

Ceramics, furniture, and distributed agency of people and things in 19th-century cottages of western Britain and Ireland

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The dresser and its ceramics formed a highly significant cultural marker in 19th-century western Britain and Ireland. Excavated transfer-printed, painted, and spongeware vessels recovered from excavations can be contextualized using ethnographic and illustrative material, together with dressers and their contents in museums, to consider ceramics in a range of dynamic relationships. This paper applies the theoretical perspective of Actor Network Theory (ANT) to consider the role of ceramics within western British and Irish 19th-century cottages. Networks of people and things create, in Latour's terminology, actants — they are made to act. Ceramics were not merely passive reflectors of function and status but were active in the negotiations of value and meaning not only in middle class homes but also within even the most impoverished rural cottage.

The dresser has become synonymous with Welsh identity (Twiston-Davies and Lloyd-Jones 1950; Vincentelli 1994), but was also crucial in Irish, Scottish and Manx homes (Kinmonth 2006; MacKay 1995; Williams 2011); for brevity just Welsh and Irish examples are considered here. The dresser housed ceramics that may be recovered from archaeological contexts, thus providing a link between furniture and the excavated record. However, the dresser will be set in its context as it was placed beside other furniture and features such as hearths, and needs to be understood as part of an albeit variable package of domestic material culture. As archaeologists we wish to place the material culture we study into its past contexts to understand their functions, meanings and inter-relationships. Actor Network Theory (ANT) emphasises relationships between people and people, people and things, and indeed between things and other things (Latour 2005), and therefore provides a framework for such analyses. This has been applied within archaeology in a number of cases, utilising ceramics from a range of periods from the Minoan (Knappett 2011), Roman (Van Oyen 2013) or early medieval (Jervis 2011; 2013).

In this case study, ceramics are not seen merely as simple functional vessels – bowls for porridge or soup, mugs for tea – or the simple representational – transfer printed plates with religious or political figures, souvenir jugs with the name of the place visited – but rather these are some of the characteristics that create the experienced ceramics by a range of actors and audiences, where items and people are conjoined in many different ways to create different, culturally significant networks. When not in use, any item could be considered to have only what I have previously termed 'generalised significance' (Mytum 2004), a background element of the scene, fulfilling no particular active role or at that moment having any socially meaningful relationships. As soon as an item is viewed and noted it has a relationship, and when that prompts action, or thought, then it is active. These may be the everyday routines of childcare or mealtimes, but also visits by neighbours or more distant relatives, and times of rites of passage such as marriages or funerals. This study emphasises the importance of domestic material culture combined with human actors in a rural working-class context: the building itself, the spaces that made it up, and the furniture and artefacts such as ceramics that formed parts of the lived experience of inhabitants and visitors alike. Proponents of ANT argue that any item of material culture, such as a dresser or a bowl, can be an active agent, as opposed to the view that it is only humans that can be active, albeit on and with material culture. Agency of people, inspired by the works of Bourdieu (1997), is now commonly applied in historical archaeology, and this has now been extended to consideration of the role of material culture (Orser 2005). Here the dresser is

seen as giving significance to ceramics even when they are not 'in use' in the strict functional sense, but their visibility and display allows many meaningful connections with the other material culture in the room and with the people who come and go within that space. Even whilst on the dresser, a plate could shift from generalised significance to actant depending on whether it prompted memories, feelings or conversation; even without moving from its display location it could at times participate in socially meaningful networks of relationships with other material culture and with people.

The interaction between people and things is seen as cyclical by anthropologist Danny Miller (1987); he has described this process as 'objectification', whereby the created physical world acts back upon the people who created it. People make things and then these things make people – a cyclical process. In what Mike Rowlands (2005) has termed the shift from materialism to materiality, Bruno Latour (2005) argues that human subjects and material objects are routinely conjoined – they are always together in action. Causation or action is distributed between *both* people and things, and so the agency does not reside dominantly in one over the other, but rather in their relationships between one and another. Some archaeologists thus see action and things being *together* – prehistorian Andrew Jones (2005) considers this *interstitial* – rather than sequential in a relationship that shifts back and forth as suggested by Miller. This has profound implications for whether material culture is in fact active – can be an agent – or whether it only (though still significantly) offers opportunities and constraints to human action. The woman boils stew, but she needs the metal pot (and indeed the hearth) to do so. The hearth or pot cannot boil stew alone, but needs the human. To boil stew they need to be conjoined – interstitial as they have to be active together – pot, hearth, stew, and person – to succeed.

