

or pieces that they believe are from the Maritimes, will certainly be able to use this book as a research tool. Colchester Furniture Makers will initiate a reassessment of many collections and should assist in the removal of the shroud of anonymity from some of the artifacts contained therein.

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English-Canadian Furniture of the Georgian Period. Donald Blake Webster.
Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, c1979. 232 p., ill., biblio.
ISBN 0-0708298-0-2. \$24.00. Reviewed by Benno Forman.

Donald Blake Webster, curator of the Canadiana Department at the Royal Ontario Museum, has published the first book devoted to furniture made in Canada in the styles, for the most part, that were popular in England during the latter years of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth centuries. The book contains 309 illustrations of this furniture, which, Webster informs us, constitute approximately 10 per cent of what remains of it. That so much is included between the covers of a book is a remarkable achievement, and the titanic labor involved in studying, photographing, and collating this material could only have been expended by a person who cares enough for this furniture to want to bring it to the attention of a wide audience.

The photographs are sharp and well-printed and the fact that they are now available will be cheered by all North American collectors and scholars who are interested in the furniture of the Atlantic community, for with this publication another of the English colonies in North America is heard from. This book fills the gap between Charles Montgomery's classic American Furniture, Federal Period and Bryden Bordley Hyde's Bermuda's Antique Furniture and Silver. The photographs are prefaced with fifty-three pages of opinions and comments that range from the extremely general to the happily specific. Observations on the types of woods that distinguish Canadian furniture from its British cousins and their importance to connoisseurship

are valuable, as is the information on the habits of workmanship and design that enables us to distinguish Canadian furniture from American, the latter unfortunately not supplemented by photographic detail. Of more than passing interest is a little sermon to collectors advising them that they are merely the temporary possessors of this fast-disappearing heritage and putting them on notice that they must conserve it for future generations. The message is an admirable one, rarely seen in print, and enlightenedly modern in point of view. Let's hope that it makes its way across the border to the south!

As a student of American furniture it is impossible for me to speak about the merits of Webster's evaluations and attributions. The book seems circumspect and appropriately conservative, the connoisseurship and methodology are solid, and the art historical/decorative arts theory on which he has raised his structure is sound. Despite this bright promise, as I read and re-read the book and look over my notes, I find myself becoming more and more depressed that so much emphasis has been placed on aesthetic questions and so little on historical ones. The neglect is all the more regrettable because this book must surely satisfy the potential market for its subject and thus discourage others from working the ground that has been plowed here. Who wants to expend several years in writing a book that will primarily be a footnote to Webster, and who would publish it?

My greatest problem with English-Canadian Furniture of the Georgian Period is that I am not sure for whom it was written. Was it written for collectors? If so, then it contains rather more than the usual collector would want to know about things of little interest to him and nothing on, say, prices, which he would want to know more about. I cannot believe that this relatively small group of individuals with very specific interests is the audience Webster expended all of this energy for. Was it written for his fellow curators? If so, then we can well understand the negative stance adopted in regard to aesthetic qualities. "I have found no examples or evidence of truly 'Great' Georgian-Canadian furniture, or any which could be credibly be described with superlative adjectives," he writes on page 11. If I were a curator interested only in great furniture, I would be tempted

at page 11 to say, "Oh well, nothing here for me," and put the book down. But surely the aesthetic qualities of furniture are only a minor theme to pursue.

Nonetheless this negative theme is echoed repeatedly in the book: few Englishmen lived in Canada in the eighteenth century, the land had to be tamed, times were hard, money was scarce, no accounts books survive - in short, a description of every pioneer colony that the world has ever known. No former colony need apologize for its simple beginnings; it is a fact of life that need not be stated more than once before going on to discuss what has grown up from simple beginnings. However, if the aesthetic qualities of furniture are the most important factor, then a sort of national inferiority complex must follow in any study of colonial furniture. It is a given fact that colonial furniture is always inferior in materials, design, and execution to that which is produced for a wealthy clientele living at leisure in a society of conspicuous consumers. In America we know that our furniture does not have the aesthetic qualities of English examples, but we do not expect it to. In England many of the younger generation of scholars realize that their furniture is not as opulent as that made in France, and no doubt a French scholar must exist somewhere who will someday admit that French design pales when compared to the ideas that French designers borrowed from Italy. Having admitted this, then it is time to get to the work at hand - to explore the questions of why colonial furniture is as good as it is (and many examples in this book are uncommonly handsome), to determine why it looks as it does, to see if it has any unique quality or qualities that make it worthy of being called to the attention of an audience that has no vested interest in it, and finally to point out those attributes which may forecast the particular personality of the society that eventually emerges from the former colony. To do otherwise is to commit oneself to an indefensible defensive posture or, worse, to assume one is going to be attacked for being something that one is not and thus disarm criticism by confessing to something one would probably never be accused of anyway.

In the absence of those aesthetic qualities which the author would have liked to find, are there not others that set this body of furniture apart? In the absence of any significant body of cabinetmaker's accounts, are there no documents that can illuminate this furniture?

Current thinking among American furniture historians is that surviving furniture is a document of material culture. We study it because it tells us a great deal about the people who made and used it and the society in which they lived, aspects of our past which are not illuminated by verbal documents. Craftsmen's accounts are rare in America too, and for the pioneer century, non-existent. Lacking them, we ask other questions of our furniture and seek the answers in the documents that are available. Important among them are land deeds, probate records, wills, and household inventories. I cannot believe that any colony founded by Englishmen under English law does not have such documents. The analysis of these records is extremely informative. They can tell us, for example, if Webster's unsupported statements - for his book contains no footnotes to guide us in verifying them - are correct or are merely assumptions. From inventories one can tell what households were likely to have what kind of furniture, how much of it, whether it was expensive and hence stylish, elaborate, and new, what forms were likely to be present on various economic levels, how rooms were furnished, what preferences for forms people of Scottish, Irish, German, and American extraction might have as opposed to immigrants from England. They also tell us what their owners considered important, whether they attempted to maintain their Britishness or were becoming Canadians and when - in short, a thousand sociological questions limited only by the inventiveness of the person analysing the documents.

The book is further marred by the lack of diligence in pursuing the men who may have been responsible for the furniture. If there were so few furniture makers, what extra trouble and expense could have been involved in producing a few pages with their names and working dates? Even to collate the lists published by others would have been helpful. Is land free in Canada? Are there no deeds recording land transfers that identify the grantors and grantees by name and trade? Take the cupboards illustrated as plates 145 and 146, built-in pieces of furniture from the Kingston area,

for example. How many men capable of making them could have been living in Kingston at the time they were built? It would seem to be a simple matter to have listed the candidates for these fascinating and well-crafted pieces.

No doubt some who read this review will accuse me of employing the old reviewer's trick of criticizing a book on the basis of something that the author never intended to accomplish. Perhaps I have done this horrid thing, but it seems to me that if this is the case, then the author should have intended more than he did. I assure the readers of this journal that I have nothing to gain by not giving this book every measure of praise it is due. But all of us have a great deal to lose if furniture is viewed only as something that is pretty and fun to pursue, for so long as it remains only that it will indeed be lost to future generations.

No person who knows us both will ever read this review and make invidious comparisons between the author and myself. His work and my own are addressed to such different materials that we do not compete for glory in the same arena and never will. My only purpose here has been to provide detached criticism that may prove constructive to future scholars who might read this. Webster's book will undoubtedly be read and appreciated by many people who have never thought much about antique furniture. To me it is a great disappointment that a major opportunity to make a significant contribution - not just to the study of Canadian furniture, but to the study of material culture in general - has been missed.