Embroidered spectacle: Celtic Revival as aristocratic display

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A large and boisterous demonstration marked the countess of Aberdeen’s departure from Dublin in August 1886. She celebrated her devotion to Ireland and her penchant for home rule by wearing a dress of pale azure Irish poplin (St Patrick’s blue) trimmed abundantly with Limerick lace complemented by a bonnet decorated with shamrocks. The rousing street cheers for Aberdeen and her husband, the departing viceroy, mirrored the silence of Dublin’s elite. According to Lady’s Pictorial’s regular column ‘Society in Dublin’, the Aberdeens had offended loyalists with their flagrant support for home rule. Lord Aberdeen, for example, had openly declared his sympathy for home rule at a Castle dinner party in July; he had announced ‘with a bland smile, that he hoped and believed that all at the table were of his way of thinking; he was answered by one of his most prominent guests – a well known Chief Justice – that his assumption was hardly correct, as in all probability only himself, and, perhaps, his footman, were disposed to follow Mr Gladstone’s rule’.

Conversely, The Times’ Dublin correspondent applauded the Aberdeens: ‘If it were possible, the majority of people in the country would desire to see the Viceroyalty retained by Lord and Lady Aberdeen, who have done more to make the office popular with the masses than any of their predecessors.’ They overcame prejudices, continued The Times, ‘by their unfailing and unbounded kindness and generosity’ and gave help whenever needed ‘without distinction of creed or party’. A few days later, The Times published a much more critical description of the departure from Ireland in the form of a letter to the editor in which the Aberdeens were chastised for their support of Irish nationalism: ‘Certainly Lord Aberdeen and his amiable Countess did receive a popular ovation. None will dispute this. None will also, with truth, deny that the ovation was a thoroughly “National” one.’ According to this Dublin observer, ‘green was everywhere, and the chief banners were green flags’ with a crownless harp and American and French flags. The Aberdeens represented home rule and the cheer-

1 Lady’s Pictorial, 14 Aug. 1886, p. 127. 2 Lady’s Pictorial, 31 July 1886, p. 75. 3 The Times, 22 July 1886, p. 7. 4 The Times, 6 Aug. 1886, p. 7. For a discussion of the complicated relationship between lords lieutenant and Irish nationalism, see James Murphy, Abject loyalty: nationalism and monarchy in Ireland during the reign of Queen Victoria (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).
ing crowds that greeted the viceregal entourage as it made its way through the Dublin streets signified, according to some, a ‘demonstration of Separatists’. 5

Affection for Ishbel Aberdeen herself remained as contradictory as the mixed responses to the viceroyalty. One columnist sarcastically reported upon the collection of subscriptions for a farewell gift for the countess: although money was ‘not flowing in with extraordinary rapidity’, it was expected that ‘the lady philanthropist’ would ‘make up all the deficiencies herself’ and, regardless, loyalists would not ‘turn up for the farewell reception’. 6 This disparaging view of Lady Aberdeen’s activities contradicted frequent praise for her dedication: she was consistently both belittled and acclaimed. 7 Sir Horace Plunkett described her as a ‘goody goody rebel’, and she was often lampooned in the press as ‘Blowsy Bella’ and later as ‘Lady Microbe’, 8 others commended her as ‘seemingly ubiquitous … continually occupied in promoting good and useful work’. 9

The 1886 spectacle of departure neither began nor ended Ishbel Aberdeen’s controversial relationship with Ireland. Similarly, the dress she selected for the occasion was one of many that articulated her keenness for displaying Irish cloth and Celtic motifs on her own body. As Elizabeth Wilson suggests, fashion, because it is related to fine art and popular culture, is ‘a kind of performance art’; it is, according to Wilson, ‘a mass pastime, a form of group entertainment’ that acts as ‘a kind of a hinge between the elitist and the popular’. 10 If, as Wilson proposes, fashion is performance, then Lady Aberdeen regularly and dramatically showed her support for Irish industry and art, publicly and privately, at Court drawing rooms, at exhibitions and on the street.

