

*The Dynamics of Outport Furniture Design: Adaptation and Culture.* By Walter W. Peddle. (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, Mercury Series History Division Paper 51, 2002. Pp. viii + 169, abstract/résumé, bibliography, photographs, ISBN 0-660-18802-3, pbk.)

Heather King

Volume 25, Number 1, 2003

Négocier la transcendance / Negotiating Transcendence

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/007140ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/007140ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

King, H. (2003). Review of [*The Dynamics of Outport Furniture Design: Adaptation and Culture.* By Walter W. Peddle. (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, Mercury Series History Division Paper 51, 2002. Pp. viii + 169, abstract/résumé, bibliography, photographs, ISBN 0-660-18802-3, pbk.)]. *Ethnologies*, 25(1), 287–290. <https://doi.org/10.7202/007140ar>

***The Dynamics of Outport Furniture Design: Adaptation and Culture.***

By Walter W. Peddle. (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, Mercury Series History Division Paper 51, 2002. Pp. viii + 169, abstract/résumé, bibliography, photographs, ISBN 0-660-18802-3, pbk.)

This book reflects the extensive research, resources and energy that Walter Peddle has devoted to the subject area of vernacular furniture. The author places a great deal of value on Newfoundland and Labrador's regional furniture and its tradition. Obviously, the study of outport furniture is his passion, and thus his expertise and experience in this area are unequalled and invaluable, and is shown in this text.

In a sense, *The Dynamics of Outport Furniture Design: Adaptation and Culture* has evolved from two of Peddle's previous texts. *The Traditional Furniture of Outport Newfoundland* (1983) focused mostly on pieces of local domestic furniture and from whence they came. The furniture was presented in the typical format of categories commonly seen in furniture texts. It was like a registry of vernacular furniture with some description for every "plate." Necessary contextual information could be gleaned from the brief text preceding the chapters. *The Forgotten Craftsmen* (1984) emphasized some of the builders of Newfoundland furniture and their business practises. In other words, these were craftsmen who had received formal training in cabinetmaking, and had almost factory-size businesses. This text featured only one non-professional furniture maker.

Thus, from this foundation, *The Dynamics of Outport Furniture Design: Adaptation and Culture* has emerged. It is newer and improved. This writing is tantamount to a giant step forward. As the title suggests, the book is about "adaptation and culture." Newfoundland outport furniture is presented as being regional, something which is historically grounded in traditions as expressed in the regional models of the British Isles and in the milieu of pre-confederation nineteenth and twentieth century Newfoundland. It is important to note that in the forward, Matt McNulty states, "The study and appreciation of vernacular furniture is in its infancy and requires more attention and study by scholars ..." This leads to a focal purpose of this book — to create an awareness of the potential of outport furniture, and to reveal insights that can go beyond the regional jurisdictions of Newfoundland.

This book has a wealth of information for the novice and the academic. The material is neither too dry nor too complex. It is well written and organized. In addition, it is refreshing to see the inclusion

of social history, and some narratives about personal experiences of ordinary people. In a sense, this text has preserved the information about outport furniture for future generations that might otherwise be lost.

The introduction gives the history behind the furniture in question. It explains influences on furniture making, like the population demographics of settlers in Newfoundland and that this “unorganized” craft was mostly of simple joinery. Also, it is stressed that historically the making of outport furniture demonstrates the strong will of the people to solve problems, while dealing with meagre resources and living a subsistence lifestyle.

As a matter of fact, the historical connection is the common thread throughout the text. The first chapter explains in great detail how outport furniture has been influenced by Irish and British regional designs and by the realities of the regions of the New World. The connection to the motherland may be illustrated in the forms of motifs or the physical construction of the furniture. Incidentally, this book is filled with 350 photos to show such features. These photos give the necessary visual contrast and recognition for the reader to understand what is being discussed. Typical examples of such elements are motifs like an incised star, a flying wheel and a pierced heart; and details like chipped carving, or a hobnail pattern; and a physical feature like a shallow Irish dresser. Essentially, the photos allow the objects to come to life. Of course, there are some drawbacks to be noted. First, you may need a magnifying glass to see some of the details being demonstrated in the photos. Secondly, details like “riven sections,” “hand forged nails,” and “scrub plane marks” are not easily illustrated through this medium. To make matters worse, there is no glossary provided to help with unusual terminology that is occupationally specific to the study of furniture.

