systematic surveys of the eighteenth and early nineteenth

centuries; broad patterns of settlement and land use, stocking and cropping; improvement and enclosure movements;
2. *Tenure and rental; land measure and division:* the way the land is divided and held;
3. *Reclamation:* general aspects of drainage, burning, etc.;
4. *Fields:* field systems, their shape, rigs, lazy beds, drainage, dykes, fences, hedges, gates;
5. *Fertilizer:* general, marl, lime and lime kilns, dung, sea ware, and kelp;
6. *Fuel:* general patterns of consumption, including coal, wood, dung, peat; peat cutting;
7. *Cultivation:* mostly on ploughs and ploughing techniques, and other associated implements, for example, harrows; ploughing matches; prehistoric ploughs, old Scotch plough, improved ploughs, makes, ploughs of the Highlands and Islands, specialized ploughs, for example, subsoil, drill, potato lifting, etc.; steam and tractor ploughing; smaller hand tools; oxen, horses, tractors;
8. *Grain:* the seasonal round as reflected in the sowing and harvesting of grain, thrashing, cleaning, storing, drying, milling; grain type, seed, and measure; tools and machinery; harvest organization, customs, and knots;[21]
9. *Livestock:* grazings and shielings; cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, poultry, bees, dairy production, veterinary;
10. *Fodder:* general, whins,[22] hay, including machinery;
11. *Root and green crops:* potatoes, turnips, peas, beans, kale;
12. *Timber:* the distribution and management of woodland; planting, felling, extraction, transport, sawmills;
13. *Fruit:* orchards; hard and soft fruit;
14. *Gardening:* domestic and market;
15. *Game and vermin:* shooting, stalking, keepering and poaching, traps and snares;
16. *Textiles:* wool, lint, jute, hemp; spinning, weaving, knitting, dyeing, and associated processes;
17. *Trades and industries:* for example, smith, joiner and mason work, baking, butchering, shoemaking, etc.; undertakings that underlie skilled trades, such as quarrying, smelting, tanning, etc.; various small industries, for example, nailmaking, tilemaking, brewing, and distilling;
18. *Communications and transport:* structure of communications, for example, routes, post, navigation, means of transport, man, beast, slype,[23] horsedrawn, motor, etc.; ferries, landings, harbours, coastal communications;
19. *Trade:* the means of commercial exchange in the countryside, markets, fairs, droving, marts, roups, shops, co-ops, vans, general weights and measures;
20. *The house:* internal arrangement, decoration, fitments, and furnishings; heating and lighting, domestic articles; washing and bleaching; housekeeping;
21. *Food:* diet, cooking, meals; consumption of cereals, vegetables, meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, etc.; drink;
22. *People and dress:* individuals and their clothes, personal belongings;
23. *People in groups:* farm-servants generally, their wages and conditions, bondagers and women workers, horsemen, cottars, bothy men, chaumers,[24] etc.; farmers, domestic servants, estate servants, chapmen, tinkers, children, their games, toys, rhymes, etc.;
24. *General social:* kinship and social organization, law and its enforcement, national organizations influencing local life, for example, Scottish Women's Rural Institutes; local government, newspapers, national public occasions, education, government forces, currency, visitors and holiday makers; the kirk; birth, marriage, and death; famous events, for example, the Turra Coo; annual events, for example, Common Riding, games, and sports; time and weather, reckoning, drinking, dancing, social pursuits; language, music, art; illness and remedies; festivals, sayings and customs, the supernatural; biography and recording;
25. *Buildings:* general survey of houses and farm buildings, etc.; building, construction and materials;
26. *Towns, villages, and townships:* their layout, relationship to local economy and communications, inns, local gathering points, village halls, water supply, power, etc.;
27. *Fishing:* white, red, herring, shell, freshwater; net and line fishing, baiting, cleaning, curing, and disposal; angling, pearl-fishing, poaching; fisherfolk and fishertowns; whaling and sealing;
28. *Boats:* boat building and sailmaking, general geographical survey of boats;
29: *Fowling:* sea and land birds.