Aberdeen first conflated her own body with Celticness when she appeared as Aoife, the twelfth-century Irish bride of Norman invader, Strongbow, at a lavish viceregal garden party organised to promote home manufacture. 11 Thus, in a spectacular event the Lady’s Pictorial called ‘the most brilliant national festival that has, perhaps, ever been held in Ireland’, 12 Lady Aberdeen brought aristocratic pleasure together with Celtic revival. All the invited guests had been told to wear Irish costumes made of Irish materials and, as the Irish Times wrote:

‘No element was wanting that could contribute to the pleasure and success of the occasion’ which was ‘both picturesque and patriotic.’ The Illustrated London News considered the garden party ‘pleasant and picturesque’ with costumes that were ‘romantic and fantastic’ as well as ‘humorous and popular’. Approximately 2000 guests circulated throughout the afternoon, while ‘on the outer side of the deep ditch or sunken fence which forms the boundary between the public and the viceregal grounds, many spectators had also assembled’. At three o’clock in the afternoon, after having greeted their guests, the earl and countess appeared on the terrace and, to the tune of the National Anthem, moved toward the reception. Ishbel Aberdeen’s costume created a stir and garnered attention in every press review of the occasion. She personified her support for a particular kind of Ireland by wearing a robe and mantle of the richest ivory-coloured Empress poplin, beautifully embroidered by hand, in gold, with interleaf decorations’ based upon designs in the Book of Kells. The costume, designed by Major Robert McEniry, the curator of the Irish Academy, was, according to the Lady’s Pictorial, that of ‘Strongbow’s Bride’, copied exactly from the picture by Maclise, and manufactured by Mary Sims, of Dawson-street, for the occasion. To complete her Celtic masquerade, Lady Aberdeen wore a richly embroidered mantle fastened by a Tara brooch and a gold-embroidered shoulder-piece fastened by fibula brooch. To complete her performance as promoter of Ireland and keeper of harmony, she carried a bouquet of roses, thistles and shamrocks.

Two aspects of Ishbel Aberdeen’s performance signify a Celtic revival circumscribed by Anglo permutations: the embroidered Book of Kells motifs and the replication of the twelfth-century Irish ‘princess’, Aoife. Each must be considered separately and interstitially, as idiosyncratic allegiances expressed by a late nineteenth-century aristocrat and as indicators of emergent nationalism. As Neil Harris, among others, has suggested, craft revival in the late nineteenth century frequently was linked with national or ethnic identity and as such ‘helped to evoke historic pasts and dreams of independence’. The embroidery on Aberdeen’s dress, although worked by women in the Royal Irish School of Art Needlework, owed its inspiration to the Donegal Industrial Fund renowned for

its trademark use of Kells embroidery and for its determination to revive specifically and uniquely Irish crafts. Lady Aberdeen ardently shared this determination, and any discussion of her Celtic dresses must be linked to the activities and reputation of the Donegal Industrial Fund.

Alice Hart introduced Kells embroideries to exhibition viewers soon after the Fund’s inauguration in 1883.21 By 1885, the Fund had been awarded a gold medal at the International Inventions Exhibition in London for Kells embroideries including, for example, a pair of portière curtains of Irish woollen cloth decorated with ‘a singularly bold design taken from a Celtic illumination of the seventh century’.22 Work exhibited at the Inventions captured the interests of press and viewers alike and, because both the marchioness of Waterford and the princess of Wales supported the ‘tiny shop’ located at ‘Ye Signe of ye Rose and Shamrock’, aristocratic glamour complemented its popularity and appeal.23 Concomitantly, in July 1885, the Fund participated in ‘an exhibition of Irish lace and cottage industries’ held in the Royal School of Art Needlework under the patronage of the princess of Wales.24 By early 1886, when Ishbel Aberdeen went to Ireland, she would have been very familiar with the Fund’s activities and awards.