Items such as rooms, dressers and ceramics are intimately interweaved with action, emotions and memories in a way that makes them socially and culturally potent. These spaces and objects act in an *equal and integrated* way with humans and one cannot be given primacy over the other. Moreover, these things have lives – artefact biographies – which see their roles, meanings, values and relationships change over time (Kopytoff 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999, Mytum 2010a). For example, dressers change their position and the items on display; these items may be viewed and discussed, may be taken down and used in a range of social interactions. These changes are made by people, but using things, and are changes to and reactions to existing material conditions and relationships. These can be analysed through the brief case studies set out below, where first dressers in a museum context are discussed, followed by a consideration of how these items, and their ceramics, would have functioned as actants in their evolving historic domestic environments.

The museum dressers and their ceramics compared with archaeological assemblages

Partial excavation of five two-ended cottages and three single houses in west Wales, mainly in the valley of the Clydach, a tributary of the Nevern river (Mytum 1988) but also other sites within a few miles and all within north Pembrokeshire, has created an archaeological data set to consider patterns of spatial organisation and potential arenas for ceramic and human actants. This can be set beside the more extensive architectural and ethnographic data, and can be compared with finds from some Irish rural excavations.

The Penrhos cottage, Pembrokeshire, now a community museum, has features and furnishings that are largely complete and original, apart from the contents of the dresser which were retained by descendants of the two sisters who had lived there till the mid-20th century (Mytum 2010b). The museum collections in Carmarthenshire support this regional

pattern, most notably from the complete two-room cottage clearance from Penrhiwbeili, preserved in Carmarthen Museum (Fig 1b). Here the kitchen contained a settle by the fire – originally open but later with a cast iron range – together with round and rectangular tables, a cupboard and, most prominent of all, a dresser. Moreover, a number of dressers are on show which house the ceramics they displayed at the time of their donation, and are not assembled by curators, as is often the case in museums and homes open to the public. They therefore offer direct evidence of at least the last phase of use of the dressers and their contents.

Most artefacts of the dresser are under-represented in archaeological assemblages of middle class sites as they would rarely be broken, and curation levels would be high. This is less the case on poorer sites, however, where what was owned and displayed was also used. The class of the owners therefore affected the length and complexity of ceramic biographies and range the of inter-relationships and meanings of the ceramics housed on dressers. Therefore on many Welsh and Irish lower status domestic sites, we find is what was on show, and which functioned symbolically and aesthetically, as well as functionally, within the kitchen networks. The combination of oral history (Vincentelli 1994), and the very occasional survivals with original assemblages such as five dressers with their ceramics bequeathed to Carmarthenshire County Museum (four of which are referred to in this article) , can be combined with the range of artefacts from excavations. Together, these suggest that a colourful array was possible given the known material, and the values, meanings and uses that the dresser and the items on it played in everyday life.

Blue and white plates, copper lustre ware and Staffordshire dogs were particularly popular on Welsh 20th-century dressers (Vincentelli 2004, 234), as exemplified by the Llansadwrn example (Fig 1a), but it would seem that the same was the case in the 19th century. The non-functional roles (apart from display itself) of ceramics such as Staffordshire dogs explains their rarity in the excavated assemblages, but lustreware and blue transfer-prints are sufficiently common in the archaeological record from all the cottage and house sites to support this continuity. The arrangement on the Welsh dressers has all the hanging jugs, cups and mugs facing to the left, and that there is a generally but not perfectly symmetrical arrangement seen in all the Carmarthenshire Museum examples.

