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Elizabeth Wincott Heckett  
*University College Cork*

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**Heavens' Embroidered Cloths - textiles from the  
Honan Chapel, University College Cork, Ireland**  
Elizabeth Wincott Heckett

Department of Archaeology, University College Cork, Ireland

**Introduction**

University College Cork was founded in 1845 as Queen's College, at that time a secular state institution for third level education for men. By the end of the century the College had prospered and was taking in students not only from the city but from the whole county. Since Queen's College was non-sectarian, initially there was no Chapel built for College use. The Honan Chapel was built by private bequest to fill this gap and to provide a spiritual base for Roman Catholic students attending College. Robert, Matthew and Isabella Honan, brothers and sister, were the last of a wealthy Cork merchant family who wished to make a bequest to College; leaving its disposition to John O'Connell, their lawyer.

It is to John O'Connell, a devout man who later, after the death of his wife became a priest, that we owe the unique composition that is the Honan Chapel and its contents. He was supported by the President of College at the time, Bertram Windle. At the end of the nineteenth century Irish ecclesiastical architecture, fittings and liturgical textiles were strongly influenced by other Catholic European countries and in many cases materials were brought in from abroad. The startling innovation of John O'Connell's concept was to look back to Early Christian Irish buildings and artefacts for inspiration, and to insist that Irish artists and craftspeople would design and make almost everything in the Chapel.<sup>1</sup> This inspiration seems to have sprung from his religious convictions but this was also a time of powerful development of Irish national consciousness, and of growing demands for independence. It was a happy confluence of events that the project took place at the height of the European Arts and Crafts Movement when many countries were looking back into their earlier histories to regain or reinforce their sense of identity. Those within the Movement were, at the same time, eager to abandon the standardisation and degradation of design and craftsmanship resulting from factory production.

The Chapel and its contents were all designed and constructed at the one time. It happened that the Chapel was consecrated in 1916, the same year in which the Irish Revolution took place.

To understand the ecclesiastical textiles in the Honan it is important to demonstrate something of the richness of the other elements that make up the Chapel which itself uses components from several Irish Romanesque churches including the twelfth century Cormac's Chapel, Cashel, Co. Tipperary. The stained glass windows are by Harry Clarke and Sarah Purser and show in vivid colours a panoply of Cork and Irish saints. There are silver altar fittings by Edmond Johnson of Dublin and William Egan & Sons of Cork. The enamelled tabernacle is by Oswald Reeves, the illuminated mass cards and missals by Joseph Tierney with the bookbindings by Eleanor Kelly. The Chapel furniture was made by John Sisk & Co.; they also built the Chapel, and the firm is still very successfully in business today.<sup>2,3</sup> This gives but a small appreciation of these treasures but sets the textiles in context. They, as part of the whole, are firmly grounded in their cultural, geographic and temporal setting

## THE TEXTILES

The textiles in the collection comprise all the articles necessary for the life of worship of the church. They may be divided into two separate parts; the first being the **vestments and accessories** associated with the celebration of the sacraments, and the second those **items which furnish the altar and chancel**. The majority of altar furnishings is linked with the vestments in that they constitute sets specific to seasons of the Church's year. For example, there are altar frontals (*antependia*) and the hangings behind (*dossals*) to match each of the sets of chasubles and copes for festivals, penitential and ordinary seasons.

Presently there is a known total of just over one hundred items and these are mainly listed in the Inventory compiled in 1989.<sup>4</sup> Here then are some of the high-points to give a flavor of the collection.

## VESTMENTS

In the first group there are sets of **gold, white, red, violet, black and green vestments and Eucharistic accessories** each to be used at different seasons. In general terms the gold and white are for festivals; the red for Whitsuntide and festivals of martyrs; green was used between Epiphany and Lent, and between Trinity and Advent; violet for Advent and Lent; and black for funerals and masses for the dead. The sets to be used for High Mass would consist of **chasuble, cope, two dalmatics, stoles, maniples, humeral veil, chalice veil and chalice burse**.<sup>5</sup> The embroideries on the vestments are all of the Early Irish style drawing their inspiration from the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells. They are worked mainly on **Irish poplin** which is a mixed weave of silk and wool, or cotton, or unusually, linen. The vestments seem to be made with a silk warp and a wool weft. Often the wool was a fine merino from Australia. The cloth needs to be light and relatively cool since the vestments were worn over other clothing. The typically ribbed effect of poplin is created by using a silk warp system and a thicker cylindrical weft system. When the weft picks are woven in, the silk warp ends completely cover them but the 'ribs' stand out.

