

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2004

From Rags to Riches to Revolution: A Social History of 19th Irish Lace

Shiralee Hudson

LORD Cultural Resources, shudson@lord.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Hudson, Shiralee, "From Rags to Riches to Revolution: A Social History of 19th Irish Lace" (2004). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 430.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/430>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

From Rags to Riches to Revolution: A Social History of 19th Irish Lace

Shiralee Hudson
LORD Cultural Resources
301 Davenport Road
Toronto, Ontario, CANADA M5R 1K5
(416) 406-0685
shudson@lord.ca

With its 2004 symposium “Appropriation, Acculturation, Transformation” the Textile Society of America asked its members to consider how human activities (through trade or war) have influenced the production, aesthetics and/or materials of textiles. I must confess to turning this theme backwards: this paper is not about how the Irish Revolution of 1916 affected lace production in Ireland. In fact, the start of World War I in 1914 effectively ended the lace industry. Instead I will show how looking at the 19th Century lace-making industry in Ireland helps us understand the social and political situation that led the Irish to take up arms against the ruling English government.

If historians can agree on one thing, it is that the definition of revolution is notoriously hard to pin down.¹ Although for the purposes of this discussion I will define it as a forcible change of regime that brings about not only political but also social change. Museum Educator David Anderson tells us “if one wishes to implement an agenda of social and cultural change, museums and galleries are not the obvious place to start. When revolutions happen, it is the television station, not the museum that is seized first.”² As a politically minded museum professional, this did not sit right with me. This was because I immediately thought of times in history where seemingly benign bodies and sites of government control (such as hospitals, libraries and museums) had been sites of revolution, and the first example that sprang to mind was the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin.

On April 24, 1916 (Easter Monday) a group of Irish Nationalists seized the GPO and other key sites throughout Dublin. This was the start of the “Easter Uprising” that, though lasting only 6 days, catapulted an entire nation to a nearly a decade of revolution and war. The purpose of the Uprising was to protest in arms English Rule, and to formally declare the existence of an independent Irish Republic. The Irish Volunteers and Citizen Army chose the General Post Office as both their military headquarters and as the seat of the provisional government for the Irish Republic that they fought to proclaim. British forces used heavy artillery to swiftly quash the Rebellion; and the leaders of the Easter Uprising were captured, imprisoned and then executed as traitors.³ This initial rebellion inspired a nation to continue the struggle for Irish independence. Historians argue about what can be termed the Irish Revolution: did it end with the south gaining independence and self-determined government from 1922 onwards, or did the revolution continue through the

¹ Tom Garvin, “Revolution? Revolutions are what Happens to Wheels--the Phenomenon of Revolution, Irish Style” in *The Irish Revolution: 1913-1923* ed. Joost Augusteijn (London: Palgrave, 2002), 226.

² David Anderson, “Museum Education in Europe: Societies in Transition” in *Transforming Practice*, eds. J.S. Hirsch and L.H. Silverman (Washington, DC: Museum Education Roundtable, 2000), 29.

³ F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London: Fontana, 1985), 374-83.

20th century until the signing of the Good Friday Peace Accord in 1998?⁴ What is inarguable is that a small group of people dedicated to Irish independence fought for and won their sovereignty.⁵

Cultural theorist Daniel Miller writes, “The deeply integrated place of the artifact in constituting culture and human relations has made discussion of it one of the most difficult of all areas to include in abstract academic discourse.”⁶ Difficult yes, but it is precisely because of this that something as seemingly innocuous as Irish lace can reveal intimate details of the social conditions that led to the transformative events of 1916. This paper sketches out a larger context, so that we may see lace as a revealing symbol of the intercultural relations and conflict that have influenced Irish history and society throughout the twentieth century until present day.

Just as the Easter Uprising of 1916 was a pivotal event in 20th century Irish history, so was the Great Famine a critical point in the 19th Century. The famine lasted for three consecutive years and left one million dead. Although some lace production began earlier, it was not until the post-famine years - the late 1840s - that the lace industry in Ireland truly became widespread as philanthropic ladies and religious orders created lace schools and encouraged lace making. This was highlighted in the *Catalogue of the Dublin Exhibition of 1853*⁷ where it was stated that the lace industry of Ireland had been greatly extended “through the intervention of private individuals, who took up the matter more with the benevolent object of finding employment for the female peasantry around them, than with that of introducing a branch of trade on any secure basis.”⁸

Try as we might to construct concepts about users out of artefacts, artefacts are about their creators.⁹ In the case of Irish lace, the artefact is about the poverty of its creators. “Poverty is the mother of the Irish lace industry; for Irish lace existed, and still exists, not to supply the commercial demand for it, but to enable a poverty stricken population to earn a meal of porridge or potatoes,” reads an article in 1887’s *Art Journal*.¹⁰ Historians note that it seems paradoxical that in the century when handmade lace was on the decline in the rest of Europe, the industry should have been introduced into Ireland as a measure of poverty relief. However, they consider this evidence of the extremely depressed state of Ireland at the time.

