

AMAZING LACE

A History of the Limerick Lace Industry



By Dr Matthew Potter | Edited by Jacqui Hayes

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Inside cover: a close up of Limerick tambour lace (Courtesy of Veronica Rowe)

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Introduction

by Jacqui Hayes,
Limerick City and
County Archivist

Lace was one of Limerick's most important industries and the city gave its name to a particular style of lace. This book is a response to the public interest in lace as many visitors to Limerick Museum come specifically to see the lace collection on display. As Limerick celebrates its designation as Ireland's National City of Culture 2014 it is timely to research this important aspect of Limerick's material culture.

Limerick lace earned a reputation for quality from its earliest days and this sustained the industry for over 150 years. Limerick's relationship with lace is unusual as it was mainly a commercial enterprise whereas in the rest of the country it was usually established on a charitable basis. The cover of this book illustrates the central role that women played in the industry as the makers, wearers, designers and purchasers of lace.

I would like to thank our lace project team who are working with Limerick Museum and Archives to showcase and celebrate Limerick lace; Gabriela Avram, lecturer in the MEScH project in the University of Limerick; Suzanna Melinn, masters student in Interactive Media in UL, who designed an interactive lace collar as part of her final year project; Frances Nevin who undertook a lace survey in 2013 and assisted with the research for this book; Eileen McCaffrey who took a beginner's class in Limerick lace three years ago and became fascinated by lace and its history; Giordana Giache, a masters student with LSAD studying Limerick lace and working to reconnect the craft to the city; Brian Hodkinson, Curator of Limerick Museum; Dr. Matthew Potter, Historian with Limerick Archives and Sharon Slater, who sourced all the images for the book.

Thanks to Fiona Burke, Ed Myers, John Crowley and Joan Carroll of the Umbrella Project, who have all worked as a great research team to pull this book together.

Lace is so visual that a book on the history of lace without beautiful images would be a disappointment. We are indebted to all those who supplied these essential elements to a lace book. Thanks to the institutions who now adopt open access policies and have given us permission to use their high quality images; Limerick Museum, the Royal Dublin Society, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, NARA, the National Archive and Records Association of the United States of America, the Royal Collection Trust, London, Sean Curtin senior and all those who sent their personal images of family events.

Many thanks to the custodians of lace collections who shared images of their lace with us; Nora Finnegan of Kenmare lace, Veronica Rowe who holds the archive of the Limerick School of Lace, Grania McEligott who holds the Thomond Lace Industry collection, Veronica Stewart of the Traditional Lace Makers of Ireland, the Good Shepherd Convent in Limerick and Geraldine O'Reilly of the Carrickmacross Lace Gallery.

We were delighted to meet Gabrielle North when she visited our Heritage Week lace event in August 2014 and we would like to thank her for kindly agreeing to share her memories of making lace in the Good Shepherd Convent. Many thanks also to our lace teacher on the day, Marion O'Callaghan.

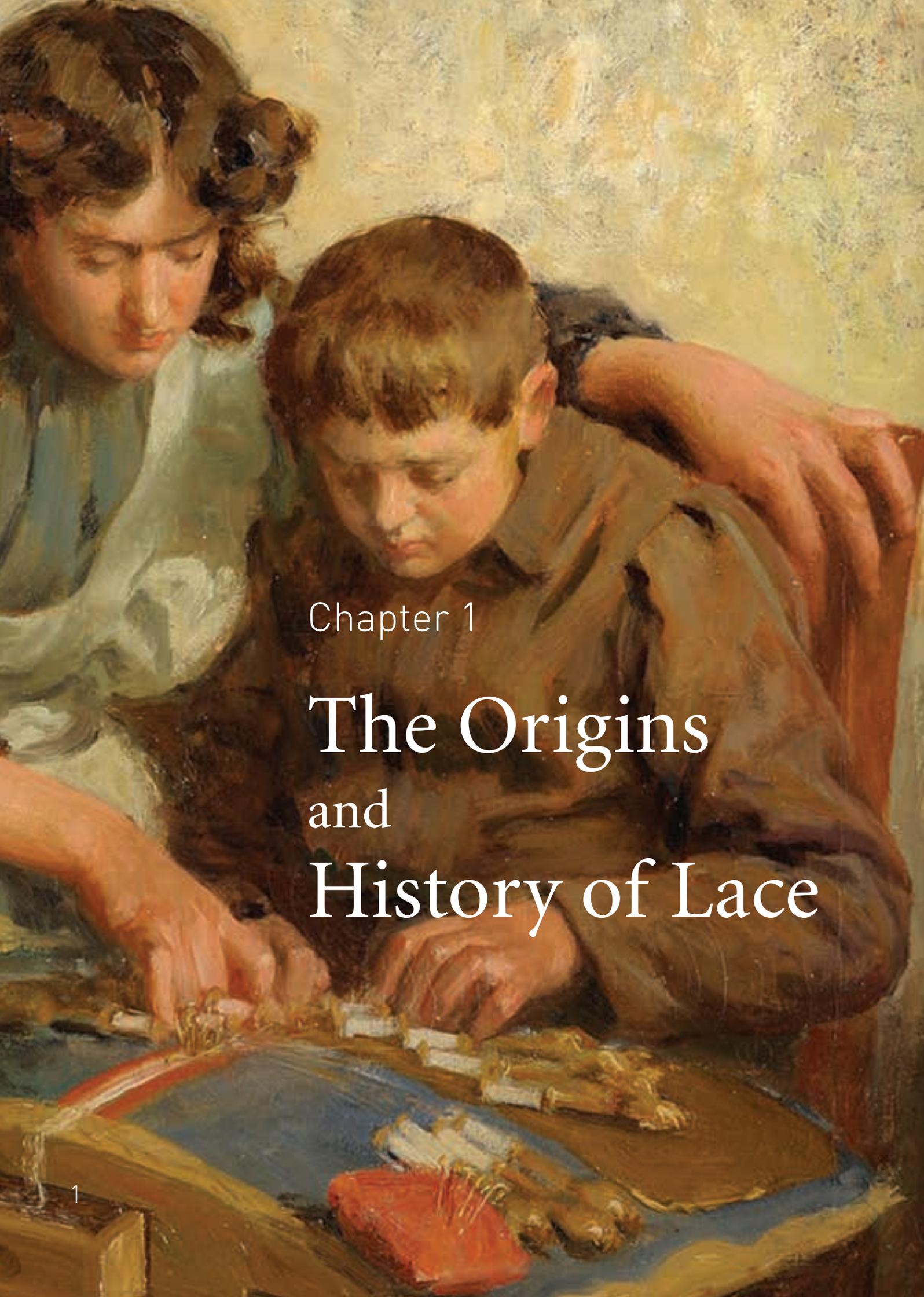
Sincere thanks to the wonderful Dr. Maura Cronin of Mary Immaculate College, who read the entire text for us and to our proof reading team; John Brosnan, Lizanne Jackman, Esther Lane and Michelle O'Donnell.

Over the past twelve months, Limerick Museum and Archives, in partnership with our lace project team has undertaken a fascinating journey to discover the history and legacy of Limerick lace. It is a history which informs our present and one which Limerick Museum and Archives is committed to celebrating.





Skills were passed down through generations. 'Die Spitzenklöppler' by Emiel Jacques (1874-1937)



Chapter 1

The Origins and History of Lace



Of many arts, one surpasses all.
For the maiden seated at her work
flashes the smooth balls and
thousand threads into the circle...
and from this, her amusement,
makes as much profit as a man
earns by the sweat of his brow, and
no maiden ever complains, at even,
of the length of the day.

The issue is a fine web, which feeds
the pride of the whole globe; which
surrounds with its fine border cloaks
and tuckers, and shows grandly
round the throats and hands of
Kings.¹

Jacob Van Eyck, 1651.