Bebb (1997) records that blue and white 'Asiatic Pheasant' was popular on dressers in North Wales, and this design was that most frequently recovered from the Pembrokeshire excavations, so its popularity was clearly widespread. Moreover, all five of the dressers with original assemblages in Carmarthenshire Museum have a dominant blue and white theme for the plates and tureens. Several have 'Asiatic Pheasant' items, as with the Penrhiwbeili dresser (Fig 1b), though 'Willow Pattern' is generally more popular, and this may reflect a change in Welsh tastes from those of the 19th century. However, many other transfer printed designs (including 'Willow Pattern') are also present both in the excavated and dresser assemblages. Individual lustre ware jugs, hand-painted gaudy wares, and sponge-decorated vessels augmented the blue and white transfer printed elements. On the Llangadog dresser (Fig 1c) all vessels are 'Willow Pattern', but at least three different minor variations in design can be easily identified revealing that this was not a set purchased all at once. The Llansadwrn (Fig 1a), Penrhiwbeili (Fig 1b), and Mynydd y Garreg (Fig 1d) dressers each display varying proportions of 'Willow Pattern' and 'Asiatic Pheasant'; all also have lusterware jugs hanging from the shelves.

The variety of ceramics available in late 19th and early 20th century Welsh cottages can be illustrated by what appears to be a ceramic dump at Pant-teg cottage, Pembrokeshire.

Assessment of the assemblage by Alasdair Brooks (2010) identified a minimum number of 154 vessels of 54 different combinations of fabric and decoration. Much of this assemblage was 19th-century, but some was later and the dump was made when the property was abandoned in the middle of the 20th century. One element of the assemblage almost certainly displayed on the dresser was that of underglaze transfer-printed whiteware with the 'Asiatic Pheasant' design. A total of 19 vessels were in this design, implying an extensive set. Closer examination, however, reveals this was either much used with breakages replaced, or acquired over a period of time into an approximately matched set. Thus, of the five 7.5 inch plates, three were scalloped, one lightly scalloped, and one unscalloped, indicating at least three separate variations. Smaller numbers of 8.5, 10 and 12 inch plates were represented, together with three tureens and three lids, to complement these. The approximate matching can be seen on the dresser donated with its contents from Llangadog (Fig 1c) discussed above.

The blue theme at the Pant-teg property was expanded beyond 'Asiatic Pheasant' with two pearlware and four whiteware 'Willow Pattern' plates, and light blue and dark blue floral whiteware cups and saucers. Other items – plates and tureens – with blue designs were also recovered. Not all was blue, however; two black and three green transfer-print whiteware plates, a jug and mug in green, and a jug, two chamberpots, and three cups in black were all recovered. Two more black transfer-printed vessels were certainly 20th-century. A creamware and two shell-edged pearlware platters were also present, as were three Chelsea sprig porcelain saucers, though no cups were found (Brooks 2010). The clearance probably does not represent all that was on the dresser or elsewhere in the house; for example, unlike the other excavated Pembrokeshire cottage assemblages, or the dressers in Carmarthenshire Museum, there were no lusterware jug fragments, so any of these must have been curated either as heirlooms for taken for sale. The Carmarthenshire Museum dressers had primarily all-blue transfer-print colour schemes, though with other colours represented in lusterware, gaudy ware, and other types of jugs hanging from the shelves. However, these may reflect adapted assemblages curated to reflect middle to later 20th-century tastes and expectations, and earlier (and indeed less affluent) locales may have been more visually varied. The popularity of blue and white colour schemes can also be seen in 19th-century paintings of Irish dressers. Further work would be necessary to discern regional preferences.

Colourful displays can be suggested across all the excavated Welsh sites by the presence within the transfer printed material of not only blue but also green and black designs, and the occasional example in red or purple. The choice of ceramics and their arrangement on the dresser was a statement of control by the woman of the house to emphasise aspects of individual style and taste on the one hand, and national or religious identity on the other, through purchase and display of ceramics on the dresser, and mugs and jugs hanging from the shelves. This cannot be reconstructed from the archaeological assemblages, though the minimum range of material available with which to create displays can be. These items then created visual impacts that were received by all who came and sat in the room, creating networks of association and meaning with values, attitudes, experiences and memories of people, places and events, the trigger for stories to be told.

The role of transfer-printed ceramics in the creation and reinforcement of national identities has begun to be appreciated (Brooks 1997; 1999). The Welsh national costume was only created in the 1830s but was quickly accepted as a national symbol, as demonstrated by a transfer-printed cup with 'traditional' Welsh scenes on it from one of the Pembrokeshire excavations (Fig 2). Other transfer-printed ceramic designs celebrated cultural and religious

figures, places, or events. The Pant-teg assemblage included one cup with a scene possibly linked to emigration, and another to the marriage of Princess Alexandra to the then Prince of Wales. The Llansadwrn dresser has items with the names of the places where they were acquired, either as holiday souvenirs of the owner or brought by others as gifts. All include the phrase 'A Present from', with different small decorative jugs from Swansea and Llanelli, and a cup from Carmarthen, and link people, places and memories within the dresser display.