Context does not follow creation; and in the same way that before there is a builder and an architect there is a need for shelter, function both precedes and follows structure.¹¹ Lace making was a way for many girls and women to earn an income during times of

⁴ Garvin, 232.

⁵ Peter Hart, “Definition: Defining the Irish Revolution” in *The Irish Revolution: 1913-1923* ed. Joost Augusteijn (London: Palgrave, 2002), 28.

⁶ Miller, Daniel, “Artefacts in Their Contexts.” *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 130.

⁷ In Patricia Wardle, *Victorian Lace* (Carlton, UK: Ruth Bean, 1982) 173-4.

⁸ In Wardle, 173-174.

⁹ Henry Glassie, “Studying Material Culture Today” in *Living in a Material World: Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture* ed. G.L. Pocius (St. John’s: Memorial University, 1991) 262.

¹⁰ Wardle, 173.

¹¹ Glassie, 259.

extreme economic hardship. In many cases this was the only income for her family, and the only thing between the maker and starvation.

This paper looks at the three most famous Irish laces to come out of the nineteenth century, each named after the Irish town in which it originated: Carrickmacross, Limerick, and Youghal. Carrickmacross was the earliest lace-making industry to emerge. Carrickmacross appliqué was introduced in 1820 near the town of Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan, where Mrs. Grey Porter, wife of the rector of Donaghmoyne, set up a school for local girls.¹² Even though this was a quarter of a century before the famines, it was nevertheless a time of agricultural depression and almost every house in the district contributed at least one worker.¹³

There are two types of Carrickmacross lace. The original form of this work was appliqué of a machine woven muslin, batiste, or organdie onto machine net. It is interesting to note that Carrickmacross was not seen as a “true lace” in the strictest sense; it was embroidery on net, rather than the “true” open work done with a needle and thread. It was nevertheless treated as type of lace as it was intended to fulfill the same decorative functions while being easier and quicker to make.¹⁴

But it was not until the late 1840s, in the aftermath of the famine, that serious endeavours to establish a commercial lace industry began. In 1849 the Member of British Parliament for County Louth and manager of the Marquis of Bath’s estates in County Monaghan, Tristram Kennedy, and the owner of another local Estate, Captain Morant, founded a training school for teachers. This quickly expanded to eight schools, accommodating about 800 pupils. A new form of Carrickmacross, called guipure, using bars of thread to hold the threads together instead of net, was introduced soon after this time. While it was thought of as “thoroughly impractical as far as wear and tear were concerned,” the guipure was regarded as “pretty and novel” and Queen Victoria ordered “a large and handsome piece” in 1852. The manufacture of Carrickmacross spread across the country. Schools were created in Counties Mayo and Donegal and by 1904 approximately twenty-eight centres throughout Ireland displayed this lace at the Dublin Horse Show, with half of these centres being schools associated with convents.¹⁵

Limerick lace is similar to Carrickmacross lace as it is embroidery on net, rather than being a “true lace.”¹⁶ Although Limerick lace began as a cottage industry, it owes its commercial origins to Englishman Charles Walker. In 1829 Walker came to Ireland and established a factory where supervision ensured the lace achieved a very high standard. He boasted he could take 100 Irish girl workers and their embroidery would be superior to that of any equal number employed in France, Flanders, Saxony, or Germany. There was soon a market in London for Limerick laces, and three of Walker’s partners would leave in succession to form their own factories. By 1852, 700 girls were employed in

¹² Marchioness Ishbel of Aberdeen and Temair, *The Musings of a Scottish Granny* (London: Heath Cranton, 1936), 132.

¹³ P. Earnshaw, *Youghal and Other Irish Laces* (Surrey: Gorse, 1998), 25.

¹⁴ Earnshaw, P. *Lace in Fashion* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1985), 83.

¹⁵ Earnshaw, *Lace in Fashion*, 83.

¹⁶ Wardle, 182.