The Origins and History of Lace



The story of Limerick lace began in 1829 when Charles Walker, an English businessman selected a premises in Mount Kennett, Limerick city as the location for a lace factory. The lace made in Walker's enterprise used recently invented machine made net, as a foundation fabric for the delicate hand embroidery that became known and esteemed as 'Limerick lace'.²

This work examines the history of Limerick lace against the backdrop of both Europe's long love affair with lace and the relatively late development of the lace making industry in Ireland. It also describes how the fortunes of the Limerick lace industry depended greatly on the vagaries of fashion and the ebb and flow of the wider economy and how 'hardly any other industry has had so many ups and downs during the four centuries of its existence [or] suffered more under the caprices of fashion.'³ The book deals with the low pay and poor working conditions that characterised the industry while also demonstrating that it provided a living for thousands of women and their families.





A Brief History of Lace

Lace may be defined as a delicate fabric made of yarn or thread, in an open weblike pattern.⁴ Lace making is a branch of needlework, which in turn is part of the textile arts. Textile manufacture is classified as one of the decorative arts or art industries, the making of functional objects, in contrast to the fine arts, which have no practical function. Lace making is closely related to weaving and knitting on the one hand and to embroidery and crochet on the other. As an art industry, lace making has always been dependent on good design, and the necessity to keep abreast of prevailing fashions and taste. It has also had a long association with Catholic convents since its fifteenth century origins. The history of lace may be divided into two broad periods, the manufacture of hand made and machine made lace, with the division occurring in the mid nineteenth century.⁵

Lace making originated in embroidery worked on linen. At first portions of the linen were cut away, leaving the embroidery. Threads were also drawn from the linen and needlework was inserted in the spaces left. In order to avoid the time and trouble of withdrawing the threads, an open network was made called 'lakis' on which a variety of stitches were worked. These laces were first worn at the opening of the sixteenth century in Italy and Flanders. In the seventeenth century, elite men and high-ranking churchmen enthusiastically adopted the fashion for wearing lace. Heavy lace made for men was gradually replaced by lace of a finer texture for women.⁶



True Lace

Limerick lace is considered a 'mixed' lace as it is made by hand on machine made net. By contrast, 'true' lace is entirely made by hand, using two main methods, either needlepoint or bobbin. Needlepoint lace, such as Youghal and Kenmare, is akin to sewing and is made with a needle and thread. The fine background on which to apply the stitches is made completely by needle. Needlepoint can be sub-divided into flat and raised, both made in the same fashion but with the addition of extra layers of thread to create a raised or three-dimensional effect.⁷ Bobbin, pillow or bone lace, which emerged later than needlepoint, is like weaving and is made by twisting threads around bobbins (small notched pins) secured in a pillow. It is also known as bone lace, as the bobbins were usually made of bone, wood or ivory.



A skilled bobbin lace maker (From *Lace Its Origin and History* by Samuel L. Goldenberg, New York 1904)

Lace was worn by all the family. "The Holme Family", 1628 by Paul Holme (Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

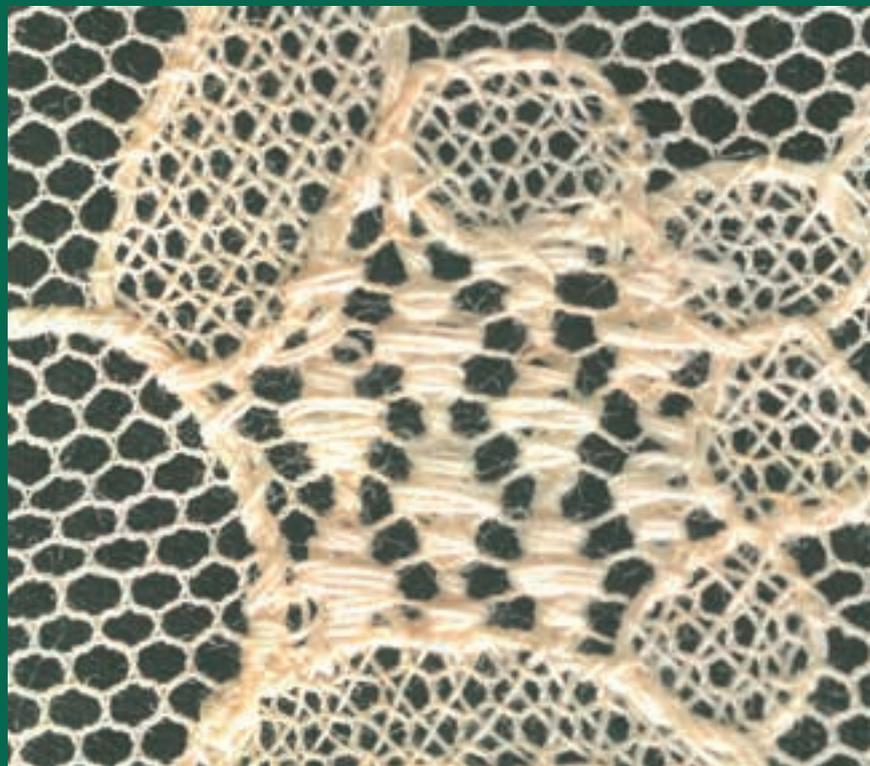
The Geography of European Lace

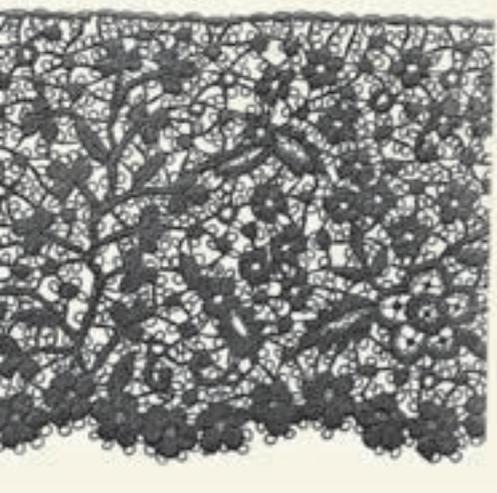
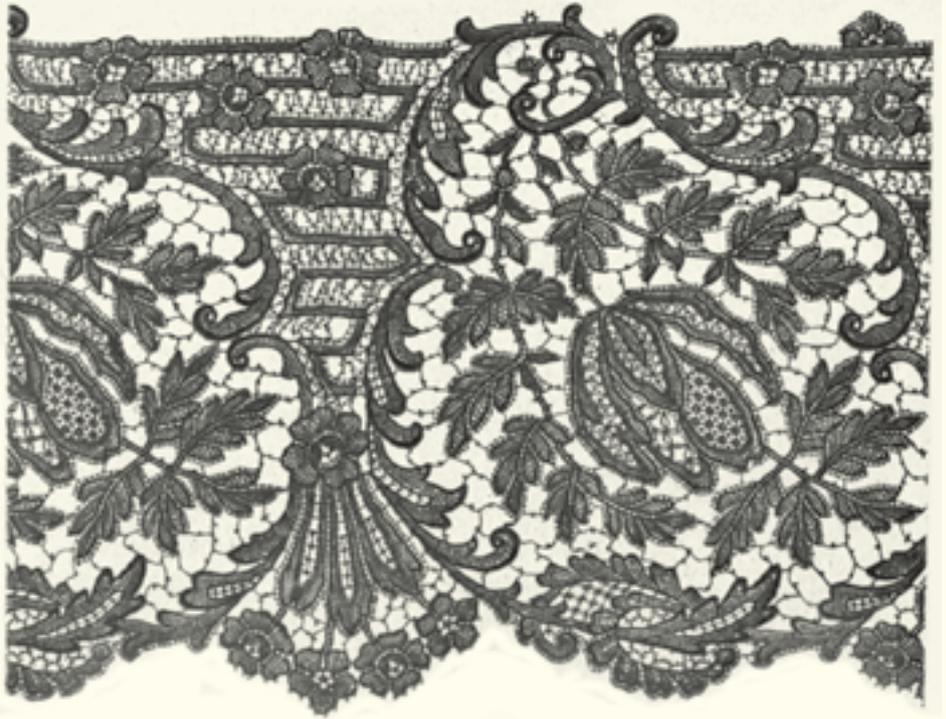
Although precursors of lace and embroidery can be found in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, true lace first appeared in the late fifteenth century in Italy and Flanders (in what is now Belgium), the most economically and socially advanced areas of Europe. Over the next three centuries, lace making spread all over Europe.