Londoner Alice Rowland Hart25 had established the Donegal Industrial Fund after a visit she and her physician activist husband had made to Donegal in 1883. Typically liberal and concerned, the Harts responded intensely to the increasingly frequent accounts of Irish misery and famine that proliferated during the early 1880s and, in preparation for their trip to view the situation themselves, they read a series of books, pamphlets, published speeches and reports ‘with ever increasing interest, mingled with feelings of pain, shame and indignation’.26 Alice Hart, in a speech she gave in London, told her audience that as she read Irish history, she ‘felt for the first time ashamed of being an Englishwoman’.27 She blamed England for ‘willingly and knowingly’ destroying the glass and woollen industries of Ireland; she denied the commonly voiced characteristic of Irish ‘idleness’ by insisting that the population wanted employment; and she decided ‘that the most practical thing to do would be to revive the old Cottage Industries, and to develop and improve the ancient arts of spinning, weaving, knitting, sewing and embroidery’.28 Her main concern was to provide work for an agricultural, rural population during the long winter months, thus supplementing the meagre income they earned during the growing season. To this end, she founded the Donegal Industrial Fund for the encouragement of Irish Home Industries and the benefit of Irish workers.29

For almost two years, Hart operated out of a London storefront in New Cavendish Street. During this time, she sought commissions for Irish goods from businesses such as Debenhams, and Freebody and Marshall and organized and operated highly successful stalls in large international exhibitions. She arranged for the teaching of classes and dissemination of information in Irish and attempted to convince Irish entrepreneurs to buy Irish goods; to do otherwise, she considered 'not a patriotic thing to do'.

In December 1885, Hart opened the doors to her new storefront, Donegal House, in Wigmore Street 'for the exhibition and sale of goods which have been manufactured by the Irish peasantry'; everything on display was 'manufactured by hand' and included homespun tweeds, friezes and woollen fabrics, all of which had been made from undyed or vegetable dyed wool, woven on hand looms. Concurrently, the more decorative objects of the Donegal Exhibition Fund appeared in a month-long exhibition at Howell's and James's Art Exhibition Galleries on Regent Street. The stars of this 'art exhibition' were the Kells embroideries based upon designs from seventh-century Celtic manuscripts and 'ancient architectural decorations' when Ireland, according to Hart, 'was in questions of art far in advance of England'. The Magazine of Art told its readers that Hart's designs 'taken either from Irish monuments or Irish manuscripts' represented 'patriotic objects' and thus could be 'regarded as a genuine attempt to revive the art as well as the industries of Ireland'.

Touted as a 'new and original type of artistic hand work' and directed toward consumers who were identified as 'lovers of art', Kells embroideries, made with dyed polished flax threads of Irish manufacture worked on various linens, became the hallmark of the Donegal Industrial Fund; they also represented objects that expanded the Fund's image to include more than wearable goods and reified the Fund's identity as a producer of 'Celticness'. Hart's intent 'was to create a new Irish industry with Irish materials, and worked by Irish workers. Years later, Hart described her amazement when she first turned the pages of the Book of Kells in the library of Trinity College: 'it revealed to me', wrote Hart, 'a mine and storehouse of design. In a few square inches of these wondrous pages there was more design and more suggestion than in sheaves of original drawings turned out from South Kensington. The production of Kells embroideries was for

Hart a statement of Irishness – that is, a reification of Irish culture and art in the reality of famine and hardship. It was these elegant designs combined with Hart's commitment and energy that probably attracted Lady Aberdeen to her cause; they remained united in their commitment to Irish arts and industries until Chicago’s 1893 World Columbian Exposition.