There is much evidence of Catholic iconography, and archaeologically recoverable items such as rosary beads, in the Irish paintings. Glassie noted some Ballymenone houses with images of William of Orange hung on their walls. Archaeological evidence reinforces the role of fine earthenwares, with the Nary cabins, County Roscommon, inhabited by the poor, having mainly blue transfer-prints but also black, green, purple and red, and blue shell-edged ceramics, as well as hand-painted wares (Orser 2005, 2006). Achill has a rich diversity of table wares, including spongeware (Dunn 2008), which is also very common on Inishark (Myles 2013). Rich and complex messages could thus be provided by the material culture of the kitchen, the people and objects together creating an environment for prayer or religious or political debate.

Welsh and Irish rural dwellings and their furniture

The houses of the rural poor in Wales can be divided into very few general forms, although there are many regional variations. One of the simplest forms is the two-ended cottage of two rooms, sometimes with an additional half-loft above (Jenkins 1971). Occupants of such dwellings were largely agricultural labourers or mariners. They were often set on land holdings so small that the families' incomes were largely derived from wage labour. The single houses were two-storey farmhouses occupied by tenant farmers. The ground floor, accessed from a central hallway containing the stairs, was usually augmented by a lean-to at the rear that served as the dairy. The main ground floor rooms off the hall were the parlour, best kitchen, and often a board room for meals – so several rooms had high levels of ceramics usage. In the poorer tenant farms there would be just one dresser, in the kitchen; in the more affluent, there could be a second with display china in the parlour.

In Ireland, roughly similar arrangements to Wales can be found (Danaher 1975; Glassie 1982) and whilst there are typological differences in all these arrangements by concentrating on the main living room – the kitchen – as the focal lived space, all these variations share a common milieu. Furniture in Welsh and Irish rural kitchens was simple, and consisted of tables, benches, stools, the occasional chair, chests, dressers, and presses or cupboards (Fig 3). The dresser became closely associated with Wales (Twiston-Davies and Lloyd-Jones 1950), and so became an active part of Welsh identity as viewed from outside, but was also accepted and developed by the Welsh themselves. Moreover, strong regional traditions of dressers developed (Davis 1991) which further emphasised identity and place. In Ireland, the dresser was also extremely widespread and found in even poor households.

Early dressers were elite furniture items, designed to store food in closed cupboards, but with space for display – usually vessels of pewter but even at this stage some of ceramics. By the 19th century, however, the dresser was found across all social classes (Davis 1991). In Carmarthenshire, the substantial dresser was used to divide the single room house into two, (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales, 1847, 2, 56*, quoted in William 1995), and Danaher (1975) shows a similar arrangement in Ireland. In addition, box beds in Wales could be placed back to back also to create two distinct spaces

with a single-roomed dwelling, and these could be fitted with shelves on which ceramics could be placed for storage and display (Peate 1946,90). This strategy adapted existing furniture to form a surrogate dresser. Some Irish paintings show ceramics propped up on shelves or tables, ad hoc yet neat and tidy stand-ins for a full dresser. Even poor families thus had some power in the segregation and organisation of their domestic space, and in which the display of household objects could be given some prominence. Furniture and ceramics were part of meaningful networks of association; they were actants that created different lived spaces than those that just offered by the architecture alone; together, they created spaces that carried values and meanings, even in extremely constrained circumstances. Even broken or damaged items could still, through their relationships with other items and with daily practices, have active roles within impoverished situations and so could have extended biographies in working-class kitchens when they may have been discarded from middle class homes. The dresser could display not only the everyday items for the table, but also in wealthier households they housed ceramics used only on special occasions. Indeed ornaments and display china (of variable quality according to class) might never be placed on the table (Vincentelli 1994), could still be active in relation to people as meaningful gifts or souvenirs, and through their spatial relationships with the other items on the dresser a form of biography and a communicator of taste. The arrangement of such furniture and ceramics within the dwellings can be considered through pictorial and ethnographic data.

