

6. Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Philip Clissett

The ladderback chairs made by Philip Clissett, following his encounter with James MacLaren in 1886, appear to have been traded widely. Clissett family members mention not only a “considerable” trade with London, but also the export of chairs to the USA. Will Clissett, who made chairs alongside his grandfather, also recalled “some [trade] with Glasgow”.¹

This Scottish connection has never been explored. The presence in the antiques market of a number of chairs which appear to be by Clissett, but attributed to Charles Rennie Mackintosh, suggests a possible link.

The tall-backed chairs of Charles Rennie Mackintosh are known the world over for their unusual and elegant designs. His earliest chair design was considered to be a tall ladderback (Figure 6.1), designed for the artist David Gauld in about 1893 and now in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow.² The Hunterian’s online catalogue attributes the design quite definitely to Mackintosh, though Billcliffe’s *catalogue raisonnée* of Mackintosh’s furniture is more guarded:

According to Gauld's daughter, this chair formed part of the same bedroom suite as 1893.5, 6 and 7. If so, it is the earliest known chair designed by Mackintosh, although it is so traditional that without the provenance one would be tempted to disregard



Figure 6.1. Green-stained chair from bedroom suite for David Gauld, design attributed to C.R.Mackintosh (Hunterian Museum, GLAHA 52692).

it. An identical chair appears in illustrations of the Windyhill nursery, but Davidson is likely to have acquired it earlier (c1895) for Gladsmuir.³

The Windyhill chair appears in a contemporary photograph of the nursery.⁴ It is thought likely that Davidson brought it from his previous house, Gladsmuir,³ for which Mackintosh designed furniture and interior schemes soon after the pair first met in 1894-5.⁵

By 1984, some concerns were being noted about the attribution of this chair to Mackintosh, and the similarities with Clissett's chairs were recognised (though the quoted design link to Gimson is incorrect):

Although associated with both the Gauld furniture and other pieces for William Davidson, it is still possible that this is a commercial piece and not designed by Mackintosh. The exaggerated high ladderback of these chairs and the unusual use of balls to the feet are quite different to all other traditional ladderbacks and so fall into the Arts and Crafts style. This hybrid style is similar to the chairs designed by Ernest Gimson and made by Edward Gardiner and Phillip Clissett.⁶

Despite these concerns, auction houses have continued to make the Mackintosh connection. Philips sold one of these chairs as Mackintosh 2001,⁷ and Christies sold another in 2007.⁸ Dreweatt Neate offered a further pair during 2009.⁹ Several of these same chairs are advertised currently (March 2013) by a dealer as "attributed to Charles Rennie Mackintosh".¹⁰ By way of contrast, another dealer has a pair described instead as "designed by Clissett, probably made by Edward Gardiner, with the design having been used by Mackintosh in the Gauld house".¹¹

Philip Clissett made a number of designs similar or identical to the putative Mackintosh ladderback. The clearest provenance is the small three-rung chair seen in the drawing by Maxwell Balfour (1898; see Figure 4.10). Examples of the same design (Figure 6.2) show the typical Clissett nipple-finial and rungs finely feathered along their entire top edge (these contrast with anything produced by



Figure 6.2. Three-rung small side chairs by Philip Clissett (photo courtesy of Acme Inc, Bexhill-on-Sea).

Gardiner and his followers). Also apparent are the acorn feet, identical to the putative Mackintosh design, and workshop scribe marks that are consistent with all Clissett's known work and, again, absent from Gardiner's work (he used ring scribe marks instead).

Clissett also made similar side chairs with larger seats and higher backs, with both four and five rungs (Figure 6.3). The five-rung chairs are identical in dimensions to the Hunterian Museum chair, and to those offered by auction houses. One example examined by the author (Figure 3b) has the usual Clissett scribe marks. Roger Billcliffe considers this chair indistinguishable from those previously attributed to Mackintosh.¹² The Butcher Row House Museum in Ledbury has another example of excellent local provenance. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has a five-rung example which is attributed to Clissett¹³ and looks absolutely right. While it might



Figure 6.3. (a) Four- and (b) five-rung ladderback chairs by Philip Clissett (photos courtesy of Alan Meikle and Russell Theaker).

be assumed that this chair is an example of one of those traded to the US around 1900, as mentioned by Will Clissett, it was actually purchased in London in 2003.¹⁴

There is no doubt that Glasgow chairs were amongst other furniture designed by Mackintosh, sometimes stained to match Mackintosh's designs. But Billcliffe is no longer in any doubt about their relationship to Mackintosh. In the most recent edition of his *catalogue raisonnée* he states:

No longer attributed to Mackintosh... It is, in fact, a 'Clisset' chair, derived from a traditional West Midlands design made by John Kerry in the 19th century and later made by Philip Clisset, possibly after his meeting with the architect James Maclaren in 1888.¹⁵

Despite this, the chair from David Gauld's bedroom suite has continued to be described by the Hunterian Museum, without caveats, as designed by Mackintosh.