Lady Aberdeen’s involvement with the revival of cottage crafts, like Alice Hart’s, had begun as early as 1883 when an ‘exhibition of industry and art’ opened in Aberdeen under the patronage of the earl and countess; her connection with Irish crafts began immediately upon her arrival in Dublin in 1886, when she assumed the position of president of the committee formed ‘for the purpose of organising a stall to represent the industries pursued by women in Ireland in the forthcoming International Exhibition, to be held in Edinburgh’. ‘Curiously enough’, wrote Aberdeen in her reminiscences, ‘this Committee had been organised by Lady Carnarvon (during Lord Carnarvon’s brief viceroyalty) at the request of Lady Aberdeen and Lady Rosebery, as Joint Convenors of the Women’s Section of the Edinburgh Exhibition’. Aberdeen enthusiastically embraced her new activities in Ireland and, in her search for objects that would grace the Irish stalls in Edinburgh, she encountered numbers of women already connected with cottage crafts. If, despite Hart’s high profile as an advocate of domestic arts, Aberdeen had not met her in London, she soon met with her in Dublin. According to the Queen, the Lady’s Newspaper, in April 1886, the ‘Lady Lieutenant’ paid an official visit to Alice Hart ‘to inspect the beautiful Kells embroideries, laces, dresses, and Irish tweeds, of the Donegal Industrial Fund’ and ordered a dress ‘decorated with Kells embroidery’ that first was exhibited in Donegal House (London) and then sent to the Liverpool International Exhibition. The Liverpool Daily Post described the costume as ‘conspicuous among articles shown’; the front of the dress was so solidly embroidered with the ‘finest coloured threads that not an inch of the original material is seen’. The coloured embroidery establishes this dress as different from Lady Aberdeen’s white and gold garden party dress but confirms Aberdeen’s connection to Alice Hart. (She ordered at least three dresses from the Fund between 1885 and 1888.)

The extensive press coverage of Hart’s organization establishes Kells embroidery as a virtual trademark of the Donegal Industrial Fund – a trademark that reified

a revival of ancient Celtic arts as interpreted by Alice Hart and worn by Lady Aberdeen. Thus, any discussion of the embroidered panels of Aberdeen’s dress, although worked by the Royal Irish School of Art Needlework, must be linked to the Donegal Industrial Fund’s distinctive and specific revival project as well as to the revival project of what would later become the arts and crafts movement. Similarly, because the Robert McEniry’s design for the costume owes its inspiration to Maclise’s picture, the dress must be considered alongside the painting. The sumptuous embroidery signalled a revival of interest in ancient Irish art specifically related to a liberal concern for economic and political conditions in Ireland. The costume itself signalled a mid-nineteenth-century interpretation of twelfth-century Irish history.

When Daniel Maclise’s picture debuted as Strongbow’s Marriage with the Princess Eva in London’s 1854 Royal Academy Exhibition, The Times considered it ‘of all others’ most likely to ‘first fix the attention of the spectator’; it occupied ‘nearly one side of the middle room’ and represented ‘the most elaborate and ambitious’ work Maclise had ‘ever presented to the public view’. The London Illustrated News likewise thought Maclise excelled ‘in invention’ and considered the picture rivalled only by Frith’s Life at the Sea-side. Lord Northwick purchased Maclise’s large painting for his ‘splendid gallery at Thirlstone-house, Cheltenham’ for the ‘large sum of £4000’. After Northwick’s death in 1859, the picture sold at auction for substantially less than he had paid for it and was exhibited off and on in London until, finally, it remained on permanent view at the Aquarium.

When the picture again came up for auction in 1879, Sir Richard Wallace (of Wallace Collection fame) purchased the picture and presented it to the National Gallery of Ireland. By 1879 the painting had acquired a much longer and more descriptive title: The Marriage of Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, surnamed Strongbow, with the Princess Eva, daughter of Dermot Macmorogh, King of Leinster. The scene, according to The Times, was ‘crowded with figures, Strongbow in the centre, placing the ring on the finger of the beautiful Eva, attended by her maids, while on the battlefield, surrounded by his Norman soldiers, with Irish chieftains laying down their arms at this feet and the dead and dying lying around.’ Maclise represented a dramatic, if fictitious, historical simultaneity and thus captured a series of events in one immense framed tableau. John Turpin called the picture ‘a form of public historical theatre analogous to the historical novel and costume drama concentrating on heroic and tragic themes’; he also suggested that it represented ‘a grandiose sweep of historical narrative, with precise antiquarian-