The second chapter is about the presence of professional cabinetmakers and furniture factories in the more populated areas of Newfoundland. In rural areas, furniture making continued to be unorganized. Towards this, the author draws parallels between the Newfoundland and the Irish experience in the making of regional furniture. For example, both practised using reclaimed materials. This is a term the author likes to refer to as “practised recycling.”

In chapter three, the author makes a distinction between two types of outport furniture makers. He refers to the “handy makers” and the

“practised makers.” Handy makers are those who made furniture for their personal use, and the practised makers are those who had woodworking shops to make furniture for sale. Neither group received formal training in woodworking and the lines between the two can sometimes be obscured. This chapter reveals more about the tools, techniques, and varying skill levels of these woodworkers. Thus, in outport furniture one can expect to find many forms of adaptation, combination, and application of elements from many sources. This tradition persisted well into the 1930s despite the availability of cheap mass produced furniture. Peddle attributes this to the idea that working with one’s hands was, for outport people, something that was in their blood.

Chapters four to seven introduce four outport furniture makers who had varying levels of skills, and who were not formally trained. William Wheeler of Keels, Bonavista Bay South, made furniture for his personal use or for friends. He was known for fish-boat designs. He created mental templates of objects that he made before he built them. This was how he created, built, and hand carved furniture using simple tools. Walter Bugden from Random Island, Trinity Bay, was a schoolteacher, and later an Anglican priest. He was born into a fishing community and a family of skilled woodworkers. He had a woodworking shop and made mostly formal furniture for churches. Also, true to Newfoundland tradition he built his own home. Elizabeth Gail of Pomely Cove, White Bay, was the outport furniture maker extraordinaire. This was a woman who could turn her hand to anything, even to tasks that were traditionally men’s work. She had no role models to learn from. Quite often she turned to Eaton’s catalogue for ideas. She was self-taught, and designed some of her own tools. Besides making uniquely designed furniture, this versatile woman built outbuildings, helped build houses, and did renovations. Clayton Ralph of Port de Grave, Conception Bay was a practised woodworker with a high level of skill. He was a carpenter and a housebuilder. This chapter gives a complete inventory of Ralph’s workshop. His building equipment ranged from the simple to the complex, and he designed some tools.

Chapters eight to ten highlight a few individuals from recent years who also have “working with their hands” in their blood, and have embraced the idea of working with wood. They eventually became formally trained in this area. Three developed rewarding museum careers in woodworking and/or restoration. Rupert Batten of Bareneed, Conception Bay, and Ralph Clemens of Groais Island, Northern

Peninsula, worked with the Newfoundland Museum and Hilary Cook with the Royal Ontario Museum.

Chapters eleven to fourteen describes the historical forms of outport homes, the kind of furniture one could expect to find there, and the functions of the furnishings in the kitchen, the parlour and the bedrooms. In this section, it may be necessary to fill in some gaps. For example, there is no direct mention that these homes had no indoor plumbing or running water. Also, regarding the homes, the author missed an opportunity to stress that the natural ability to build things was tied to the greater tradition of it being the cultural norm, or the expectation of that time, for men to build their own homes in rural or outport areas.

In general, there are some other concerns with the text. There are numerous important references to motifs throughout the text and they are connected to specific place names in Britain but they are not clearly connected to a citation in the bibliography. Perhaps a motif index was used. Missing information like this can create problems for research. As well, neither are lecturers listed in the bibliography (Matthews, 63), nor are informants listed. Also, the inclusion of maps of Newfoundland and Labrador, and of Britain could help to enhance the understanding of the connection between the regions and their objects. Indeed, an illustration of settlement patterns from the Motherland to the New World would have been most useful.

As the author concludes, the idea of regionality in country furniture has the potential to go beyond geographical borders, and contains a positive message. Indeed, the idea of regions raises more questions. Can elements of Irish and French styles be found together in Newfoundland outport furniture? Will furniture from the Codroy Valley show Scottish and Welsh influences? Will motifs of First Nations people be reflected in some outport furniture?

Also, other questions can be raised. How was the desire to be more-up-to-date, as was expressed in some of the features of outport furniture, balanced with the common practise of social levelling in communities? Or, how has the desire to make things with their hands evolved for the descendants of outport handy people of today?

*Heather King*  
*Memorial University of Newfoundland*  
*Saint John's*

---