In the beginning the number of designs was necessarily limited, but as the industry developed and spread, and as the workers became more expert and artistic, there was an uncontrollable impulse to break away from conventional designs and to evolve new patterns. Then, too, there was something of the spirit of pride behind this movement- a sort of local patriotism if it may so be termed. The Belgian, the Spaniard and the Frenchman were not content slavishly to imitate Italian design, and anxious to win a name for themselves, set about to produce new effects that would immediately identify them with the place of their origin.⁸

The leading centres of the fine and decorative arts in the Western world mirrored the world centres of lace making. In the sixteenth century, Italy and Flanders were the world centres. Italian lace was made in several locations, including Rome, Florence and Milan but Venice was the most important centre, and Venetian lace is sometimes regarded as the finest of all laces. The other rival lace making industry was in Flanders, concentrated in Brussels, Bruges, Ghent and Mechlin.⁹

Seventeenth century France successfully challenged the dominance of Italy and Flanders. Louis XIV's chief minister Jean Baptiste Colbert founded the French lace making industry in the 1660s as part of his deliberate policy to make France the centre for all luxury industries. In an early example of industrial espionage, lace makers were brought from Venice to France, but having shared their secrets with the French, were unable to return home for several years, fearing dire punishment. Alençon, Chantilly, Valenciennes and Lille were among the main centres of the French lace industry.¹⁰ In the early eighteenth century, the Italian industry went into a major decline, leaving France and Flanders as the main centres of hand made lace. In both of these, the government promoted and protected the industry. Nineteenth century Belgium required 'the female scholars in the





Clockwise from top left:

- Real Bruges (From *Lace Its Origin and History* by Samuel L. Goldenberg, New York 1904)
- Imitation Duchesse (From *Lace Its Origin and History* by Samuel L. Goldenberg, New York 1904)
- Honiton designed by Mrs Charles Harrison 1910 (Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London)
- Real Honiton (From *Lace Its Origin and History* by Samuel L. Goldenberg, New York 1904)
- Real Valenciennes (From *Lace Its Origin and History* by Samuel L. Goldenberg, New York 1904)
- Real Carrickmacross (From *Lace Its Origin and History* by Samuel L. Goldenberg, New York 1904)
- Real Mechlin (From *Lace Its Origin and History* by Samuel L. Goldenberg, New York 1904)
- Imitation Point de Venise (From *Lace Its Origin and History* by Samuel L. Goldenberg, New York 1904)



public schools to be trained in the art of making lace, and also in some rudimentary knowledge of design'.¹¹ All Irish and British laces have been influenced by France and Flanders.

The English hand made lace industry originated in the sixteenth century, and was centred on Devonshire, where Honiton lace was made and the East Midlands (Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire). Queen Victoria was a staunch supporter of Honiton lace, which she wore on her wedding day. However, English hand made lace could never compete with the superior designs and products of France and Flanders.¹² Nottingham only became the world capital of machine made lace in the nineteenth century.

As lace originated and developed in Europe, its not surprising that the continent remained the powerhouse of the industry. In 1851, there were 535,000 employed in the European hand made lace industry. Of these, 240,000 were in France, 95,000 in Belgium, 45,000 in England (including her colony Malta), 30,000 in Spain, a total of 110,000 between Denmark, Austria and Germany, and a total of 5,000 in Switzerland, Italy and Portugal (including her colony Madeira).¹³

Lace Makers

Like other forms of needlework, lace making operated at two levels. On the one hand, it was a leisure occupation of the wealthy and was considered part of a lady's accomplishments. However, the time required to make the smallest piece meant that lace making gradually became the preserve of the poorer classes as 'the desire to wear the beautiful fabric in process of time outstripped the desire to make it.... The leisurely amusement of the wealthy became an industrial employment of the poor.'¹⁴ The wearers of lace were usually drawn from among the extremely wealthy classes, and later from among the rising middle classes. For the most part, there was usually a stark contrast between the consumers of lace and its makers. Truly has it been said that lace has been 'made by the poorest women to adorn the rich.'¹⁵ In 1893, a commentator wrote

that the materials are so fine and delicate, the work so tedious, the danger of unevenness so constant that the labour would be appalling to one not born to patient and unremunerative toil. It can only be carried on in cottages where women have no other resource, and there is plenty of time for slow labour... It is the work of the peasant, and as such in the present order, it deserves to be fostered. To know how to do it is to be able to pay the rent and provide food for the home.¹⁶

Hand made lace has always been considered a luxury product, due to its delicacy, rarity and fine design. From the sixteenth century onwards, lace was greatly sought by the upper classes in Europe to accessorise clothing. Lace combined beauty with utility as it was washable, in contrast to the heavy and elaborate clothes worn by the European elite which were difficult to launder. As lace collars or cuffs could be reused, lace became a form of portable wealth, like jewellery, silverware and porcelain and was often passed down through several generations as a family heirloom. For centuries, 'rare lace of beautiful pattern has been highly prized, some of the earliest specimens, in the possession of world-famous libraries and museums, being of relatively fabulous wealth.'¹⁷ Queen Victoria owned £76,000 worth of lace at the time of her death, while Pope Leo XIII had a collection worth £200,000.¹⁸ However, more modest amounts of lace were owned by people from all classes of society and even today many Limerick people treasure a christening robe or wedding veil which has been in their family for several years.¹⁹

Lace has been very vulnerable to changes of fashion and in consequence it has been subject to violently contrasting cycles of boom and depression. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were a high point in lace fashion during which it was widely worn by both sexes. Indeed, of the two, men's lace was the more elaborate for long periods, such as the elegant and decadent 1630s, when Charles I and the so-called Cavaliers, created an unforgettable image of male peacockry and splendour. By contrast, one of the turning points in fashion history occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when men discarded bright colours and stopped wearing lace, making it the sole preserve of women.²⁰