45 The Times, 29 Apr. 1854, p. 12. 46 Illustrated London News, 6 May 1854, p. 421. 47 The Times, 12 July 1879, p. 6. 48 Ibid. 49 Wallace was a member of the Board of Governors and Guardians in the National Gallery of Ireland at the time. He presented the picture to the Gallery because of its Irish content. I thank Sighle Bhreathnach Lynch for this information. 50 The Times, 12 July 1879, p. 6.
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ism of costume and accessories’. As Hilary O’Kelly suggested in her essay on ‘Reconstructing Irishness’, it is virtually impossible to reconstruct Irish dress from that period; thus it is unlikely Maclise’s picture reproduced ‘precise’ dress and accessories. The artist would not even have had access to Eugene O’Curry’s The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish, which was not published until the 1860s and, although he may have seen Joseph Cooper Walker’s An Historical Essay on the Dress of the Irish published in 1788, it would not have helped with the reconstruction of Aoife’s dress for the painting. Thus, Fintan Cullen’s insistence that, ‘This is not nationalistic sympathy but metropolitan interest in anthropological detail. Equally, this is not history as such but entertainment’, is probably more precise than Turpin’s sympathetic reading of the picture.

However, for late nineteenth-century viewers such as Ishbel Aberdeen and Robert McEniry, Maclise offered rare and precious insight into twelfth-century costume. For Aberdeen, the picture’s narrative of romantic unification after dispute and destruction might have complemented her Gladstonian liberal desire for peaceful home rule. Although the first volumes of Goddard Henry Orpen’s expansive study of Ireland under the Normans were not published until 1911, Orpen had been studying, researching and writing about this period of Irish history for some time, and he quite likely knew McEniry as well as Aberdeen. In the first volume of his published magnum opus, he discussed Aoife’s historical marriage to Strongbow as well as Maclise’s ‘imaginative’ interpretation of the event:

Far be it from me to question the prescriptive right of the painter to treat his subject in an imaginative way, and to introduce any setting that serves to help out his thought; but in view of the statements of recent historians it is almost necessary to remark that Maclise’s picture is not a contemporary record, and cannot be used, as the Bayeux Tapestry has been used, to fill up the gaps of contemporary writers. There is no other authority for this scene, which on the face of it is utterly improbable.

Orpen suggested that the marriage took place in the Christ Church of the Holy Trinity at Waterford some days after Strongbow took the town. He also indicated that Gerald of Wales (late twelfth century) in one ‘heavily loaded Latin

sentence’ conflated a series of events that included battles, the building of a garrison, the signing of a treaty and the marriage (among others). Thus Orpen, having criticized Maclise, alluded to how Maclise may have constructed his historical simultaneity. However the events fell out historically, Maclise did construct the image of a potential albeit fictitious harmony between England and Ireland consecrated by the love and sanctity of marriage. Ishbel Aberdeen, categorically supportive of home rule, must have found the picture romantic (marriage as healer of enmity) and promising (the descendents of Aoife and Strongbow might potentially erase differences). She may even, in flights of imagination, have fancied herself a modern-day Aoife, filled with the desire for a non-conflicted relationship that might celebrate a rich and colourful Celtic past along with a productive and bountiful future. Whatever images or stories passed through her mind as she prepared for the garden party, Aberdeen’s selection of that particular dress from that particular painting signifies the visualization of a legendary Irish woman and the representation of a turbulent Irish history. The dress that, like her bouquet, played well to an enthusiastic audience, illuminated Irish arts and industries but camouflaged political undercurrents in much the same way Maclise’s picture romanticized a love conceived upon defeat.

Ishbel Aberdeen’s departure costume, while not as overtly Celtic as the garden party dress, used colour to establish her connection with Ireland (St Patrick’s blue) and accoutrements (Limerick lace and shamrocks) to ensure the message was understood. Soon after leaving Ireland, the Aberdeens set out upon extensive travels spending much of 1887 in Australia and Canada, returning to England late that year with their political preferences still intact. Lady Aberdeen’s appearance at Queen Victoria’s first Drawing Room of the 1888 season in a dress flamboyantly embroidered with Celtic motifs must have surprised many of the elite while it confirmed her commitment to Ireland and to its cultural heritage even as she helped to construct and authenticate that heritage. If, as Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner suggest, cloth can communicate ‘the wearer’s or user’s ideological values and claims’, then Ishbel Aberdeen’s clothing consistently demonstrated her politics and her beliefs. Like her replicated twelfth-century costume, her Court dress was made from cream imperial poplin embroidered with gold; however, the decoration was much more lavish, and the costume included the compulsory Court train: the tablier, front of bodice, and the border around the train of the ‘richest ivory double poplin’ lined with satin were ‘embroidered in gold from Celtic designs copied from old Irish manuscripts’. This was apparel she favoured; she wore it again in 1893 to the first Drawing Room of the

