Newport’s Illustrious Clocks

Claggett
By Donald L. Fennimore and Frank L. Hohmann III
Winterthur, 268 pages, $65
By Kirk Davis Swinehart

In their book about clockmaking in 18th-century Newport, R.I., Donald L. Fennimore and Frank L. Hohmann III pay sumptuous and serious tribute to Edith Wharton’s beloved oasis by the sea. Equal parts catalogue raisonné and superb social history, “Claggett: Newport’s Illustrious Clockmakers” documents the lives and work of three crackerjack clockmakers working between 1716 and 1797—William Claggett; Thomas Claggett, who may or may not have been William’s son; and James Wady—each endowed with ineffable gifts more typically associated with painters and sculptors. Certainly the lives of clockmakers were less knowable than: Making clocks (or furniture) in the 18th century was foremost a business and therefore anonymous in ways that painting and sculpture still are not.

The Claggetts and James Wady made utilitarian objects of sheer heart-stopping beauty. The private worlds of these men, however, could be glimpsed only darkly. Until now. Drawing on evidence as various as it is sometimes arcane, Messrs. Fennimore and Hohmann have reconciled their subjects’ lives and work, and the result is a truly remarkable act of historical recovery, an often thrilling narrative of how three artists spent their days. And so much else, besides: A granular portrait of everyday life in an outpost of the British Empire folded into a larger history of early America.

For many scholars and collectors of early American furniture, 18th-century Newport represents the best in cabinetmaking; the finest pieces made there continue to perform well at auction, even as superb brown furniture goes for pennies on the dollar. “Claggett” so easily could have been an exercise in hagiography, another lavish installment in the annals of Newport Furniture Worship. In the hands of Mr. Fennimore, a curator emeritus at Winterthur Museum, and Mr. Hohmann, a collector of 18th-century clocks and furniture, admiration and scholarship coexist in near-perfect harmony. A rare marriage, that.

Mr. Swinehart, a historian and biographer, is completing a book about the political dynasty of William Johnson.