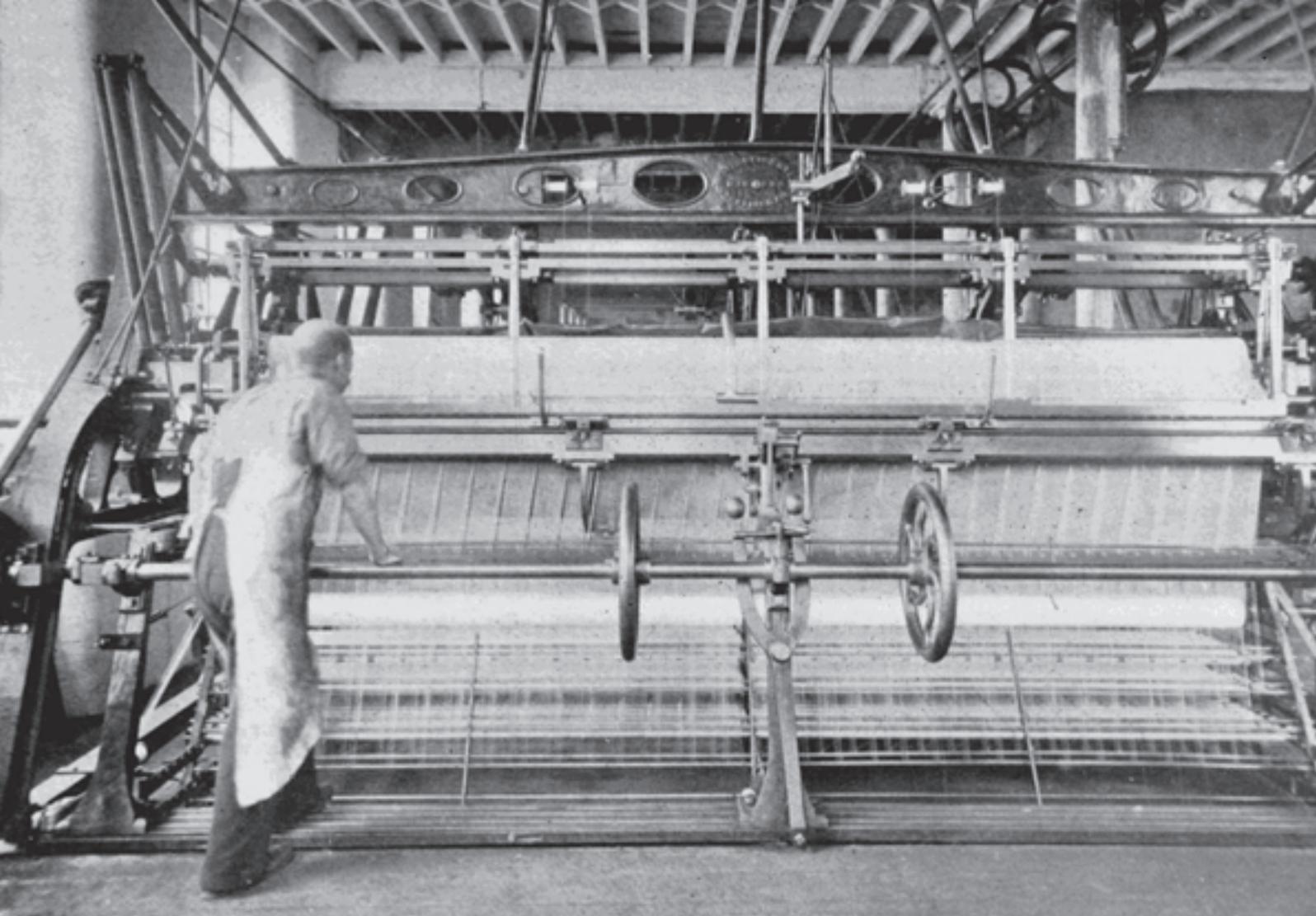


Clockwise from top left:

Working by natural light. 'Lace maker' by Louis-Alexandre Dubourg (1821-1891)

A group of French lace makers (From *A Book of the Cevennes* by Sabine Baring-Gould, Devon, 1907)

'Venetian Lacemakers', 1887, by Robert Frederick Blum (Cincinnati Art Museum)



From Hand to Machine

Lace making was mechanised in two stages. In the first, machines were invented to manufacture the net used as the base for making lace, but the pattern imposed on the net was still hand made. In the second stage machines appeared which made lace in its entirety. The Limerick lace industry was developed in the first stage and underwent a major decline in the second, resulting in its mode of production having to change from factory to workshop and homework.

Although the first netmaking machine appeared in 1769, the real father of machine made lace was Nottingham based inventor John Heathcoat who in 1808 patented a machine capable of producing an exact imitation of lace net. For the next thirty years, lace making was a hybrid of mechanisation and handcraft. Mechanisation was completed in 1839 when James Wright of Nottingham produced a machine which duplicated every pattern of hand made lace.²¹ Mechanisation transformed lace from a luxury item for the few to a mass-produced product available to the many. Entire dresses made of lace could now be produced for the first time and longer veils produced at a fraction of their previous cost. In 1846, lace became an affordable furnishing item for the first time with the invention of the lace curtain making machine.²² From the 1840s, machine made lace gradually displaced the hand made product and in consequence Nottingham rose to be the lace capital of the world. The enormous influence of the industry in Nottingham is vividly recalled by the Lace Market in the city centre, a large protected streetscape of Victorian buildings covering an area of a quarter square mile. In 1910, some 25,000 people, one third of the city's work force, were involved in lace manufacturing. The vast Nottingham industry produced huge quantities of every type of lace product, from dresses, veils and handkerchiefs to curtains and furniture trimmings.²³

Early Irish Lace

Although the wearing of lace was common in Irish upper class circles from the sixteenth century, evidence for its manufacture in Ireland, as distinct from the production of embroidery, only dates from the eighteenth century.²⁴ Lace making in Ireland may be divided into three broad periods. The first extended from the 1730s to the 1780s when lace was entirely hand made and very few examples survive. The second period of manufacture, from 1820 to 1914 became the Golden Age when lace was an item of high fashion in British and Irish élite circles. In this period all the classic Irish laces including Carrickmacross, Limerick, Youghal and Kenmare were developed and lace making became a major industry. The final period, from 1914 to the present has been characterised by a long and slow decline, which has accelerated considerably since the Second World War.²⁵

All Irish lace traces its origins to Europe, particularly to France and Flanders. In the first period of the Irish lace industry, bobbin lace seems to have predominated. In 1731, the Dublin Society (which was given the appellation Royal in 1820) was established by a number of enlightened landlords and professionals to encourage the development of agriculture and industry in Ireland. Among the industries it promoted was the manufacture of lace, and so it is from the Society's minutes that the earliest references to lace making in Ireland can be found. From them, we learn that in 1739, there were three schools (actually workshops) in Dublin where lace was made.²⁶

The Dublin Society was pivotal to lace making in Ireland. The Society organised lectures for lace workers and awarded grants, funded by the Irish Parliament or by private benefactors, for good specimens of lacework. From 1739 to 1756, the best known of these grants were funded by Dr Samuel Madden (1686-1765) an author and improving landlord with estates in County Fermanagh. His work was continued by Lady Arabella Denny (1701-92), daughter of the Earl of Kerry, the first of many philanthropic ladies to support and encourage Irish industries. She also created the link between Magdalen asylums and the Irish lace industry. In 1767, Lady Arabella founded Ireland's first Magdalen asylum in Dublin and from 1758 reorganised the pre-existing Dublin Foundling Hospital.²⁷ Anxious for the inmates to learn useful trades, she was responsible for introducing lace making into both establishments. In 1767, the Dublin Society began paying to the Foundling Hospital grants administered by Lady Arabella, which continued for a decade. From the 1780s the fledgling Irish lace industry seems to have effectively petered out for some fifty years.²⁸

Golden Age of Irish Lace (1820-1914)

The Golden Age of Irish lace began as a result of the Industrial Revolution, which transformed the lace industry from hand made to machine made and promoted England, specifically Nottingham, to the position of lace centre of the world.

The two earliest forms of indigenous Irish lace that still survive, Carrickmacross (1820-21) and Limerick (1828-29), both used machine made net, which leads some authorities to deny that they are 'true' laces. The short-lived Kells lace industry (1825-51) operated on the same principle.²⁹ Many older accounts of Irish lace maintain that, with these exceptions, all other lace making enterprises in the country were founded during the Famine.³⁰ This is incorrect, as lace making on a significant scale also occurred in pre-Famine Ireland at Headford, County Galway, Tallow, County Waterford and Dublin city. However, a great many Irish laces did originate in the 1840s, as famine relief measures.

During the Golden Age, lace was made all over Ireland, from Newry, County Down to Cappoquin, County Waterford. Apart from Limerick, which will be dealt with in succeeding chapters, and Kells, which did not survive the 1850s, Irish laces may be classified into five categories: Carrickmacross, needlepoint, crochet, tatting, and the 'forgotten laces' which were only rediscovered when the present work was being researched.³¹

Carrickmacross

Carrickmacross lace was set up in the early 1820s by Mrs Margaret Grey Porter, wife of the rector of Donaghmoyn, a village near Carrickmacross in County Monaghan.³² While on honeymoon in Italy, accompanied by her maid Anne Steadman, she took an active interest in lace manufacture there. On their return to Ireland, Mrs Grey Porter and Anne Steadman, taught the skills to local women in need of employment. Carrickmacross lace uses machine made net as a base fabric and is a form of appliqué.³³ Carrickmacross is made by applying fine fabric or muslin to a net base, the design being outlined with a thick thread and the surplus fabric cut away to form the pattern on the net base.³⁴ After Mrs Grey Porter's death, the industry survived through the intervention of a Miss Read who opened a small lace class using Mrs Grey Porter's designs. The industry was saved from extinction when lace making was introduced to the two largest landed estates in County Monaghan, those of the Shirley family and the Marquess of Bath. In turn, lace making ceased on these estates and in the 1890s underwent a third revival at the hands of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Louis. Carrickmacross lace became a style of lace produced in other locations, including Cobh, Tuam and Bundoran. The wedding dresses worn by Princess Diana in 1981 and Kate Middleton in 2011 used the Carrickmacross lace technique.³⁵





Irish Needlepoint

The Great Famine inspired the foundation of several lace making enterprises by both lay and religious philanthropists. Unlike Carrickmacross and Limerick lace, Irish needlepoint was a hand made 'true lace'.³⁶ It is made entirely by needle and was inspired by Italian needlepoint. Irish needlepoint originated in three separate centres from which it spread all over the country.³⁷