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56 Orpen’s sources were the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century writings of Gerald of Wales and the thirteenth-century Song of Dermot. 57 Jane Schneider and Annette B. Weiner (eds), Cloth and human experience (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1989), p. 1. 58 Queen, 3 Mar. 1888, p. 258 and Lady’s Pictorial, 3 Mar. 1888, p. 221. The Irish School of Art Needlework did the embroidery; Mary Sims of Dawson Street made the dress.
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season in Dublin Castle\(^{59}\) when she visited Ireland to gather objects and support for her proposed Irish Village at the Chicago World’s Fair. *Queen* featured a photograph of Lady Aberdeen wearing the dress on the cover of one of its 1896 issues;\(^{60}\) and panels from the dress were worked into the costume she wore at Canada’s Victorian Era Ball in 1897.\(^{61}\) She was also photographed wearing her garden party dress and, in keeping with her support for Irish industry, she posed as spinner for a fiction that proposed Aberdeen as Celtic Ireland and keeper of domestic tradition.\(^{62}\) The image of Lady Aberdeen elegantly posed with her hand on the spinning wheel, her gaze directed at the yarn, personified her promotion of Ireland at the Chicago World’s Fair, where she established an Irish village in competition with her former colleague, Alice Hart. The two proponents of Irish art fell out over the Chicago exhibition and instead of the one village Lady Aberdeen desired, two faux villages offered Ireland to America. Alice Hart’s village featured her ‘famous Kells embroideries’ along with a ‘half-size reproduction of the ruins of Donegal Castle’, imitations of Celtic jewellery and copies of illuminated manuscripts.\(^{63}\) Ishbel Aberdeen replicated Blarney Castle (to two thirds its size) and constructed a series of cottages each based upon an original in Ireland including one based upon her own cottage near Queenstown; she would live in the replicated cottage for weeks at a time.\(^{64}\) Thus the frequently reproduced photograph of the aristocrat with a spinning wheel complemented her Chicago activities while it represented the Celtic. The image also reified Ishbel Aberdeen as founder of the Irish Home Industries Association. This was the persona she cultivated and maintained even after she moved to Canada in 1893 and then revitalized when she returned to Ireland in 1903.

Ishbel Aberdeen’s use of her own body as a device to support Irish art and industry followed a pattern of aristocratic patronage that, by 1885, was celebrated even in literature: Rosa Mulholland, a character in *Marcella Grace*, insisted upon cloth woven in Dublin for her ‘castle train’ even though her modiste wanted Lyon velvet.\(^{65}\) In 1886 Queen Victoria wore Irish lace to her Drawing Room as an attempt to help revive the industry.\(^{66}\) Lady Londonderry frequently wore dresses trimmed with lace or incorporating embroidery made by Irish women: she wore a costume of Irish poplin when she arrived in Dublin as vicereine,\(^{67}\) and