It is not only these tall-backed side chairs that have been ascribed to Mackintosh. In 2003, Bonhams sold an armchair as "thought to be designed by Mackintosh in the late 1890's/1900 for Douglas Castle, the family home of his fiancée, Margaret Macdonald".¹⁶ This chair has all the features of a chair by Clissett, including

typical workshop scribe marks, chamfered rungs, blind mortices at the arm fronts, typical pegging, and his unusual style of rushwork.

Mackintosh was commissioned to refurbish several rooms at Dunglass Castle, including the drawing room, in 1900. The sale catalogue shows a photograph of what is undoubtedly the drawing room with, it suggests, either Mackintosh or his friend Herbert MacNair seated in a similar chair (Figure 6.4). It is not a clear image, but the chair certainly has the more pointed finials typical of Clissett's work. Whoever is seated in it, the photograph appears to place yet another Clissett-type chair in a room furnished by Mackintosh.

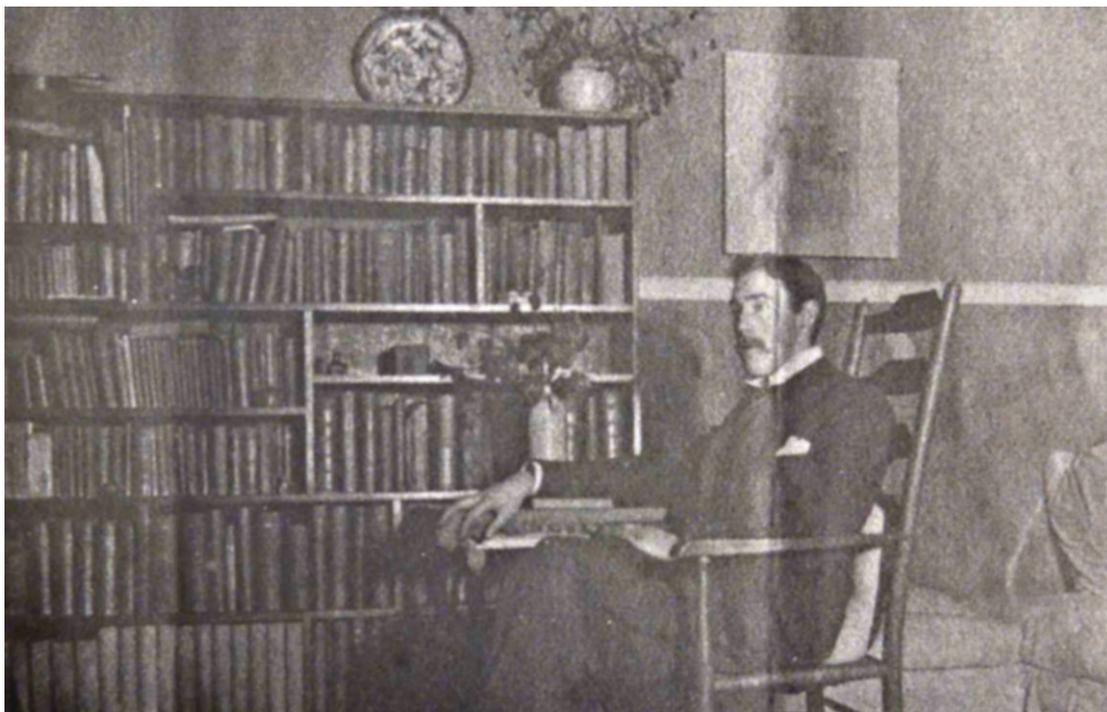


Figure 6.4. The drawing room at Dunglass Castle with five-rung armchair.

Until the Hunterian Museum chair is fully inspected, some doubt must remain over the suggestion that Mackintosh used Clissett's chairs in various settings. The evidence is, however, quite strong, and may well explain the final destination of the "trade with Glasgow" mentioned by Will Clissett.

References

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