Youghal lace. Mother Mary Ann Smith of the Presentation Convent, Youghal, established the lace making enterprise there when she unravelled a piece of Venetian lace in order to learn the technique. She opened a lace school in 1852 and subsequently, new designs and stitches were invented. In 1911, Queen Mary, wife of King George V, wore a train of Youghal lace on her visit to India.³⁸

Kenmare lace. Kenmare lace was introduced by the Poor Clare nuns in 1864 to relieve poverty in the area. A school of design was established linked to the National Art Training School, South Kensington, London and the Crawford School of Art in Cork.³⁹ This ensured a prize winning quality of design. In 1886, English lace expert Alan Cole described the designs for a large bedspread and set of pillow covers made of Kenmare needlepoint lace as the largest and most important ever made for Irish lace up to that time.⁴⁰

Inismacsaint lace. In 1849, needlepoint was introduced to Tynan, County Armagh, by Mrs Jane Maclean, wife of the local rector, and following its demise there in the late 1860s, was introduced to Inismacsaint, County Fermanagh by her daughters. In succeeding decades, it became one of the largest lace industries in Ireland.⁴¹

Crochet

Crochet (derived from the French word for hook) occupies an intermediate position between lace and knitting. It differs from knitting in that it is made with a single crochet hook rather than two or more knitting needles and from lace in that it is generally much heavier. Although it is known that crochet was made in Ireland before the Famine, it only became widespread in the 1840s after originating in two centres. The first was the Ursuline Convent, Blackrock, Cork city, where its manufacture started in 1845. From there, it was spread throughout Munster through the efforts of the convent network. The second centre was Clones in County Monaghan. In 1847, Mrs W C Roberts of Dunlavin, County Kildare began teaching crochet as a means of famine relief. Soon after, it was introduced to Clones by Mrs Cassandra Hand, wife of the local rector. In succeeding decades, the Dunlavin crochet industry declined and disappeared while that of Clones flourished and spread to several other centres. Irish crochet was highly regarded in Britain and the Continent, where it became known as Point d'Irlande. Its prestige was enhanced when it was used by dress designers such as Parisian couturier Jeanne Paquin and Irish designers Irene Gilbert and Sybil Connolly.⁴²

Tatting

Tatting, a form of strong and durable lace, was only a small part of the Irish lace industry. In the 1840s, it was introduced to Ardee, County Louth as a famine relief measure by Sophia Ellis, daughter of the local rector. Although it enjoyed considerable success, tatting in Ireland never became widespread, and was only made in a single other centre, Ballintubber, County Mayo.⁴³







Forgotten Irish Laces

Three lace enterprises of nineteenth century Ireland, those of Headford, Tallow and Dublin city have fallen into almost total obscurity. In the case of Headford and Tallow, this is probably due to their early collapse and consequent omission from Alan Cole's seminal reports on Irish lace in the 1880s and 1890s, which in turn caused modern accounts, such as Boyle's *The Irish Flowerers* to also overlook them.⁴⁴ The present author discovered their existence when examining Irish census returns for 1841 and 1851 which listed large numbers of lace workers in these areas where, according to the standard works, no lace industry existed. Lace making in Dublin city has also been generally overlooked, although it survived into the early twentieth century.

The manufacture of bobbin lace was introduced to Headford, County Galway, in the late eighteenth century by Mrs St George, wife of the local landowner. It flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century, employing 108 in 1841, before collapsing as a result of the Famine in the 1840s.⁴⁵ The lace industry in Tallow was even bigger. It was run by the Carmelite nuns and at its peak in 1841 employed 307. Thereafter, numbers declined steadily, to 115 in 1851, 68 in 1861 and 10 in 1881, before the enterprise closed in the early 1880s.⁴⁶ In Dublin city, lace making was carried on in a number of centres, including the Presentation Convent, Georges Hill and the Sisters of Mercy, Lower Baggot Street. By far the largest manufacturer was William Fry and Company, 31 Westmoreland Street, manufacturers of various textiles, who made the carriage lace, used to trim upholstery in carriages and coaches.⁴⁷

The Role of Women in the Irish Economy

Traditionally, women workers tended to be concentrated in three main sectors. After the Famine, domestic service became the largest employer of females, accounting for nearly half of working women in 1881. Agriculture continued to be significant, though female agricultural labour was often invisible to the census enumerators. In 1841, the Irish textile industry and its ancillaries were overwhelmingly female (83 percent) and employed 500,000 women, around 48 percent of the total female workforce.⁴⁸ Like most other branches of the textiles industry, the vast majority of lace workers has always been female.⁴⁹ The census of 1841 returned a total of 528 lace workers in Limerick city, of whom only one was male.⁵⁰

Accordingly, the Irish lace industry in its Golden Age can only be understood in the context of the role of women in the nineteenth century Irish economy. Maria Luddy has written that 'the participation of women in the Irish workforce and the economic significance of their labour, has been obscured in historical enquiry until relatively recently.'⁵¹ One of the principal reasons for this was the tendency for their numbers to be under-represented in census data, a trend which became more pronounced as the century progressed. This was due to the increasing belief that the place of women was in the home, working as fulltime housewives. Also, many women who engaged in manufacture worked at home, something which often caused them to be overlooked by officialdom. From 1871, most married women were not officially classified in the census returns as being in the workforce, resulting in the number of female workers being seriously underestimated.⁵²

Traditionally, most lace manufacture was carried on by women in their own homes, which was convenient for many, particularly mothers with dependent children. Although tedious and time-consuming, the home work system also gave women a certain amount of autonomy. Unfortunately, it has also made researching their history more difficult due to the underestimating of female home workers in census returns. In common with other female workers, lace makers were paid less than male employees in similar industries.⁵³

Business versus Philanthropy

Two models were used in the manufacture of Irish lace in its Golden Age, the entrepreneurial and the philanthropic. Of these, the entrepreneurial model was rare and indeed was almost entirely confined to the manufacture of Limerick lace. This is in marked contrast to the situation in Britain and Continental Europe where lace manufacture, both hand made and mechanised, was generally conducted by commercial establishments. On the other hand, most lace manufacturing enterprises in Ireland were established by philanthropists, the majority of whom were female.

Philanthropy (literally 'love of humanity') may be defined as the voluntary giving of time, money and resources for the benefit of society, particularly its most vulnerable members. While sometimes regarded as synonymous with charity, philanthropy is more long-term, systematic and aimed at the root causes rather than the symptoms of a social problem. Although the practice of charity has been an intrinsic part of Christianity and other religious traditions for centuries, modern philanthropy is held to have begun in the eighteenth century as part of the development of associational culture and civil society. Associational culture consists of voluntary bodies, such as clubs, societies and charities distinct from both government institutions and the business community.⁵⁴ Philanthropy flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and encompassed the establishment of schools, orphanages, Magdalen asylums, and numerous other activities.

In the nineteenth century, the numbers of Irish women involved in philanthropy and the range of their activities in the area increased dramatically. This was due to the growth of both humanitarianism which created a much greater awareness of social problems and religious earnestness and commitment, which inspired people to do something about them. Such women were usually drawn from the upper and middle classes but worked with the poor and marginalised. Much of their efforts were directed towards needy women and children, such as widows, prostitutes and orphans. Cahill argues that there were 'severe class divisions' between philanthropists and workers in the lace industry, with elite women taking on the role of 'natural supervisor and educator of the lower classes.'⁵⁵ Luddy agrees, writing that 'for the majority of women philanthropists, the perpetuation of class divisions was an implicit part of their work. They were primarily serving their own class interests.'⁵⁶

Examples of female philanthropists in Limerick included the Good Shepherd Magdalen Asylum in Clare Street and the Sisters of Mercy Orphanage at Mount Saint Vincent. Most philanthropic women were highly class conscious and conservative and were strongly motivated by deep religious beliefs. Inevitably, this resulted in a division along sectarian lines, with Catholic and Protestant philanthropists working separately and often in opposition to each other. One major difference between the churches was that from the mid-nineteenth century, Catholic female philanthropy was almost entirely monopolised by the rapidly expanding religious orders of nuns, while their Protestant equivalents were nearly all lay, mostly women of the gentry and rectors' wives.⁵⁷ This division was very evident in the history of Irish lace though a happy exception was the close co-operation in the manufacture of Limerick lace between the Good Shepherd nuns and the Protestant laywoman Florence Vere O'Brien.