The exception is the gold set which is made of '**cloth of gold**,' a cloth incorporating gold metal thread. This would be worn at festivals. Several firms in Dublin were then still weaving poplin and 'cloth of gold'; they include Atkinsons, Elliotts, Pym and Frys, all well established in their manufacture.<sup>6</sup> These background cloths are themselves valuable survivals from the period when the manufacture of Irish poplin was still successful and not yet in decline. The pieces of cloth that constitute the vestments are now precious survivals since sadly poplin is no longer being made in Dublin. Thomas Elliott & Sons had premises in Clonakilty, Co. Cork until 1979, and poplin is still woven in Belfast by Atkinsons. Linen surplices made to an antique pattern were also made up.

The vestments, of poplin, cloth of gold or linen, were all designed and made in Cork. The sewing and embroidery were carried out in the workshops of William Egan & Sons. The firm was long-established with a strong tradition for excellence, having been founded in 1823.<sup>7</sup> A group of about thirty girls over an eighteen month period completed the work with Barry Michael Egan in charge.<sup>8</sup> The 'cloth of gold' set was designed by Ethel Josephine Scally who died in 1915 before she could see her plans completed. The chasuble displays examples of the Celtic style embroideries although at some time in the past it has been cut from the original cloth and remounted, presumably

due to the deterioration of this last. Most regrettably the cope in this set has not survived well and cannot be displayed. There are illustrations of the *morse* or clasp on the cope and the edge of the *humeral veil* which show off the quality of the cloth. So some pieces in the original cloth do survive but in a bad state. Indeed some sets of vestments now appear to be incomplete.

One of the pleasing aspects of the textiles is the more intimate knowledge of the women who made and embroidered the vestments which is afforded by the embroidered inscription on the interior of the chasuble. This gives all their names including that of Ethel Scally the designer, and a prayer for the repose of her soul. Here is also the evidence that the work involved Barry Egan, then in charge of the family firm at 32 Patrick Street, Cork. This dedication was transferred to the new backing.

A question that comes to mind is why were conditions right at the time in Cork for this flowering of talent and skill? There seem to be several reasons. A very immediate one is that Barry Egan as a young man spent several years of apprenticeship in silversmithing and vestment making in both Belgium and France. In 1900 he went to Paris where he spent time with Biais Freres, one of the most important manufacturers of these items whose premises were located in la Place St. Sulpice.<sup>9</sup> It was on his return that he set up an embroidery and vestment workshop above the shop.

There had also been a movement in Cork since the middle of the nineteenth century to promote female employment and skills. Numerous groups were set up by convents and benevolent ladies of all religious denominations which trained and sometimes employed girls in crochet work, silk hair net making, knitting, making shirt fronts, general needlework and embroidery. There were other schemes connected with large commercial textile establishments who ran industrial schools-cum-factories with mainly young women employees who thus developed sewing skills.<sup>10</sup> The founding of the Cork School of Art and of a Cork school of needlework in the 1880s, and the general development of interest in decorative textiles led to a climate sympathetic to the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement.<sup>11</sup>

Another development was that of the Irish lace industry which can only be mentioned briefly here. It was at this time that Cork, Youghal, Limerick, Carrickmacross and other lace flourished.<sup>12</sup>

## ALTAR FURNISHINGS

The second group of textiles includes the altar frontals and back hangings, all made by Evelyn Gleeson and the Dun Emer Guild in Dublin. They are of course used in conjunction with the appropriate vestments at the different seasons.

**The black set** is, for example, used for the Annual Founders Mass which takes place in the third week of October, and is traditionally the ceremonial memorial for the Honan family. There is a **white antependium with blue applique panels** and embroideries which show it was made for the Feast Days of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Here we see scenes from the life of Mary which embody a delicacy and charm totally suitable to their subject. First there is the Annunciation (*Mater Dolorosa*), then the Assumption (*Regina Coeli*) in the center, and finally the Nativity (*Mater Dei*). There are delightful red-headed Irish angels paying their respects to Mary and her Babe, and assisting in the other panels. This last item and the following ones display a completely different inspiration to that of the Egan vestments.