Walker's factory, and in the 1850s nearly 2000 people were working in the Limerick lace centres, as well as approximately 300 girls working from their own homes.¹⁷

Of the three laces discussed here, it was the hugely successful Youghal lace that began specifically as an effort to create work after the great failure of the potato crop in 1846. Limerick and Carrickmacross lace had already been established commercially when Mother Mary Ann Smith and the Sisters of the Presentation convent in Youghal began production. Youghal is different from Limerick and Carrickmacross; it is a "true lace" in the sense that it uses a sewing needle, single thread and a button hole stitch technique in which a series of loops are linked together to produce a stable fabric of openwork form.¹⁸

With the opening of a convent lace school in 1852, new stitches and intricate designs were invented and helped to make the Youghal school's endeavours a great success. The lace made by the convent's pupils (most of who were from poor fishermen's families) was so sought after the school never had to request famine relief. One reason for this lace's popularity was its thread that, although cotton, was very fine.¹⁹ Designs were usually on a large scale and often included the national emblem, the shamrock.²⁰ Its influence and success spread needlepoint lace to centres and convent schools all over the country and Youghal itself became a renowned centre for the production of Irish needlepoint lace until the end of the Victorian era.²¹

Carrickmacross, Limerick and Youghal laces were not just made in these centres, but also traded and sold, utilized and worn as part of economic and social systems. And it was certainly not all "smooth sailing" for the lace industry in the nineteenth century. Irish lace saw a serious decline in the 1870s. Lace had gone out of fashion, and the invention of lace-making machines meant that lace could be easily copied and cheaply produced. The Limerick lace industry especially suffered and, as production sped up, its quality and reputation suffered. In contrast to the great success of the 1850s, by the end of the 1870s the number of workers dwindled to about 300, and the industry almost died out.²² Dealers held an exhibition of Irish Lace in 1883 at Mansion House in London, and "although the standard of skill was undeniable, the designs were found to be poor and uninteresting."²³

This decline did not go unnoticed and efforts made by both individuals and government meant that by the mid-1880s lace had entered a renaissance period. As a result of an appeal by Irish MPs, Alan S. Cole of the Department of Science and Art in South Kensington began to take interest in the industry. In 1884, with Cole as Chairman, a committee was established with James Brenan, headmaster of the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, to promote a revival of Irish lace. The committee highlighted the

¹⁷ Earnshaw, *Youghal*, 27.

¹⁸ Earnshaw, *Youghal*, 27.

¹⁹ Boyle, Elizabeth. *The Irish Flowerers* (Belfast: Ulster Folk Museum and Queen's, 1971), 64.

²⁰ Wardle, 179.

²¹ Wardle, 178 & Ada K. Longfield, *Guide to the Collection of Lace* (Dublin: National Museum of Ireland, 1982), 37.

²² Earnshaw, *Youghal*, 28.

²³ Wardle, 176.

importance of the production and creation of well-designed patterns, and the establishment of schools that would teach such studies.²⁴

The enthusiasm and efforts of Cole and Brenan saw a vital resurgence in the Carrickmacross, Limerick and Youghal industries, and all benefited from the new designs being created in lace design classes in London and Ireland. Patterns were commissioned, competitions were held, new schools were established and Irish lace was shown regularly at exhibitions in Ireland, England, and America. Limerick particularly bounced back from the brink of extinction, thanks again to an industrious woman named Mrs. Robert Vere O'Brien. She established a Limerick lace-teaching school in 1888 at the Convent of the Good Shepherd on the very site of Walker's original factory. "Without her sustained efforts," wrote one official, "the industry in that locality would have fallen into a state of complete decay."²⁵ Limerick lace making flourished once more and was praised to be as "flimsy as a fairy's wings." At the time of the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland Exhibition in 1904 most of the centres reported to have sold all their Limerick lace, "owing to a temporary vogue for it which existed last year, and still exists."²⁶

The Irish lace industry also survived competition from machine-made lace because of fashion trends at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Centuries. Heavier laces, such as Youghal, were very much in style at the end of the century and Paris couturiers gave valuable patronage in the early years of the twentieth century.²⁷ Fashion shops in Brussels and Vienna quickly followed their lead. For example, the 1902-1903 society ladies of Paris were appearing in gowns and hats "encrusted" with Irish lace and certain laces became associated with different occasions: Carrickmacross guipure for 'smart race meetings' and Carrickmacross appliqué for opera or evening wear.²⁸

Along with its promoters, the social circles trimmed by Irish lace are also significant; upper classes and royalty were the central consumers of this luxury good. The Irish lace industry benefited from extensive interest of English royalty and aristocracy, who beyond having the monetary means to purchase handmade laces also had the social position that created and sustained the tastes of fashion. Indeed, some histories of lace read more like lists of royal family members. If we look at Youghal lace, for example, we see pieces presented frequently in the second half of the 19th century to royalty such as Princess Alexandra and Queen Victoria. And in 1911, the *piece de resistance*: all Youghal lacemakers were set to work to produce a train for Queen Mary, wife of George V, that was to be worn during their majesties' visit to India (at that time, still part of the British Empire) towards the end of the year. As it needed to be completed in a little more than six months, sixty lacemakers at the Presentation Convent worked on it in shifts, day and night, since it would have taken a single person working alone approximately thirty years to complete.²⁹

²⁴ Earnshaw, *Youghal*, 12.