The Rise and Fall of Irish Lace: the Numbers Employed

The Golden Age of Irish lace making can be divided into three sub-periods: the first lace boom (1820-60); a depression (1860-83) and the second lace boom (1883-1914). Despite their problematic nature, the census returns provide a useful profile of the rise and fall of the Irish lace industry. Having reached a peak around 1907, Irish lace declined precipitously after 1918.

During Ireland's first lace boom, Limerick lace was predominant. The 1841 census returns a total of 1,210 lace workers in Ireland, of whom nearly 90 percent were concentrated in four centres: Limerick city (44 percent of the total), County Waterford (25 percent), Dublin city (11 percent) and County Galway (9 percent). Carrickmacross accounted for only 1.5 percent of the total. The peak of this boom came in 1851, when there were 1,906 lace-workers in Ireland and the largest centres were Limerick city (49



percent), County Limerick (12.5 percent), County Galway (9 percent), County Waterford (6 percent) and Dublin city (4.8 percent).⁵⁸

The depression in Irish lace resulted in the total numbers employed dropping from 1,906 in 1851 to 557 in 1891, a decrease of 71 percent. The lace industries of Counties Galway, Limerick and Waterford practically disappeared, while those of Limerick and Dublin cities declined sharply. However, Counties Cork, Louth and Fermanagh had developed sizable industries. In 1891, the largest centres were Limerick city (17 percent), County Cork (14 percent), County Louth (13.6 percent), County Fermanagh (12 percent) and Dublin city (8 percent). Although Limerick city remained the largest centre, it had lost its dominant position.⁵⁹

The second Irish lace boom was even more spectacular and ephemeral than the first (why this was the case will be discussed in chapter 3). The combined work of the lace revivalists, Congested Districts Board and the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (which are also described in chapter 3) resulted in a dramatic growth in the number of lace makers returned in the census statistics, from 557 in 1891 to 2,099 in 1901, an increase of 276 percent. The largest number of lace makers ever recorded in Ireland was 3,004 in 1911. Lace making spread all over the country and was no longer dominated by a single centre as had been the case with Limerick until the 1860s. A number of new lace making areas appeared in Counties Donegal, Mayo and Sligo, while other existing ones enjoyed large increases, including Counties Cork, Fermanagh and Monaghan. In 1911, the largest lace making areas were County Mayo (22 percent), County Cork (15 percent), County Fermanagh (13.6 percent), County Monaghan (12 percent), County Donegal (5 percent) and County Sligo (4 percent). Limerick city ranked next (3 percent) and in terms of numbers employed was no longer a major centre.⁶⁰

After the First World War, the Irish lace industry collapsed. The numbers employed in what became the Irish Free State declined from 2,434 in 1911 to 336 in 1926, a drop of 86 percent. In 1936, the total was 94 and in the 1946 census, the category of lace maker was dropped from the returns. The post-First World War collapse was country-wide and to date has not been reversed. However, as shall be seen in relation to Limerick, the census returns overstated the disappearance of Irish lace, and for long after the 1940s, lace making continued, albeit to an ever decreasing extent.⁶¹

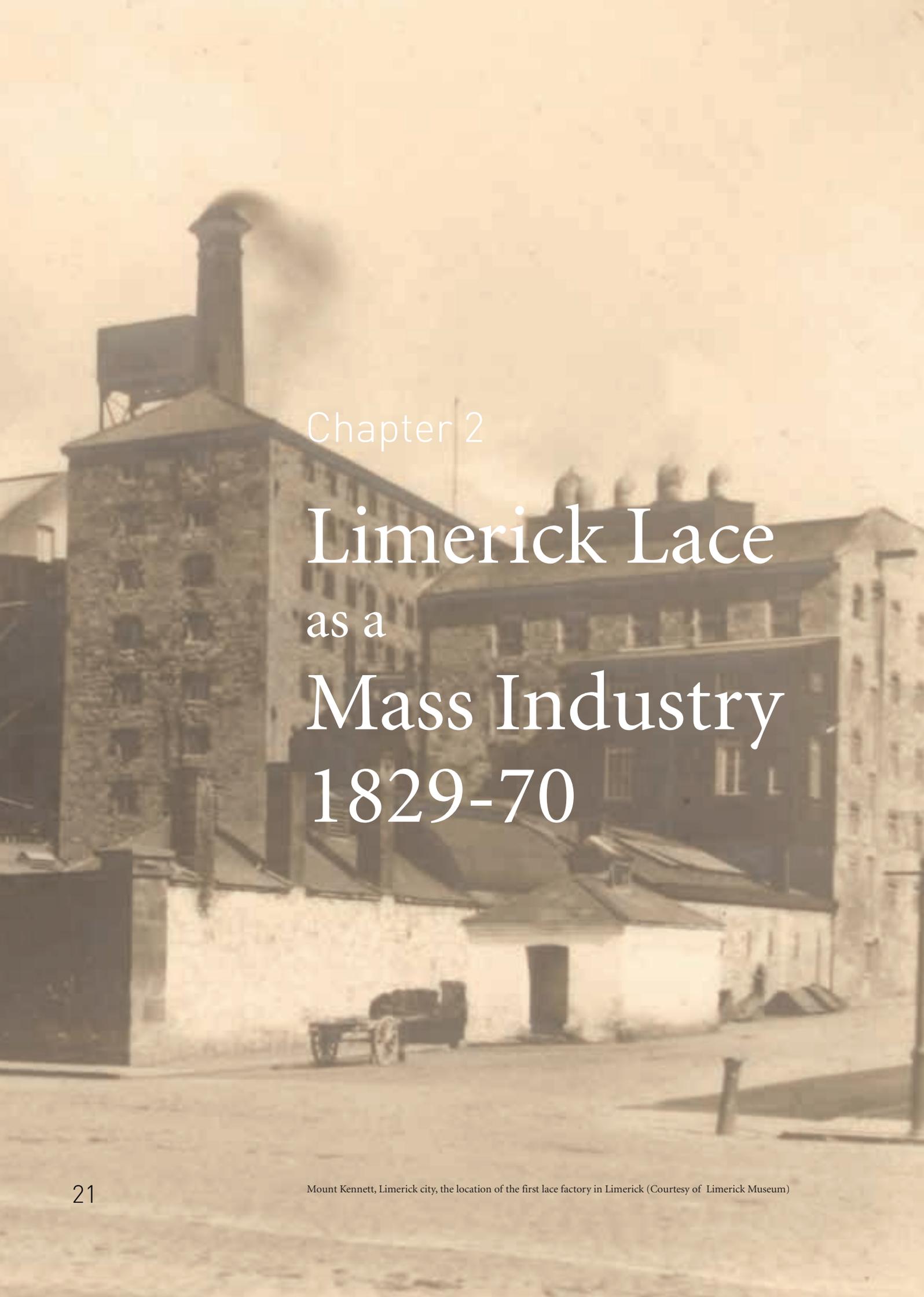
It has been said that 'Irish culture has been viewed as pre-eminently literary, verbal and musical... [and the] study of visual and material history has been relegated to a subordinate place in Irish studies.'⁶² The story of Limerick lace, which unfolds in succeeding chapters, will demonstrate that Irish material culture is also deserving of serious study.

