The Kilt as "National Dress"

Writing to J. O'Kelly (Seamas O Ceallaigh) Pearse introduced the concept of "National Dress":

This lengthy letter, which includes a sketch by Pearse of the trews described, was obviously in reply to a query from O'Kelly, a prominent Gaelic Leaguer, as to the appropriate national costume for a Feis (cultural festival) organised by the League.

26.10.1900

5 George's Villa, Sandymount.

My dear O'Kelly, I have been away from home for a few days and until this morning could not get an opportunity of looking at the pair of trews in the Royal Irish Academy Collection in the National Museum. As the collection is being re-arranged and catalogued, they are not on exhibition now but Mr. Coffey very kindly unearthed them for me and gave me an opportunity of examining and handling them.

They really resemble nothing so much as a modern pair of drawers of the kind usually worn by men.

In fact one would at first sight take them for a rather clumsily made and ill-treated pair of modern gentlemen's drawers. They are tight fitting and reach down to the foot, the extremities being pointed at each side. There is no opening in front and the wearer must hence have found considerable difficulty in putting them on. The material is a thick strong woollen stuff. There is a seam on the inside of each leg. As for the colour, the legs are plaid or cross-barred with black and yellow stripes all the way down, the upper portion back and front in plain yellow.

There is absolutely no means of judging of the age of the garment. Probably it is not older than the 16th century. It must have been worn by some farmer or labouring man and was probably made by his wife. At least I cannot imagine an Irish gentleman of three or four centuries ago wearing so clumsy an article or dress. Frankly, I should much prefer to see you arrayed in a kilt, although it may be less authentic, than in a pair of these trews.

You would if you appeared in the latter, run the risk of leading the spectators to imagine that you had forgotten to don your trousers and had sallied forth in your drawers. This would be fatal to the dignity of the Feis.

If you adopt a costume, let it, at all events, have some elements of picturesqueness. The accompanying rough outline will give you a very fair idea of what the trews are like. Numerous pictures of them have however been published.

I think you will find one in Wilde's Catalogue and in Collier's History of Ireland. The trews worn by a peasant or soldier shown there correspond exactly to the pair in the R.I.A. collection.

With the trews were worn a pair of shoes identical with the "pampooties" now worn in Aran, a tight fitting jerkin or vest and a large heavy woollen cloak. Of all these I have seen specimens. It is quite certain that these were the ordinary dress of the lower class in Ireland in the 16th century. But then I cannot see that they are entitled to the dignity of being called a "national" costume.

Are they not the hose, jerkin and cloak worn universally throughout Europe during the Middle Ages and down to the end of the 18th century?

Very sincerely yours.

P. H. Pearse.

Source:

The collected letters of P.H.Pearse, 1897-1916.

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By 1905 the "kilt" had become the "Irish kilt" as in this extract from the clothing list for boys attending St Enda's.

"It is suggested that parents should dress their boys in the Irish kilt, which, apart from its claims as a distinctively national form of dress, provides an economical, hygienic, and becoming costume for boys.

This recommendation applies to Day Pupils equally with Boarders, as does the regulation with regard to clothes, etc., of Irish manufacture. Messrs. M. Meers, A Co., Tailors, 10 Lower Pembroke Street, Dublin, will supply the kilt in the School colours to pupils of ST. ENDA'S at very special terms.

They will also supply a handsome cloak, with hood, suitable for wearing with the kilt in lieu of an overcoat."

Examples of these garments are preserved in the reserve collection at Kilmainham Geol Museum and photographs follow.
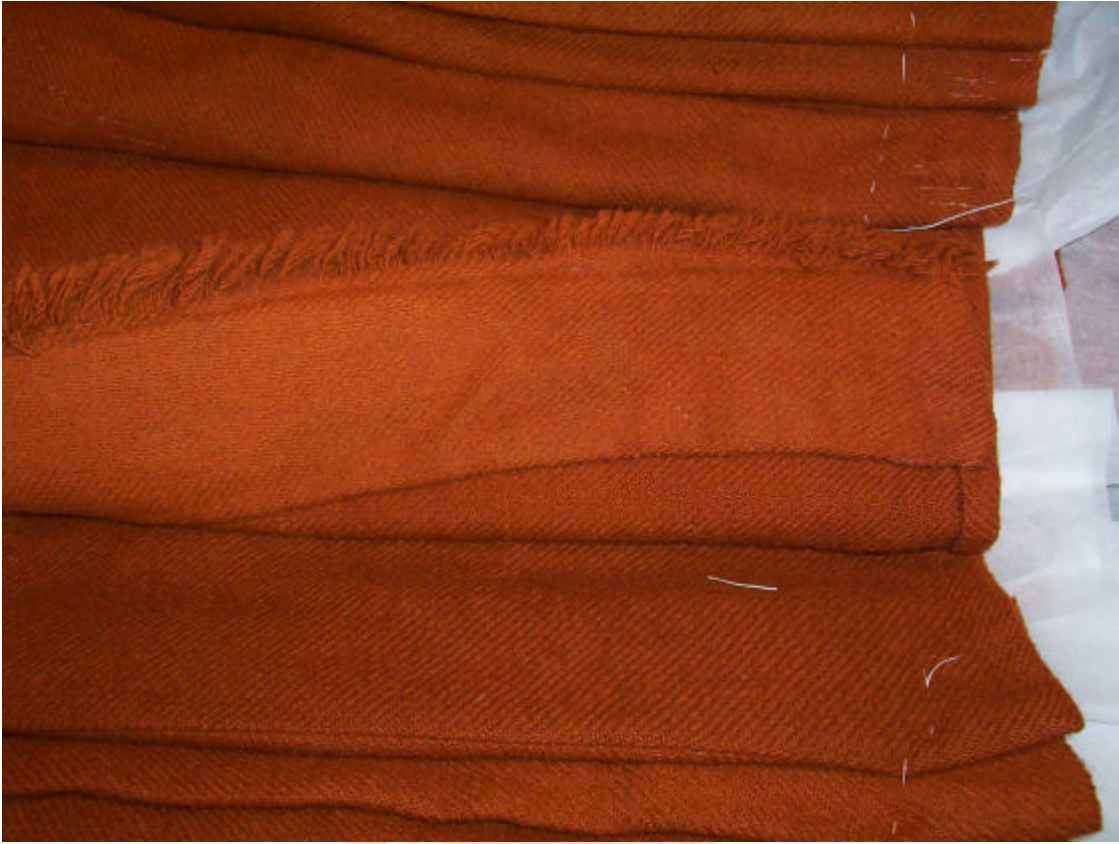
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