²⁵ Wardle, 178.

²⁶ Earnshaw, *Youghal*, 28.

²⁷ Wardle, 177.

²⁸ M.J. Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland* (London: Batsford, 1989), 161.

²⁹ Earnshaw, *Youghal*, 7.

Perhaps one of the greatest patrons of Irish lace was Lady Aberdeen, also known as the Countess of Aberdeen. She was still a young woman in February 1886 when her husband became (in his own words), “the viceroy [of Ireland]...the emblem of an unpopular form of government.” She had advocated cottage industry in Scotland, and after arriving in Dublin she almost immediately organized Irish home industries to show at the forthcoming exhibition at Edinburgh. She also formed an Irish Industries Association and eventually even purchased the Lace Depot, the main distributor of Irish lace in England and internationally. The Aberdeens’ first term in Ireland lasted only six months because of a change in British government, but nevertheless Lady Aberdeen maintained her presidency of the Irish Industries Association and went ahead with plans to exhibit Irish goods at the 1893 Chicago World’s fair. Irish lace became one of the few successes of the Fair, with profits made and a sales depot established.³⁰

The Aberdeens’ second viceregal term in Ireland lasted from 1906-1915. Lady Aberdeen’s interest in the lace industry culminated in her organization of the Lace Ball held in the spring of 1907 at Dublin Castle. Guests were instructed to wear only laces of Irish manufacture. Even the dance sets were named after laces, such as the Limerick set and the Carrickmacross quadrille. Lady Aberdeen attended the ball, wearing an elegant gown trimmed with Youghal lace.³¹

The lace industry, by Lady Aberdeen’s estimates in 1907, was outputting eight times as much as it had twenty years prior.³² The *Lace and Embroidery Review* of 1911 announced that “real Irish” was in vogue as trimming on fashionable black velvet gowns. And although it was stated in 1912 that “the lace school at Youghal is flourishing at the present day, employed a large number of workers,” the end of the lace industry was at hand.³³

The disparity between the impoverished Irish makers of lace as compared to the affluence of its wearers was not lost on the Irish people. Lady Aberdeen, despite her dedication to the promotion of Irish industry and her support of Irish self-government, was often a target of criticism. An anonymous newspaper ballad of the time reads: “But she [Lady Aberdeen] has made the business pay and cut the tradesmen down/And made her price and had her way in dear old Dublin town./ She patronizes shops and stores, and sends her friends to buy,/ Then levies her commission tax or knows the reason why.”³⁴

For the coronation of Queen Mary she organized a gown to be paid for by contributions from all Her Majesty’s Irish namesakes, i.e. Marys. This “loyal gesture” sparked nationalist outrage, expressed in the ballad “To the Marys of Ireland”:

O, Mary dear, and did you hear our queen is to be crowned?
And to help her buy a hobble skirt the hat is going round.
‘Twill be of Irish poplin, trimmed with *disinfected* lace,
To show how warmly and how well she loves the Irish race!

³⁰ Boyle, 117 & Aberdeen, 182.

³¹ Boyle, 117.

³² Boyle, 118.

³³ Earnshaw, *Youghal*, 8.

³⁴ In Boyle, 118.

...O Mary dear, you needn't fear your penny or your crown Will bear disease
across the seas to healthy London town;
'Twill be surely disinfected, pasteurised, and washed with care,
To banish all the poison of the tainted Irish air!
...the Queen'll murmur "Chawming Emerald Isle! so generous and so green
Its Marys go in rags themselves to decorate their queen!"³⁵

It is here in the spaces between lace's stitches we find the most interesting social paradox: the vast economic and social crisis that created the Irish lace industry – the poverty of its makers – stands in direct opposition to the wealth of its promoters and consumers. This opposition makes the social inequality between the Irish and the English markedly clear; and as these ballads demonstrate, this inequality was certainly noted by the Irish people. There are often shifts and divisions between the makers and users of artefacts, but in the case of lace it is a drastic one. Material culture theorist Henry Glassie refers the study of artefacts as a hunt for pattern (a fitting metaphor for this subject matter). Single things, like individual words, mean nothing in isolation, they are arbitrary. However, [This] arbitrariness leaves them when they become parts of interconnected sets."³⁶ Keeping this in mind, much about 19th Century Irish lace is revealed in the examination of lace as part of the society and culture, not only the dress, to which it was attached. A study of lace is not merely a study of luxuriant fashion and its trends, but rather an assertion of stark social realism.

