

Antony Buxton. *Domestic Culture in Early Modern England*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2015. xx + 302 pp + 126 illus. \$120.00. Review by LISA J. SCHNELL, UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT.

At the root of Antony Buxton's "historical ethnology" (9) is, as he explains, "an assertion of the fundamental place of the material in human existence, engagement with the environment giving rise to actions which articulate relationships and convey meaning" (280). Things, in other words, and in particular how and where we use them, hold within them the history of change—our changing relationships with each other and with our selves, with the world we inhabit and with which we interact.

The things in this case are those found in probate inventories. Detailed legal and economic documents accompanying a will, these inventories catalogued the moveable assets of the deceased. As well as providing the identity and, typically, the occupation of the decedent, these inventories provide a rich trove of data about the things themselves, not only naming the objects being accounted for, but also their value and their placement in the household, the cataloguing usually proceeding room by room. In examining in considerable detail the probate inventories of one small market town, Thame, in Oxfordshire, over the course of the entire seventeenth century, Buxton has produced a rich microhistory that is a curiously compelling portrait of the private and public domesticity of the non-elite classes. And indeed, it is the shifting relationship of domestic things to the private and the public lives of their owners that make up the narrative foundation for Buxton's eventual argument concerning what the data reveal about England in the seventeenth century.

The argument is *eventual*, because Buxton does not begin the book with a narrative of early modernity in England into which he and his reader can neatly emplot the data he goes on to present. Instead, the book opens with a densely theoretical introduction that lays out the assumptions and pitfalls of the historical ethnography Buxton employs as his method, and engages in a rich philosophical discussion about humans' relationship to things themselves.

Historical ethnography, Buxton explains, combines an archaeological approach that, in this study, treats the probate inventories as

deposits of historical artefacts that, although not physically present, can be contextualized in both time and space by documentary sources. Contemporary written and pictorial sources such as conduct literature, practical manuals and advice books, diaries, engravings from broadsides—all these provide a temporal and spatial dimension to the objects in the inventories. For instance, Gervase Markham's 1615 household manual *The English Housewife* shows up frequently in the book, as does George Herbert's *A Priest to the Temple* (1652), a practical guide for country parsons. Buxton's emphasis is thus on establishing associations, and this brings him philosophically to Heidegger whose phenomenological perspective "sees all encounters with the world set in the context of associations, which are themselves the result of previous experiences of the world—a 'web of significance' arising from actions in the world" (10–11). As Buxton goes on to explain, this Heideggerian "immersion in the experience of being in the world, and simultaneously conceptually 'understanding' and seeking to order the world can be seen as a significant impulse in human domestication" (11). This leads him to a discussion of the concept of "affordance," the reflexive relationship between what the physical environment affords the individual living in it, and what the requirements are of the affordee. This reflexive relationship with things—as Buxton says, he is interested in "a domestic culture conceived as a structured and structuring network" (17)—takes place in a hermeneutic circle which "constantly refers the individual element of evidence to its context, testing its interpretation in the light of all the evidence" (17). In a word, Buxton is concerned throughout the book with the transformation of *space* into *place*, and his clear and deeply considered discussion of the phenomenological impulses of human life in this introduction is a compelling philosophical exploration that will, even apart from the rest of the book, be important to graduate students and scholars of material culture, and not only of this historical period.

The long middle section of the book is made up of a rich description of the physical, economic, social and cultural context of seventeenth-century Thame and the household itself, and then a painstaking accounting of the objects catalogued in the probate inventories. Buxton does not explicitly engage with the already-existing scholarly narrative of early modern culture until the end of the book,

preferring to let the material and documentary evidence of the Thame household, as he says (somewhat disingenuously), “speak for itself” (271). Nonetheless, the structuring principle of the inquiry—from an analysis of the most basic sustenance needs of the family (foodstuffs) to the differentiation and naming of rooms and households according to social/economic distinctions—reveals a narrative that focuses on the pressures of modernity on the early modern household and the shifting allegiances both within and without the family that result. As one might rightly expect, those influences are chiefly economic in Buxton’s rendering.

Using a statistical software program, Buxton subjects the probate inventories to a regression analysis that reveals “the frequency, associations, and context of objects against selected variables, such as status, date or size of dwelling” (30). Buxton’s interpretive biases peek out frequently from the meticulous presentation of these data in the middle chapters of the book, though for this reviewer, that was not at all a bad thing. The data and documentary evidence, thorough and richly detailed (as well as illustrated, when possible), will no doubt prove to be a treasure trove for other, future, scholars of domestic culture. But it is also a relief to touch down every once in a while through this long middle section and get a sense of our bearings through Buxton’s Marxist-leaning observations and analysis.

For example, in the chapter titled “Rest and security,” there is a detailed accounting of storage furniture and its placement in various Thame households. Toward the end of this richly descriptive section, Buxton notes a final detail: that “most extant storage furniture from this period has locks of some sort on doors and lids” (203). He goes on to add that this “speaks eloquently not only of the fear of burglary from outside the dwelling, but also of pilfering and curiosity by servants, revealing some of the social tensions in the Thame household: the inclusiveness of the social ‘household-family’ challenged by the unequal control of material assets” (203). As he moves in his accounting from individual objects to objects in association, the analysis becomes yet more suggestive of Buxton’s underlying narrative of the pressures, chiefly economic, that modernity exerted on social transactions. In a chapter that analyses seating furniture, for instance, Buxton, with the aid of a graph showing the shifting distribution of

seating furniture in household chambers in the first and last quarter of the seventeenth century respectively, notes a dramatic increase in the number of chairs that appear in parlours. Stools, he notes, virtually disappear, and there is a notable decrease in the number of multiple-seat benches. “This redistribution,” Buxton notes, “tells the story of a changing social dynamic in the household: of the introduction of a moveable form of seating which privileged the individual, and a shift away from communal to selective social engagement” (239). Buxton then proceeds to enhance this story:

Whilst select socializing with guests might be seen as a way of enhancing the social and economic standing of the household, it also involved the householder turning away from his or her household, and the invasion of the household, physically and socially, by external allegiances. The communal was being challenged and diluted by individual agendas, the invasion and fragmentation of apparent domestic homogeneity by the economic and social dynamic of the world beyond.” (242)

At this point, late in the book, Buxton can really no longer hold back the narrative that has been lurking just outside the door all along. In the final chapter of the book, Buxton explicitly invokes the established early modern narrative of the social, moral, and economic changes that took place in England across the seventeenth century. Buxton’s microhistory, which makes a convincing case for the “role of objects in articulating actions and the social significance of space” (238), ultimately accedes to this narrative in providing a painstaking portrait of the early modern household as a site of gradual innovation. And yet, it is hard not to read a certain kind of nostalgia or regret in this narrative, and indeed, in passages like the one above, with its repetition of the word “invasion,” the book seems almost to be a kind of elegy to another story, one of domestic, familial insularity, natural agrarian rhythms, and local modes of production. The question that Buxton allows to linger around the edges of the narrative, to put it another way, seems to be whether the innovation articulated by those household objects can also be considered progress.