ENDNOTES

The Origins and History of Lace

- 1 Mary Eirwen Jones, *The Romance of Lace* (London and New York: Staples Press, 1951), p. 61.
- 2 A name identifying the geographical location of a product, such as Limerick lace, is known as a toponymic brand name.
- 3 *Queen*, 17 February 1883, p. 137, quoted in Janice Helland, 'Caprices of Fashion: Hand made Lace in Ireland, 1883-1907' in *Textile History*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Nov., 2008), p. 193.
- 4 The word itself is derived from the Old French 'lakis,' or 'lassis', which in turn comes from the Latin 'laqueus', meaning a 'noose.'
- 5 For the history of lace, see Santina M Levey, *Lace, A History* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum in association with W S Maney and Son Ltd, 1983) and Pat Earnshaw, *Lace in Fashion, From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (London: B T Batsford, 1985).
- 6 Levey, *Lace, A History*, pp 4-10.
- 7 Levey, *Lace, A History*, pp 1-2 and Doreen Yarwood, *The Encyclopaedia of World Costume* (London: B T Batsford, 1978), pp 264-65.
- 8 Samuel L Goldenberg, *Lace, Its Origin and History* (New York: Brentano's, 1904), p. 7.
- 9 Yarwood, *Encyclopaedia of World Costume*, pp 265-66.
- 10 For Colbert's role in this process, see Joan DeJean, *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafes, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), pp 1-20. France has never lost this position, and in 2008, held 34 percent of the global luxury goods market, followed by Italy (20 percent), the United States of America (14 percent) and Switzerland (6 percent).
- 11 Ben Lindsey and C Harry Biddle, *Mansion House Exhibition, 1883, Irish Lace, A History of the Industry with Illustrations* (London: Exhibition Committee, 1883), p. 1.
- 12 Pamela Sharpe and Stanley D Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation: Commercial Lace Embroidery in Early Nineteenth-Century Ireland and England' in *Women's History Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1996), p. 327.
- 13 Levey, *Lace, A History*, p. 94.
- 14 Lindsey and Biddle, *Mansion House Exhibition, 1883*, p. 1.
- 15 Catherine Amoroso Leslie, *Needlework Through History: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2007), p. 107.
- 16 Hester M Poole, 'Lace at the Columbian Exposition Exhibited under the Auspices of Lady Aberdeen' in *The Decorator and Furnisher*, Vol 22, No. 6 (Sept., 1893), pp. 219-221.
- 17 Goldenberg, *Lace, Its Origin and History*, p. 8.
- 18 Alison Gersheim, *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey* (Mineola, New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2013), p. 29.
- 19 For examples, see *Limerick Leader*, 23 April, 1955; *Irish Press*, 24 July 1963.
- 20 Earnshaw, *Lace in Fashion*, pp 25-75. See also Levey, *Lace, A History*, pp 11-86. An exception was the clergy, the only men who continued to wear lace.
- 21 This process is described in Zillah Halls, *Machine Made Lace in Nottingham in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Nottingham: City of Nottingham, 1964).
- 22 Sharpe and Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation', p. 328.
- 23 Sheila A Mason, *Nottingham Lace, 1760s-1950s: The Machine Made Lace Industry in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire* (Ilkeston: Cluny Lace Co, 1994).
- 24 Helland, 'Caprices of Fashion: Handmade Lace in Ireland, 1883-1907', p. 195.
- 25 The standard work on Irish lace is Elizabeth Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers* (Belfast: Ulster Folk Museum and Institute of Irish Studies, Queens University, Belfast, 1971). See also Ada Longfield, *Irish Lace*, No. 21 Irish Heritage Series (Dublin: Eason and Son, 1978), Ada K Longfield, *Guide to the Collection of Lace* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1982) and Nora and Emer Finnegan, *The Lace Story. Kenmare and other Irish Laces* (Kenmare: Privately Published, 2013).
- 26 Longfield, *Irish Lace*, p. 6.
- 27 Magdalen asylums were designed to reform prostitutes and other 'fallen women' while founding hospitals were an early form of orphanage.
- 28 Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers*, pp 11-16 and Longfield, *Irish Lace*, pp 5-7.
- 29 Mairead Reynolds, 'Kells Lace' in *Irish Arts Review*, Vol. 2 (1985), pp 50-54.
- 30 For an example, see Lindsey and Biddle, *Mansion House Exhibition, 1883*, p. 4.
- 31 For Irish laces in general, see Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers*, passim. It should be pointed out that the 'forgotten laces' of Headford and Tallow are still remembered in their own localities.
- 32 Nellie O'Cleirigh, *Carrickmacross Lace, Irish Embroidered Net Lace, A Survey and Manual with Full Size Patterns* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1985), pp 9-10.
- 33 Appliqué is a type of ornamental needlework in which pieces of fabric are sewn or stuck on to a larger piece to form a picture or pattern.
- 34 O'Cleirigh, *Carrickmacross Lace*, p. 9.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 36 Irish bobbin lace did not flourish in the nineteenth century.
- 37 Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers*, pp 63-70 and Longfield, *Irish Lace*, pp 17-21.
- 38 Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers*, p. 64.
- 39 Founded in 1837, the National Art Training School was often known as the South Kensington Schools. It is now known as the Royal College of Art.
- 40 Patrick V O'Sullivan, 'Kenmare Lace' in *Irish Arts Review*, (1991-92) pp 106-08.
- 41 Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers*, pp 52-53, 64-66.
- 42 Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers*, pp 50-62 and Longfield, *Irish Lace*, pp 20-24.
- 43 Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers*, pp 62-63 and Longfield, *Guide to the Collection of Lace*, p. 43.
- 44 See chapter 3 for Alan Cole's role in the history of Irish lace.
- 45 An account of Headford lace may be found in Henry Parkinson and Peter Lund Simmonds, *The Illustrated Record and Descriptive Catalogue of the Dublin International Exhibition of 1865* (London: E and F N Spon and Dublin: John Falconer, 1866), p. 273.
- 46 See the website of the Carmelite Monastery in Tallow, at <http://www.carmelitetallow.org>.
- 47 *Freeman's Journal*, 31 May 1853.
- 48 *Ibid.* p 46-47. See also Frank Geary, 'Deindustrialization in Ireland to 1851: Some Evidence from the Census' in *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Aug., 1998), p. 519.
- 49 Maria Luddy, 'Women and Work in Nineteenth- and early Twentieth-Century Ireland' in Bernadette Whelan (ed.), *Women and Paid Work in Ireland, 1500-1930* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp 46-47. See also Geary, 'Deindustrialisation in Ireland', p. 519.
- 50 *Census of Ireland, 1841* (Dublin: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1841), Table VI, p. 210.
- 51 Maria Luddy, 'Women and Work in Nineteenth- and early Twentieth-Century Ireland', p. 45.
- 52 *Ibid.* p 45.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp 44-56.
- 54 For the general background, see Robert H Bremner, *Giving: Charity and Philanthropy in History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1996).
- 55 Susan Elizabeth Cahill, 'Crafting Culture, Fabricating Identity: Gender and Textiles in Limerick Lace, Clare Embridery and the Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework' (Unpublished MA thesis, Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 2007), pp 55-58.
- 56 Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 216.
- 57 The standard work is Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*.
- 58 *Census of Ireland, 1841*, Table VI pp. 21, 210, 254, 386; 1851, Part VI, Table V, pp 28, 294, 311, 363, 555.
- 59 *Census of Ireland, 1891*, Vol 1, Table XIX, pp 142, 618; Vol.2, Table XIX, pp 294, 630; Vol.3, Table XIX, p 649.
- 60 *Census of Ireland, 1911*, Munster, Table XX, pp 370, 840; Ulster, Table XX, PP 573, 893, 1136; Connacht, Table XX, pp 458, 725.
- 61 *Census of Population, 1926* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1926), Vol.2, Table 5, p. 41; 1936, Vol.2, Table 5 p.41.
- 62 Paul Caffrey, 'Irish Material Culture: The Shape of the Field' in *Circa*, No. 103 (Spring, 2003), p. 29.





Chapter 2

Limerick Lace as a Mass Industry 1829-70



Limerick Lace as a Mass Industry 1827-70



Limerick Lace

Limerick lace has been described as 'probably the most famous of all Irish laces'.¹ It is a specific class of lace which evolved from the invention of machine made net in 1808. Limerick lace is a form of hand embroidery on machine made net and is a 'mixed lace' rather than a 'true lace', which is entirely hand made. Limerick lace comes in two forms: tambour lace is made by stretching a net over a circular frame like a tambourine and drawing threads through it with a hook while needlerun lace is made by using a needle to embroider on a net background.² Tambour lace was introduced to Limerick by Charles Walker in 1829 while needlerun lace was introduced by Jonas Rolf in the late 1830s.³

By some commentators, 'embroidered lace is not seen as a pure article. As it is partly machine made, it has crossed the divide from craft to industry.'⁴ Limerick lace evolved as a marriage between handcraft and mechanisation using both art and skill. The result is a pretty, light lace with a delicate and subtle form.⁵ Janice Helland has written that 'its gossamer, ethereal texture was the perfect fabric to display over satin or silk, allowing in some instances the colour of the cloth to peer through the diaphanous lace.'⁶ The history of Limerick lace may be divided into two broad periods: the age of factory manufacture (1829-70) and the age of production in workshops and the home (1870s to the present).