Actants in the kitchen: ceramics, furniture, people

Lowe (1985,4) illustrates the interior of a two-roomed cottage on Bardsey Island, Gwynedd, using a 19th-century interior photograph which does not look in any way staged (Fig 4). This provides a guide for the range of ceramics present, their location, and how they could act relationally within this constrained domestic context. The focus of the photograph, as of life in the cottage, is the central fireplace. Above it is a mantelpiece – a safe shelf for foodstuffs and a washing bowl. The fireplace itself houses a large cooking pot, around which are placed small three-legged stools, with a settle and table to the left and another low table and the dresser to the right. Ceramics can be seen on the mantelpiece and on the low table and dresser, and these vessels would variously have been used at the table or by those sitting on the stools. Early 20th-century photographs from Irish homes are very similar. A photograph is a static image showing relationships of objects ‘at rest’, without people visible (though present to take the photograph, and indeed to subsequently view it), but even here many relationships are visible. For example, the hierarchy of display on the dresser can be seen (e.g. plates propped up in rows, bowls stacked), those associated with the heat of the fire are upon or around it, and storage vessels clustered less visibly in the corner. In the photograph items have only generalised significance but once people appeared, and lived in this space, these objects and the people could all be actants with numerous interactions, meanings, and roles at both conscious and unconscious, deeply culturally accepted, levels.

The Bardsey Island photograph (Fig 4) shows undecorated bowls upside down on the dresser, and such bowls are frequent on the Irish paintings. Sponge-decorated bowls from Orser’s famine period Irish house excavations are identical to those from the Pembrokeshire excavations, and the paintings show how bowls formed parts of kitchen displays. The stacking of bowls (some inverted) on the Bardsey dresser would limit the visibility of designs, but as these were plain this was not an issue; only the topmost of a stack would display the sponged designs, or they may have been laid side by side on a shelf. The Pant-teg assemblage included a substantial number of sponge-decorated vessels: nine bowls, ten mugs, and three chamber pots (Brooks 2010). Only one mug and one bowl had a similar

design, and whilst red and blue combinations were the most common with eight vessels, others had sponge-decorated designs with just red or blue, or with brown or green. Bowls often have distinctive decoration round the rims, which would be visible even when stacked. The Irish excavated evidence, from the western islands of Achill and Inishark, also reveals considerable quantities of spongeware. Indeed the location of a probable dresser, left with mainly spongeware ceramics when the building was abandoned, further emphasises the role of this material within the Irish cottage (Dunn 2008; Myles 2013).

The spatial pattern recorded at Bardsey is also visible in a painting (Fig 5) by J.D. Wingfield, c. 1850, a romanticised view for an affluent client, but it would seem to be an accurate representation of a mid-19th-century Welsh cottage in many of its details (National Library of Wales Acc. No. 200115104). David Gaimster (2012) has recently discussed both the potential and the necessary awareness of culturally-specific nuances required for the archaeological interrogation of such pictorial forms. The ANT approach emphasises that the picture contains many relationships within it but also creates relations between subject, artist and viewer (both in the 19th century and today). With these in mind, there can be little doubt that Wingfield's painting depicts a decaying two-roomed structure meant to represent a two-ended cottage, untidy and with old or broken furniture. But even in this constrained existence the dresser is prominent and displays an array of decorative ceramics including lustre ware jugs and transfer printed plates. Irish paintings of the same period show remarkably similar scenes, whilst revealing local details that suggest their general accuracy for our purposes, with the well-appointed dresser a significant feature in creating the setting for many paintings of Irish working-class kitchen scenes (Kinmonth 2006). As with Gaimster's Dutch paintings, the details of the material culture are surprisingly accurate; in these cases also the materiality of the scene is an important element for painter and viewer. Even paintings deliberately emphasising the extreme distress, hunger and discomfort of the poor, the inhabited space was still being structured by baskets, rocks for seating, and a dresser, shelf or table with ceramics propped up for display. From an archaeological perspective, this demonstrates that even in abject poverty, ceramics were present, visible, and socially active in relations with each other, with furniture often adapted to purpose, and with people. This is reinforced by both documentary and ethnographic sources describing the material worlds of the lower-class Irish peasantry, as well as ceramic assemblages recovered from sites of this social status recently excavated in Ireland (Dunn 2008; Orser 1991). Similar ceramics have also been identified in the western Isles of Scotland, also linked to dresser use (Webster 1999).