Three other very interesting pieces made by the Guild are **the banner of St. FinnBarr**, the **embroidered antependium of Our Lord with Irish saints** and the **wool tapestry dossal**. **The banner** shows St. FinnBarr in the vestments suited to a Bishop, and wearing one glove. Behind the gloved hand a small tree is bursting into flower. On the other side of the Saint a lamb is standing. The Saint's gloved hand refers to the legend attributed to him that Christ touched his hand whilst he was praying, and he then, out of humility, wore a glove to disguise the fact. The small tree is a hazel bush FinnBarr caused to break into flower in the winter-time.<sup>13</sup> The whole surface of the banner is embroidered in a variety of stitches, including variations of laid and cord work, and satin and split stitch.

**The antependium** is also completely covered with embroidery. Close examination gives some idea of the quality and variety of the work. Here we have a seated figure of Our Lord holding the Book of the Gospels. The other figures, from the left, are St. Ita, St. Columcille, St. Patrick, St. Brigid, St. FinnBarr and St. Colman.

**The wool tapestry dossal** is a work of great visual richness set on a deep red ground. The tapestry is divided into four panels containing the traditional symbols of the Evangelists. Matthew is represented by a man; Mark by a lion; Luke by an ox; and John by an eagle.

The Guild also made a **set of carpets** for the chancel and altar steps; this was another of its specialities. There is also a single round cushion, with St. John's eagle; perhaps there were three others originally. The design is very close to that of the eagle on the dossal.

## **DUN EMER GUILD**

The Dun Emer Guild had been started in 1902 by **Evelyn Gleeson** and **Susan (Lily) and Elizabeth (Lolly) Yeats**, sisters, of course of William Butler and Jack Yeats (the poet and the artist).<sup>14</sup> The high quality output of the Guild was an important part of the Celtic Revival, and the Arts and Crafts Movement in which it was active for many years, finally declining into closure around 1964. In its heyday the Guild was most productive, with tapestries, carpets, vestments and embroideries being pre-eminent. There was also a printing and publishing Press and later enamel work was undertaken.<sup>15</sup> Evelyn Gleeson was so determined to weave tapestries authentically that she borrowed an old loom from the National Museum.<sup>16</sup>

After 1908 the Yeats sisters were no longer connected with the Guild, leaving to set up their own Cuala enterprise. Later Evelyn Gleeson's niece **Katherine or Kitty MacCormack**, having been brought up at Dun Emer, began to work as a designer and part of the group. **May Kerley**, a niece of Augustine Henry was also an important member of the group. These names appear on pieces of the Honan textiles

Here it is appropriate to underline the interesting role played by women artists and craftworkers in the Irish Arts and Crafts Movement. As was also true in Scotland and England, young women eagerly took advantage of the opening and development of art colleges in both Dublin and Cork. Alternatively, like the Yeats sisters they taught themselves the skills they needed to thrive outside the home. From the names quoted here, it can be seen that the Honan treasures stem from the talents of Sarah Purser, Eleanor Kelly, Evelyn Gleeson and the women named on the textiles just as much as from the gifted men involved. It was an exciting time for women as they enthusiastically became engaged with the wider world.

And finally, why choose the W.B. Yeats' quotation, aside from the fact it is from a poem that so many people know and love? It came in mind when considering the background to the Honan textiles, and their general ambience. Although the poem was written before 1899, it certainly seems likely that W.B. Yeats would have a clear idea of how 'heavens' embroidered cloths' might have looked. He would have been very aware of the excitement generated by the 'new' textiles of the Movement. Living in London at that time he had become a friend of William Morris; his sister Lily had worked with Morris's daughter May in that family's famous textile and embroidery workshop. Lily learnt to embroider and sometimes design textiles there. Textiles were central to the vision of the Arts and Crafts Movement, not marginalised, as they sometimes seem to be nowadays. Later both William and Jack were very supportive of their sisters' involvement in the Dun Emer project with advice and specific designs. Just as every part of the Honan Chapel and its contents has its own integrity and value so all the arts and crafts of the celtic renaissance were held in high esteem. The textiles made and embroidered for the Honan Chapel can take their place proudly among the other treasures there. Surely William Butler Yeats' lines are an appropriate, though unwitting, description of this dazzling collection.

