

-- Excerpt, "Dress in Ireland," Mairead DUNLEVY (1989)

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SNIPPET: "The houpellande, a colourful, heavy woollen overgarment, worn long by the wealthy and of various short lengths by the less so, evolved about 1375. Superbly tailored and made weatherproof through fulling, it was worn by men, women, and children and was considered such a valuable item that it was included in wills. Fitted to the shoulders it fell in deep tubular folds which were held in place by a belt. Irish women continued to use versions of this houpellande into the 17th century. All were over a kirtle or chemise. A popular version had a wide V-neck with long front opening ending in a U-shape over the stomach.

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The Irish sleeve evolved about this time too. Worn by both sexes it was a band of woollen fabric which stretched from the shoulder along the arm and was secured by buttoning or tying at the cuff. This allowed the display of the voluminous linen sleeves of the kirtle and of the Irish shirt.

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Throughout the medieval period Ireland produced and exported 'rugg mantles' or fringed woollen mantles with a thick tufted nap which resembled the wool of sheepskin. Although taxed and disparaged by edicts from 1462 onwards, the rugg mantle was exported regularly to Britain and Europe from the 15th to the mid-17th centuries as it satisfied a market demand for a cheap version of the then fashionable fur-lined woollen cloak. It was criticized regularly in Ireland as unhygienic, being worn by day and night, yet being such a warm outfit it remained in use until at least the late 17th century. It was replaced by another fashion derivative, the home-spun frieze semi-circular cloak.

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Another distinctive male dress item in late medieval Ireland was the Irish jacket. Of gilded and embroidered leather or of wool, it had a thickly pleated skirt, stand collar, and Irish sleeves. Trews in plain or checked wool were worn as were shoes and hats or caps. The Irish shirt is probably derived from the tunic of the early historic period. In the style of that early time, the long, full skirt was hitched up to the length required by the owner. Irish shirts were said to take 35 yards of linen, which may account for their distinctively full sleeves. By the 16th century they were frequently dyed saffron.

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The aim of the government from the mid-14th to the 17th century was to make Irish people abandon their own dress styles -- styles which retained ancestral comparisons with those worn throughout Europe -- and to follow the styles favoured by the middle and upper classes of England. Under HENRY VIII there was legislation against the Irish mantle, the use of saffron dye, and the wearing of overly long and full garments. Government also prohibited gowns embroidered or garnished with silk, decorated with couched embroidery, or with applied jewels 'after the Irish fashion.' The use of strong colours at the time and the heavy demand for paste and other jewellery indicates that gaudy medieval fashions survived in Ireland.

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Initially it was the chieftains and other ambitious for land and wealth who began to adapt English styles, although even then some needed the encouragement of gifts of clothing or promises of preferential treatment to induce them to conform. By the 17th century London fashions were adopted more readily. For men this meant a change to trunk hose (later pantaloons), doublet, long coat, and semicircular cloak. Women's gowns of English styles were of stiff shapes in expensive fabrics but usually in quiet colours. At the same time some obstinately continued to relate to the styles worn by the unpretentious and comfortably off in Europe. An example of this is the red petticoat fashion. Worn with a small brown jacket and a neckerchief crossed on the front, this was a standard style worn by women of all ranks of society throughout Europe -- with the exception of Britain -- in the 16th and 17th centuries. It survives in use in Ireland to the 20th century."

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Dress in Ireland - Late 17th century to 20th century - Irish coat, Kinsale cloak, Irish shawl.  
[TRANSCRIPTIONS-EIRE]

Per Mairead DUNLEVY, "Dress in Ireland" (1989,Book) --

"The coat as an outer garment is generally seen as having evolved in the late 17th century as the long coat for men in the French and English courts. The real origins of the 'Irish coat,' however, more probably lay in the medieval gowns that artists such as Brueghel show as having been used generally by the less well off in Europe in the late 16th century. The fabric was measured through wrapping around the wearer's body and then cut to size. The arms were measured in a similar manner and edges joined with cloth buttons rather than a seam. In line with other medieval woollen garments the coat was of unlined frieze, about knee-length, unhemmed, and with unisex stand collars. Irish coats of this distinctive kind were still in use in the late 18th century.

By the late 17th century, the trend throughout Europe was for people not to be restricted in their dress styles by their status in society. The blurring of social distinctions caused consternation in both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish circles, and in 1682 the Irish Council of Trade issued ordinances against women who dressed above their station. By the mid-18th century this barrier had been broken and most people dressed as they could afford -- helped by second-hand clothes dealers, locally woven fabrics, and itinerant tailors.

The introduction to Ireland in the 17th century of lace-making, machine-knit stockings, silk, and poplin manufacture helped those interested in a luxury image. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries the development of the cotton manufacture allowed even the less wealthy to dress in current fashions.

Some fashions continued to be worn for a long time in rural Ireland. The survival of the tailed coats, knee-length trews, and felt hats of the 18th-century gentleman, for example, was used to caricature Irish men in the mid-19th century. On the other hand long trousers were worn in rural Ireland not long after they were introduced to the fashion world in 1807. Other current fashions were adopted so quickly and fully that they became identified with Ireland. The 'Irish/Kinsale' cloak which evolved from the semi-fitted cloaks fashionable from 1700 to 1730 is a case in point. Similarly the Irish shawl evolved from the Kashmir and Paisley shawls fashionable in the early 19th century. It changed in style in Ireland through the decades until in the 20th century it was the black shawl worn principally by widows.

The greatest breakdown in traditional attitudes in clothing was in the second half of the 19th century, when women in rural as well as urban Ireland began to dress to represent through their clothing the family's position in society. Women thus usurped the role held for centuries by the male head of the family. This happened at a time when fashionable male clothing was conservative, and after the introduction of the sewing machine had enabled women to follow fashions with ease."