The situation in Scotland is part of the pattern in Britain. Material history has already been pushed into a position of academic respectability, but what is to come next? Nearly 200 years ago the French writer le Comte d'Hautrive wrote in his *Élemens d'Économie Politique* that "l'Écosse est le pays, où l'esprit d'observation est aujourd'hui le plus perfectionné." This was in relation to matters agricultural. I would like to feel that we have retained this spirit of observation, and that the observations we have been making in collecting objects and in building up an Archive are such as to establish a very firm base for the subject. But this is not quite the same as establishing a subject. To collect facts is one thing. To give them general historical significance, to analyze them in depth and relate them to their historical background on a sound theoretical base is another, and this is the stage towards which the subject is beginning to move, not only in Scotland but also in the rest of Britain.[24]

NOTES

1. J.Y. Mather and H.H. Speitel, eds., *The Linguistic Atlas of Scotland*, 2 vols. (London: Croom Helm, 1974–77); H. Orton and N. Wright, *A Word Geography of England* (London, New York, San Francisco: Seminar Press, 1974); M.F. Wakelin, *Patterns in the Folk Speech of the British Isles* (London: Athlone Press, 1972).
2. John Firth, *Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish* (Stromness: W.R. Rendall, 1920, 1974); William Alexander, *Johnny Gibb o'Gushetneuk* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1871, 1881).
3. Alexander Fenton, "Lexicography and Historical Interpretation," in *The Scottish Tradition: Essays in Honour of Ronald Gordan Cant*, ed. G.W.S. Barrow (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974), pp.248–52.
4. H.J. Fleure and M. Davies, *A Natural History of Man in Britain* rev. ed. (London: Collins, 1970); P. Vidal de la Blache, *Principles of Human Geography* (London: Constable, 1926, 1952); J.B. Brunhes, *Human Geography* (London: Harrap, 1952); J.G. Jenkins, ed., *Studies in Folk Life: Essays in Honour of Iorwerth C. Peate* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp.xv–xvii; E. Estyn Evans, *Mourne Country: Landscape and Life in South Down* (Dundalk, Ireland: Dundalgan Press (W. Tempest), 1951), *Irish Heritage: The Landscape, The People and Their Work* (Dundalk, Ireland: Dundalgan Press (W. Tempest), 1958), and *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957); G.B. Thompson, "Estyn Evans and the Development of the Ulster Folk Museum," *Ulster Folklife* 15/16 (1970): 233–38, and "The Welsh Contribution to the Development of the Ulster Folk Museum," in Jenkins, *Studies in Folk Life*, pp.30–33.
5. R.H. Buchanan, "A Decade of Folklife Study," *Ulster Folklife* 2 (1965): 63–75.
6. Robert de Zouche, *A Bibliography on Vernacular Architecture* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972).
7. A. Fenton, B. Walker, and G. Stell, eds., *Building Construction in Scotland: Some Historical & Regional Aspects* (Edinburgh and Dundee: Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group, 1976); B. Walker, *Clay Buildings in North East Scotland* (Dundee and Edinburgh: Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group, 1977).
8. Pierre Rastoul, "La chaumière québecoise," *Material History Bulletin* (Canada: National Museum of Man, History Division, Mercury Series Paper no. 21, 1977), pp.19–41.
9. G.I. Meirion-Jones, *La maison traditionnelle. Bibliographie de l'architecture vernaculaire en France* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1978).
10. I.C. Peate, *The Welsh House* (Liverpool: Brython Press, 1946).
11. I.F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1961).
12. I.C. Peate, *Tradition & Folk Life: A Welsh View* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972).
13. For example, M. Hartley and J. Ingilby, *Life and Tradition in Northumberland and Durham* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1977); E. Brill, *Life and Tradition in the Cotswolds* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1973); M. Hartley and J. Ingilby, *Life in the Moorlands of North-East Yorkshire* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1972) and *Life and Tradition in the Yorkshire Dales* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1968); T. O'Neill, *Life and Tradition in Rural Ireland* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1977); W. Rollinson, *Life and Tradition in the Lake District* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1974); N. Smedley, *Life and Tradition in Suffolk and North-East Essex* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1976).
14. S.F. Sanderson, *A Catalogue of Theses and Dissertations in Folk Life Studies in the University of Leeds 1961–1970* (1971).
15. C.Ó. Danachair, *Folk & Farm: Essays in Honour of A.T. Lucas* (Dublin: Royal Society of Antiquarians of Ireland, 1976).
16. A. Fenton, *Scottish Country Life* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1976, 1977).
17. A. Fenton, *The Northern Isles, Orkney and Shetland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1978).
18. J.A. Symon, *Scottish Farming Past and Present* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1959).
19. A. Mitchell and C.O. Cash, *A Bibliography of Scottish Topography*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1917); P. Hancock, *A Bibliography of Books on Scotland 1916–1950* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1960).
20. I.F. Grant, *Every-day Life on an Old Highland Farm 1769–1782* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1924) and *The Social and Economic Development of Scotland Before 1603* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1930); Henry Hamilton, *The Industrial Revolution in Scotland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932).
21. Knots is the term used for harvest knots or plaited straw decorations.
22. Whins is the term used for furze or gorse.
23. Slype is the name given to a type of travois.
24. Bothy men are farm workers who lived and fed in a special room or building which was the bothy; chaumer is the sleeping room for farm workers who fed in the farm kitchen.