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Irish Costume

Author(s): Sigma

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IRISH COSTUME

The great difficulty about Irish costume is that the material cannot be got in the shops. Where could one get saffron linen? But if a demand arose for it, it would be supplied. Then our tailors and our dress makers do not know anything about Irish dress, but they could be told how to make Irish clothes.

Now suppose a lady wanted to have her children dressed in Irish fashion, what is she to do? She sees little Highlanders dressed in what is fondly supposed to be a native dress, but this is a mistake. It is a modern modification of what used to be the native dress of North Britain, and derived from the old Irish dress. The plaid and kilt are the old mantle cut in two. The coat is all right, but there is no sign of the saffron shirt unless the buff fatigue dress of some of the Scottish regiments is a survival of it. But how is she to get the Irish dresses for her children? She orders smocks and blouses of saffron linen, but where is she to get this colour? It is now absolutely unknown in dress. She will be shown orange and drome, but she will not find saffron. But saffron is still used by the confectioners. If she goes into a confectioner's and gets a saffron bun she will have the exact colour. There used to be a shop in Great George's-street in Dublin, a little old shop frequented on Sundays for a cup of tea between services, and before St. Patrick's opened at 3 o'clock. It was celebrated for saffron cakes. If she breaks the saffron cake she will have the exact yellow, and she ought not to take anything else, and she ought not to be happy till she gets it. If she puts her youngsters into saffron linen smocks and blouses she puts them into the old Irish dress. Then the jackets must have four skirts and four pockets, and be worn of course over the smocks. The boys and girls will like them well on account of the four pockets. It is easy to manage the blue bonnet and ornament. That makes the whole complete.

Now I shall repeat again the information that is available in the Acts of Parliament, the works of Spenser, and the statements of the French traveller, Le Gonz. It is important in this as in every thing else to stick to facts, and not depend on anybody's imagination. I saw in the newspapers that an authority on Celtic dress proposes to invent an Irish kilt. Now there never was an Irish kilt. There was certainly the skirt of a saffron shirt or smock, with its voluminous folds, kept in by a belt, but that is not a kilt. The kilt is the invention of the Highland Irish, and should be left to them. But let us get back to the facts.

It appears by the Act of 5 Edward 4; c. 3, that there was at that time a distinctly Irish apparel, and every Irishman by that Act, who dwelt amongst Englishmen, was to go like an Englishman, and shave his beard above the mouth. The 28th Henry VIII, c. 15, goes more minutely into the hair question. No king's subject was to be shaven above his ears or wear long locks or use his hair on his upper lip called a crommeale. He was not to wear any article coloured with saffron, nor wear above seven yards of cloth in his skirt or smock. No woman was to wear any Kirtel or coat tucked up or embroidered with silk, or laid with uske after the Irish fashion. None were to wear any mantle, coat, or hood made after the Irish fashion, upon pain of forfeiture of the article by any of the king's true subjects. A lord, spiritual or temporal, was to be fined £6 13s. 4d.; a knight or an esquire, £2;

a gentleman or merchant, £1; a freeholder and yeoman, 10s.; a husbandman, 6s. 8d.; others, 3s. 4d. We need not be surprised at these sumptuary regulations. So late as 1747 an Act was passed forbidding the wearing of tartan as part of a Highland dress under pain of six months imprisonment, and for a second offence transportation beyond the seas. This Act was repealed in 1782, so the Queen's own Highlander can wear a Highland dress.

Now we see what this Irish apparel was. It comprised a saffron linen shirt, in smock, often containing more than seven yards of stuff. A coat made after the Irish fashion. The French traveller says it had four skirts. A short coat of this kind, with four pockets within reach, without raising the arm, would be invaluable for cyclists, sportsmen, and schoolboys. There could be one pocket for the handkerchief, one for tools and material, one for papers, and one for what Primate Alexander's good boy called S.P.G., "something probably grub." The bonnet was of blue cloth, which, when woven or knit, became the Scotch-cap and Tam-o'-Shanter, and is now the British military forage cap, restored to its old use of being made that it could go over the ears. Trousers were worn in Ireland, though in Scotland all the young people of the Highlands, and no doubt many of the poor, wore only "red shanks." Even the first Marquis of Antrim never wore shoe or stocking till 8 years of age. The mantle was the great subject of Edmund Spenser's objurgations. He considered it a danger to society. From it developed the cloak and hood, and in Scotland the plaid, belted plaid, and then plaid and kilt; but these were distinctly Scottish, not Irish. It is to be hoped that no one will be so foolish as to invent an Irish Celtic dress out of his head, or try to compose one out of the poetical and imaginative accounts of the tales, but begin by dressing the children in full Irish dress, or try any part of the old dress that may be of use for modern purposes. Some innocent may think that he cannot use a saffron pocket-handkerchief on account of the Act of 28th Henry VIII, c. 15, which certainly mentions a kercher and a necherchour, but he need not be afraid. It will give him, however, some trouble to get the colour, as the Irish linen manufacturers have lost the dye. It may be preserved in the Highlands still as one of the tartan dyes.

It is very curious that green does not seem to have occupied a position of any great prominence in Celtic Ireland. The reason seems to be that in the Emerald Isle it was too common, and like white and black, was hardly considered a colour at all.

SIGMA.

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