Ethnographic evidence from the early to mid 20th century in south Cardiganshire and Ballymenone County Fermanagh, provides descriptions of the furniture found in Welsh and Irish cottages (Jenkins 1971,95; Glassie 1982), and these indicate continuity in usage shown on the Bardsey Island photograph and the paintings of earlier periods. The dresser was the largest piece of furniture in the room, and with its ceramic display would be the most visible. Most of the images – photographs and paintings – have to face a particular way, so the role of the dresser is not always clear. In Cardiganshire the dresser faced those entering the room (Fig 3), though in Ballymenone it was on the wall to the right or left; in all cases seating could be moved to be round the hearth or the table for meals (Fig 6). Much of the floor area was taken up by furniture even in working class houses and, whilst there was some open space in the centre, all these items structured the foci of individual activities – food preparation, eating, socialising, spinning, net mending. More than this, though, furniture form and location, and the ceramics on these, were active in creating and reinforcing many relationships between people. Moreover, these internal arrangements structured social interactions through inter-visibility and audibility of conversation, with

ceramics active in cooking, eating and, through dresser displays, triggering memories and encouraging storytelling and conversation.

Items were stored on the dresser – displayed on the shelves and hanging from them, or stacked on the top of the base or on the shelves which may be open. When there was eating or drinking, these items and those normally enclosed with cupboard doors would change from their generalised significance to have particular meanings and roles through their relationships with people, activities and other things, and be in use in various parts of this inhabited space, allocated according to function, status and gender. Only the more affluent middle classes had display dressers with largely unused ceramics in the parlour, and even in these households there was a kitchen dresser with the much-used crockery available for easy access but also display at other times. In all these contexts, ceramics could be actants within the kitchen-living space – colourful, useful, containers and evokers of memories. They both enabled and participated within action and communication between people and their environment, affecting relationships and actions, and being acted upon. Objects could acquire meanings and roles, through association, new functional activities, or through being damaged and having their functions change. Just as people had biographies with changing roles and meanings over their lives, so did objects including furniture and ceramics; the Wingfield painting (Fig 5) shows incomplete vessels still in use.

Conclusions

Furniture was essential in the structuring of social relations within the family and between the family members and visitors, creating routes of interaction, whether around the hearth or at the table during meal times when ceramics were in use. Zones of activity and gender were created even within the smallest cottage, and indeed could be used to create distinct spaces by dividing up the single-roomed dwelling. Ceramics operated in many of these zones, and were stored, often visibly, on many surfaces. People and things were in connections that altered the shapes and sizes of spaces, they acted upon and with people, pets and each other. The dresser, or even a table or shelf, offered the opportunity for colourful decorative and symbolic display, and here ceramics played a crucial role as often the most brightly coloured items in the room, creating different types of meaningful relationships.

Social and gender historians in Wales have discussed the role of women and the concept of domesticity, especially Welsh Nonconformists, now recognising a widespread acceptance of domesticity in middle and working class households, though with a greater emphasis on work within the home in the latter (Jones 2000, 195; Mytum 2010b). The dresser was the most obvious and important feature in the Welsh house by which such domestic standards could be demonstrated. It had a functional role that spared it from criticism by nonconformist commentators critical of any ostentation or extravagance (Vincentelli 1994, 234). Rather, the serried ranks of sparkling clean ceramics evoked respectable domesticity across the classes, variable only by the quality of the dresser's carpentry and the ceramics. However, even here the superficial difference could be masked on first observation, as many of the archaeological transfer prints indicate the use of seconds, so from a distance they would be similar, and so could act in similar ways. Despite being much cheaper and so available, and visible to archaeologists as different, in the social contexts they now operated their relationships could be the same as for perfect products, and the same could be true even if cracked or otherwise damaged. The major difference between classes was probably a greater variety of designs and colours in working-class contexts, with at least apparently matched and undamaged sets in middle-class homes. In Ireland, Catholic values similarly

defined gender roles and, as in Wales, paintings and prints may reveal middle class stereotypes as much as the flexibility of real-life work sharing amongst the poorest classes (Kinmonth 2006). Nevertheless, the archaeological evidence demonstrates widespread availability and choice of decorated ceramics in a range of forms and glazes as seen in the paintings, suggesting at least some valuable relationship between image and reality (Dunn 2008; Gaimster 2012; Myles 2013; Orser 1991).

