

Why the Kilt for St Enda's?



Dr Anne O'Dowd Curator of Clothing and Fabrics at the National Museum of Ireland at Castlebar was kind enough to send us these images from her now out of print book **Common Clothes and Clothing 1860 - 1930** published by the National Museum of Ireland in 1990.

I'd asked her if Pearse would have known about the Aran Dress typical in

1905 and on display in the museum entrance (a visit well worth making) when he chose the kilt for St Enda's she replied:

"I am sure that Pearse would have been aware of the traditional dress on the Aran Islands. However, am I correct in thinking that you are looking for an influence for the St Enda kilt? If so, then certainly the traditional dress at the time would have shown similarities but I think it is more influenced by looking for a version of traditional dress which was very much in vogue at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

Pearse was involved in this and examined some items of older dress in the National Museum holdings at the time. The whole issue of why a kilt was chosen is an interesting piece of research in itself and undoubtedly influenced by the kilt of the Scots. If men there could wear it then Irish men might show a similar willingness. And, so the boys at St. Enda's were the 'guinea pigs' in a sense. I remember listening to a John Bowman interview with James Dillon some years ago. If my memory is correct, Dillon's father decided against St. Enda's as a school for his son when he visited the place and saw the boys dressed in 'skirts'.



You might have a look at Mairead Dunlevy's *Dress in Ireland*, Batsford, 1989. Especially page 176 where there is a quote from Pearse on the issue of the merits of the kilt versus the trews, ie 17th century attire for men.

I wrote a short booklet some years ago which gives views of boys dressed in skirts - a traditional form of dress for boys in many areas of the country until certainly the opening decades of the 20th century in many parts of Ireland.

I am not an expert on dye colours but I can supply you with a few references should you wish.

Looking at your images of the school uniform it looks more an orange hue, i.e. closer to saffron than the bright red of the Aran islands boys' dress.



Traditionally the red came from the madder plant. However, when chemical dyes began to become more plentiful in the middle of the 19th century, I believe red was one of the first of the 'new' colours to be available to purchase. We have not had chemical analysis done as yet on any of the red dyed objects in the collections here. However, because of the vibrancy of the colours I would suggest that they are dyed with a chemical dye.



There is some research done on the dressing of boys in skirts from the folklore evidence. A widespread belief stems from a belief in fairies and that the fairies favoured male children rather than female children to abduct and bring up as one of their own. They then left a 'changeling' or a sickly child in place of the human child. It was one way of

explaining a child's sudden illness.

I agree however that the skirt was more hygienic. In traditional non moneyed economies also it was the role of women to make both their own and their children's clothes. When the boys reached the age to be dressed in trousers, this would entail an expenditure to the tailor who made the clothing for the men. It was certainly more economical to keep the boys in skirts for as long as possible."



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