Scholars agree that the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 was the end of Irish lace as an international industry. Furthermore, the political tides had been turning in Ireland for more than a decade and 1916's Easter Uprising in Dublin would see Ireland's systems break down in revolution and war in the decade that followed.

Lace is commonly considered to be a symbol of the delicate and dainty, the rich and the feminine. Yet studying it within the context of social history also reveals its ties to the hardship of the Irish people in general, the not-so delicate working Irish woman specifically, and the very masculine endeavours of revolution and war. Lace was an object that adorned the royal and the rich of England and the world, but began in the hands of those at the extreme other end of the social scale: the poor and the Irish. Lace ironically becomes a potent symbol of the disparity between Irish and English societies, England's oppressive rule of the Irish, the resulting poverty, and Irish nationalist resentment of a foreign government.

The disparity between the luxury of lace and the poverty of the makers reflects the crux of social and political conditions that impelled a nation subjected to hundreds of years of English oppression to revolution in 1916 and continued violence throughout the twentieth century. Through study we discover that even something as seemingly superfluous and nonsensical as lace can be connected to the basic human need of survival and the human desire for freedom.

Note: Bibliography below.

³⁵ See M. Keane, *Ishbel: Lady Aberdeen in Ireland*. (Newtownards, NI: Colourpoint, 1999), 168-9.

³⁶ Glassie, 256.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Aberdeen and Temair, Ishbel, Marchioness of. *The Musings of a Scottish Granny*. London: Heath Cranton, 1936.
- David Anderson, "Museum Education in Europe: Societies in Transition." In *Transforming Practice*, edited by J.S. Hirsch and L.H. Silverman. Washington, DC: Museum Education Roundtable, 2000.
- Blum, Clara M. *Old World Lace or A Guide for the Lace Lover*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1920.
- Boyle, Elizabeth. *The Irish Flowerers*. Belfast: Ulster Folk Museum and Queen's University, 1971.
- Birmingham Museum of Art. *Lace through the Centuries: 1600-1920*. Birmingham, Alabama: The Museum, 1984.
- Costello, Francis J., *The Irish Revolution and its Aftermath*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003.
- Dunlevy, M. J. *Dress in Ireland*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1989.
- Earnshaw, P. *Lace in Fashion*. London: B. T. Batsford, 1985.
- _____. *Lace Machines and Machine Laces*. London: B. T. Batsford, 1986.
- _____. *Needle-made Laces*. London: Ward Lock Limited, 1988.
- _____. *Youghal and Other Irish Laces*. Surrey: Gorse, 1998.
- Garvin, Tom. "Revolution? Revolutions are what Happens to Wheels--the Phenomenon of Revolution, Irish Style." In *The Irish Revolution: 1913-1923*, edited by Joost Augusteijn. London: Palgrave, 2002.
- Glassie, Henry. "Studying Material Culture Today." In *Living in a Material World: Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture*, edited by G. L. Pocius. St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991.
- Head, R.E. *The Lace and Embroidery Collector*. London: Herbert Jenkins, 1922.
- Keane, Maureen. *Ishbel: Lady Aberdeen in Ireland*. Newtownards, NI: Colourpoint, 1999.
- Longfield, Ada K. *Guide to the Collection of Lace*. Dublin: National Museum of Ireland, 1982.
- F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London: Fontana, 1985), 374-83.
- Miller, Daniel. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.
- Pollen, J.H. *Seven Centuries of Lace*. London: William Heinemann, 1908.
- Reigate, Emily. *An Illustrated Guide to Lace*. Woodbridge: Antique Collector's Club, 1986.
- Roberts, Edna H. *How to Know Laces*. New York: Dry Goods Economist, 1925.
- Simeon, Margaret. *The History of Lace*. London: Stainer & Bell, 1979.
- Wardle, Patricia. *Victorian Lace*. Carlton, UK: Ruth Bean, 1982.
- Veksler, V. *Lace: the Poetry of Fashion*. Atlgen, PA: Schiffer, 1998.