It is clear that many material items were part of networks that allowed women to fulfil their own understandings of domesticity within their kitchen spaces, and to display these values and practices to others who entered the home. Although literature such as women's magazines propounded standard tropes of female behaviour (Jones 2000), gendered roles in homes were in reality very varied, as demonstrated by the central administrative role of Martha Harries at Henllys Farm (Mytum 2010c); ANT does not assume any fixed relationship between categories of people as these are continually negotiated and alter through time, space, and social context. Objects, including furniture such as dressers, and their ceramics could be actants along with people in these constant negotiations.

Many sources indicate that children were largely taught in the home by the mother (Jones 2000), and they thus passed on Welsh and Irish culture including language, and their particular family histories and relationships through storytelling (Langellier and Peterson 1993). The 1847 Commission of Enquiry claimed low levels of morality amongst Welsh working-class women, and the widespread reaction this was to emphasise the many ways in which Welsh mothers acted responsibly. The Wingfield 1850 painting (Fig 5) reflects an ambivalence in the attitude of the middle class painter and his potential client – squalor caused by a romanticised poverty, yet dignity in adversity with the woman working by knitting whilst looking after her child. Both are clean and relatively well dressed, the china on the decrepit dresser shiny, all suggesting stoic virtues in difficult physical circumstances. To a Victorian viewer of the painting this might create a reaction that was of outrage at the deserving poor suffering, or one seeing virtue in the face of adversity, and an exemplar for all. Today, we view the painting with a sense of historical detachment, searching for meanings, yet we should recognise that, through ANT, we can analyse our own complex assumptions and wishes in terms of what we desire from viewing the image. Readers of this journal may be drawn to the ceramics on the dresser; others might concentrate on the figures' clothing or demeanour, the architecture, or the squalor. All such readings were active, meaningful, and would have been significant in real life to different audiences at different times; there is no one set of relationships in any context, but many operating at various levels – from global capitalism to individual psychology.

Domesticity potentially created rigid behavioural barriers for middle class women, but it was understood and appreciated more broadly in the working classes, and this was indeed celebrated by middle class moralisers and painters in both Wales and Ireland. This is manifested in popular literature and in painted and photographic images, where the domestic production of knitting, spinning, or work such as net mending, was seen as compatible with other activities such as child rearing and cooking. The activities – made up of people and things in defined spaces – sustained a pattern of life that was not static but could change if people, things or the relationships between them altered. At mealtimes and visits from family or honoured guests, the space would be full and busy, at other times quieter with mother and children involved in the domestic round of tasks that structured their lives. The ceramic actants had different roles in these varied situations, and archaeologically they are often one of the few types of evidence to indicate that such conjunctions occurred.

Whilst archaeological assemblages may not well represent the highly curated collections found on middle class dressers, they are more likely to include items displayed when not in use in working class homes. The excavated rural Pembrokeshire and Irish evidence supports such assumptions, and suggests a fruitful line of research. The role of ceramics, including many sponged and transfer-printed examples, in Irish rural working-class homes is also now well attested archaeologically. Given the social importance of furniture and fittings, historical archaeologists should give more attention to the surviving and documented context in which ceramics were used, and to the ways in which these things and the people who lived in these houses were conjoined in meaningful ways that we may yet be able to understand. The application of ANT or cognate relational approaches moves beyond the classification of ceramics and their assignment of simple functional and symbolic attributions. It offers the opportunity to consider the ways in which ceramics acted in multiple ways in conjoined relationships with other things – food, furniture, cutlery – and people with their various roles, perceptions and actions. Whilst our archaeological assemblages appear static they are derived from complex lived interconnections in which their final deposition marks only one point in their complex biographies. ANT offers a way of perceiving and articulating such relationships which, when combined with other sources as illustrated here, can offer deep insights into the cultural richness of past lives, and the role of things within them.

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