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59 *Gentlewoman* described the dress and published a small drawing of it (18 Feb. 1893, p. 126).
60 *Queen*, 21 Nov. 1896, p. 94, cover photograph by Lafayette. 61 Lord Aberdeen has been appointed governor-general of Canada in 1893. For a discussion of the Ball and Lady Aberdeen’s role in it, see Cynthia Cooper, *Magnificent entertainments: fancy dress balls of Canada’s governors general, 1876–1898* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1997). A photograph of Lady Aberdeen in her Ball costume is reproduced on page 102. 62 This photograph is frequently reproduced. For example, see Bowe and Cumming, p. 88, or Doris French, *Ishbel and the empire: a biography of Lady Aberdeen* (Toronto & Oxford: Dundurn, 1988), p. 78.
63 Harris, p. 90. 64 Ibid., p. 96. 65 As quoted in Murphy, *Abject loyalty*, p. xx. 66 Alice Hart, ‘The women’s industries of Ireland’, *Queen*, 18 Dec. 1886, p. 742. 67 The marquess of
a dress trimmed with Irish lace to her first Drawing Room; an 1888 costume was embroidered by the Royal Irish School of Art Needlework; an 1897 Court dress was ‘embroidered with lilies and love knots in tinted silks by the students at Viscountess Duncannon’s Garry Hill School of Needlework’. Lady Cadogan, when she was vicereine, also patronized local arts. She wore a spectacular pale green satin dress decorated with a ‘rich trail of green velvet shamrocks down each side of the skirt, fastening in a drapery of fine Limerick lace’ to a Flower Ball at Dublin Castle (embroidered at the Royal Irish School of Art Needlework); and a black and white dress ‘studded with pearls and diamonds’ worked at Lady Duncannon’s Garry Hill School to a London fancy ball hosted by the duchess of Devonshire. Even Mary, princess of York, wore a dress of Irish poplin with a deep yolk ‘of exquisite gold thread and sequin transparent embroidery’ made by Lady Duncannon’s cottage workers, and another dress embroidered at the Royal Irish School of Art Needlework and trimmed with Carrickmacross lace when she visited Ireland in 1897.

None, however, embodied Irishness and epitomized the Celtic revival with such extravagance and splendour as Ishbel Aberdeen. She sought to encourage Irish art and manufacture and to urge consumers to buy Irish rather than seek goods from elsewhere – she insisted that lace on dresses should be Irish, not French nor Italian, and that embroidery should be done by Irish women on Irish cloth. (Alice Hart introduced a ‘flax on flax’ type of embroidery that incorporated Irish thread as well as Irish fabric.) She also promoted Irish designers and dressmakers – Aberdeen time and again commissioned Mary Sims or Harriet Manning, both Dublin dressmakers. Her own image moved beyond this to overtly promote the Celtic – a revival of ancient Irish art as interpreted in the nineteenth century. Her patronage is a blatant form of benevolent colonialism but one that shifts and, in many ways, disrupts such a definitive label. Her boundaries are mercantile rather than military, directed toward self-help rather than external control: this does not erase a problem but it does complicate an issue.

Ishbel Aberdeen sold Celtic-ness and, particularly in America. This had consequences beyond her liberal desire for home rule; she sought Irish identity in ancient symbols that she then performed on her own aristocratic body and this, too, surpassed her own philanthropic benevolence. She personified and reproduced Irish revival as display and pleasure, as spectacle and desire, and thus as sought after and replicated. Her attentions and motives remain suspect in an atmosphere of colonialism, but her patronage leaves a legacy of complexity not

Londonderry followed the earl of Aberdeen as lord lieutenant of Ireland. See, for example, Illustrated London News (28 Aug. 1886, p. 229) for a descriptive account of the new appointment. 68 Lady’s Pictorial, 12 Feb. 1887, p. 162. 69 Lady’s Pictorial, 5 May 1888, p. 487. 70 Queen, 15 May 1897, p. 962. 71 Ladies Field, 26 Mar. 1898, p. 55 and Irish Society, 19 Mar. 1898, p. 354. 72 Queen, 10 July 1897, p. 76. 73 Gentlewoman, 21 Aug. 1897, p. 7. 74 Queen, 18 Sept. 1897, p. 542.
easily disentangled from late nineteenth-century Irish history. Neil Harris, in his discussion of Aberdeen at the Chicago World’s Fair, suggested that she ‘married theatre to shopping’; if this is true, she also wed Celtic Revival to English court and to American fantasy in an enduring albeit an uneasy exchange.\textsuperscript{75}

NOTES

I should like to thank Cynthia Cooper, Sighle Bhreatnach Lynch and Siobhán O’Rafferty for their suggestions, and Betsey Taylor FitzSimon for her helpful editorial comments. My thanks also go to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada whose support funded the research for this essay.

\textsuperscript{75} Harris, p. 100.