#### **HE WISHES FOR THE CLOTHS OF HEAVEN**

**Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,**  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

**W.B. Yeats** (*from The Wind among the Reeds, 1899*)

#### References

<sup>1</sup> O'Connell, John. *The Collegiate Chapel Cork*, Cork University Press, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> O'Kelly, Michael.J. *The Honan Chapel, University College Cork*, Cork University Press, Cork, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> Wincott Heckett, Elizabeth and Teehan C. Virginia *The Honan Chapel Collection, University College Cork - an inventory*. (unpublished) 1991.

<sup>5</sup> James, Raymund *The Origin and development of Roman liturgical vestments*. Catholic Records Press, Exeter. 1934, pp. 3-12.

<sup>6</sup> Campion, Mary 1963 'An old Dublin industry - poplin' (from the old Dublin Society, 28 November 1962) *Dublin Historical Record* 19, pp. 1-14. (Australian wool p. 9. cloth of gold pp. 12-13)

- <sup>7</sup> *Cork Examiner*, November 28, 1979, p. 8.
- <sup>8</sup> Larmour, Paul *The Arts and Crafts movement in Ireland*. Friar's Bush Press, Belfast. 1992, p. 134.
- <sup>9</sup> O Mahony, Eoin 'Our notable men' *The Chrystal*, Cork, 1927 p. 200.
- <sup>10</sup> Cronin, Moira 'Work and Workers' (eds) Patrick o'Flanagan and Cornelius Buttimer (*Cork History and Society*) Geography Publications, Dublin 1993, pp.721-58. (p.738).
- <sup>11</sup> Murray, Peter 'Art institutions in nineteenth-century Cork (eds) Patrick O'Flanagan and Cornelius Buttimer *Cork History and Society*, Geography Publications, Dublin 1993 pp. 813-72. (pp. 856-69).
- <sup>12</sup> Longfield, Ada *Guide to the Collection of Lace in the National Museum of Ireland*, the Stationery Office, Dublin. 1982, pp.26-43.
- <sup>13</sup> . O'Kelly, Michael.J. *The Honan Chapel, University College Cork*, Cork University Press, Cork, 1966.
- <sup>14</sup> Hardwick, Joan *The Yeats Sisters - a biography of Susan and Elizabeth Yeats* HarperCollins London. 1996, pp. 117-121.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Larmour, *The Arts and Crafts movement in Ireland* Friar's Bush Press, Belfast. 1992, pp. 151-161.
- <sup>16</sup> Mairead Dunlevy 'The Honan Hostel Chapel - an observation' in (eds) Elizabeth Wincott Heckett and C. Virginia Teehan *The Honan Collection, University College Cork - an inventory*. p. 16 (of Dunlevy section). (unpublished) 1991.

#### **ADDENDUM**

For the general interest of TSA members the following American references from the Irish Arts and Crafts Movement have been collated from Paul Larmour's *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland* cited above.

In 1908 Dun Emer Guild and Cuala Industries (rival groups by then) displayed at the Irish Industrial Exposition in Madison Square Gardens, NY. p159.

In 1923 they provided vestments for St. Patrick's Church, San Francisco to the order of Monsignor Roberts. 'Designed by Katherine MacCormack these vestments were lavishly ornamented with panels of Celtic pattern and medallions of Irish saints embroidered in 'cloth of gold' specially made by Atkinsons the well-known Dublin poplin manufacturers.' p.160. (also see *Irish Builder and Engineer*, 11 August 1923, p. 605). (St. Patrick's still stands but a friend who visited there a few years ago reported that nothing is now known of the whereabouts of the vestments.)

Embroidery from Kenmare Convent, Co. Kerry (Poor Clare Sisters), was shown and won a medal at Chicago Exhibition of 1893. The Sisters showed a set of Celtic ornamented chasubles and accessories made for Cardinal Gibbons. p.15. (also see *Irish Textile Journal*, 15 February 1893 p. 20, and 15 March 93, p. 38; *The Queen*, 7 January 1893 p. 8 - 'Irish exhibits for Chicago.'