As a commercial enterprise Limerick lace stands alone as the only large scale Irish lace enterprise founded on a commercial basis. In contrast, virtually all other lace making enterprises were established by philanthropists as charitable and poverty relief ventures. The scale of Limerick lace and its commercial character means that it forms a prominent part of the city's industrial history and this work examines the role it has played in both the local and national economy. Walker's establishment of Limerick lace is part of a recurring trend where many of the city's most notable industries were founded by non-native entrepreneurs, who invested their capital in creating enduring enterprises that helped mould the character of Limerick. The most notable were Joseph Matterson and Sons, bacon manufacturing; Limerick Clothing Factory and the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland.⁷

Limerick lace was produced mainly in factories for the first forty years of its existence, but from the 1860s onwards, it developed into a combination of production based in homes and workshops (officially defined as employing less than fifty).⁸ From the 1840s



philanthropists also became involved in making Limerick lace. However, the commercial element, represented by Cannock's department store and the lace businesses established by Maude Kearney and James Kirby, continued to be prominent until the mid-twentieth century.⁹

With the notable exception of the factory owners in its early decades, the history of Limerick lace is dominated by women. Women made the lace, and wore the lace. From the 1880s women also generally owned and managed its places of manufacture and marketed the finished product. A major exception to this largely female profile was the manner in which lace formed a major part of male clerical dress throughout the vast Irish 'spiritual empire' in North America and Australia as well as in Ireland itself. Like all laces, Limerick provided a sharp socio-economic contrast between those who made it and those who wore it. However, the sheer numbers employed over a long timespan also meant that it provided a vital source of income for generations of families.

In 1897 Florence Vere O'Brien wrote of Limerick lace that

It has shown vitality under great difficulties in the past and that to have preserved its name and reputation as an inexpensive, graceful, handmade manufacture for a period of sixty years, in the face of cheap foreign competition abroad and the rivalry of machine made lace at home is, in itself, no small achievement of good augury for the future.¹⁰

Lace put down deep roots in Limerick, and both the skills and brand have survived for 185 years to date, meeting the challenge of both changing fashions and the advent of machine made lace.

Although Limerick lace only dates from 1829, lace had been made in Limerick long before this. Ferrar's Directory of 1769 lists Humphrey Holland of Quay Lane as a lace weaver and also a freeman of the city.¹¹ The register of the Limerick House of Industry between 1774 and 1793 lists the names and ages of eleven women whose occupation was described as 'lace worker.' They probably made bobbin lace which was being promoted at the time by the Dublin Society. However, a large scale lace industry did not emerge in Limerick until the arrival of Walker.¹²





Wishing you a
very happy
Birthday
May 12/1923
Yours truly
Miss Hogan

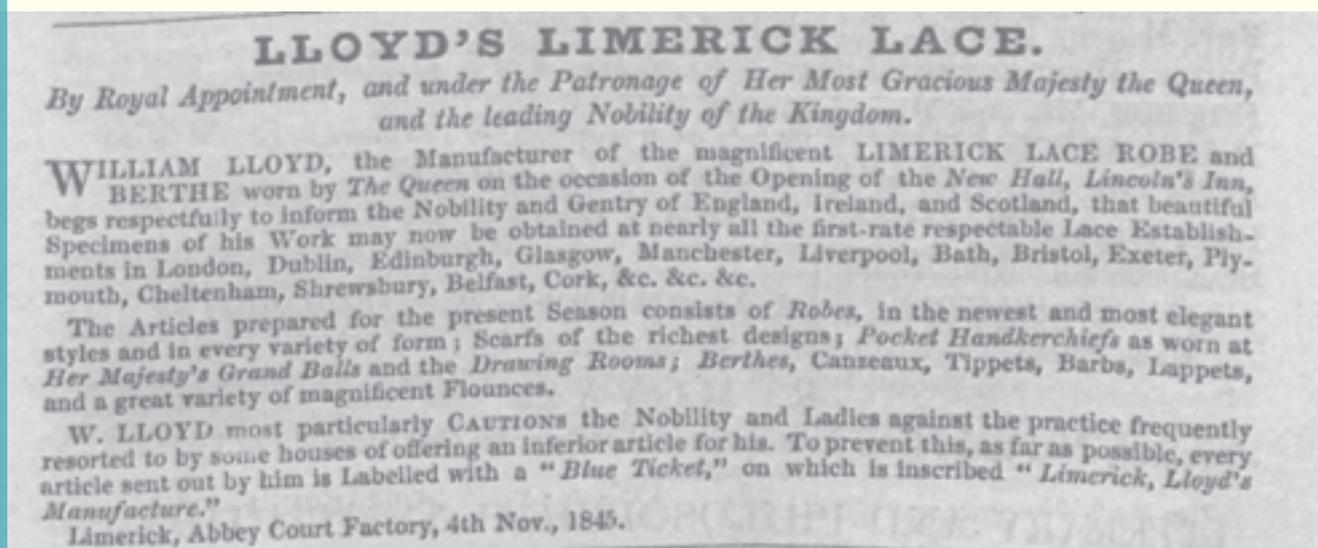
Charles Walker

Charles Walker, the founder of Limerick lace, was born in Oxford, studied to become a clergyman but was never ordained.¹³ Possessed more of an aptitude for business than the church, he completed an apprenticeship with an engraver and copperplate printer in Oxford. He moved to London where he met the owner of a lace factory in the village of Marden Ash, near the little town of Chipping Ongar, Essex. He married Margaret, a widowed daughter of the owner, and moved to Marden Ash to manage the family lace factory.¹⁴ The newly established Essex lace industry had begun in 1816 when a French-Belgian lace maker named Drago and his two daughters introduced tambour lace making to the town of Coggeshall in Essex, near Chipping. Later the manufacture of Coggeshall lace spread to other parts of Essex. For this reason, it can be said that Limerick lace is directly descended from Coggeshall lace and as shall be seen below, to a lesser extent from Nottingham lace.¹⁵

In 1823, the patent on Heathcoat's net making machine expired, which resulted in an enormous increase in output, as dozens of lace makers copied his invention and set up enterprises in numerous locations, particularly Nottingham. The number of women and children embroidering net increased massively to an estimated 150,000 employed by 1828-29.¹⁶ This boom produced a temporary shortage of low-cost lace workers in Britain. Sharpe and Chapman have cynically but accurately observed that 'lace tambourers were ideally young females with nimble fingers who were easily controlled.'¹⁷ The canny Walker quickly rose to the challenge, firstly by unsuccessfully attempting to recruit pauper labour in Essex and later casting his net as far as Ireland. He made a tour of the country and having visited Dublin, Belfast, Cork and Limerick, decided to establish a lace factory in Limerick.¹⁸

On 14 August 1829, Walker opened his lace factory in a large rented premises at Mount Kennett, on a site later occupied by the offices of Limerick Steamship Company.¹⁹ It 'afforded those essential requirements for a manufacturing establishment, namely, ample room, good light and thorough ventilation.'²⁰ Coggeshall lace is the parent of Limerick lace, as Walker brought twenty four girls from Nottingham and Coggeshall to teach lace making skills to the 'six young girls' who started work there on the first day.²¹ As a result Walker's employees were taught both Nottingham and Coggeshall lace making techniques.²² The workforce expanded rapidly, although Walker recruited only girls between the ages of eleven and fourteen in possession of a medical certificate of fitness, and proof of age. The workers were employed in embroidering machine made lace imported from Nottingham.²³

According to one report, Walker invested the enormous sum of £20,000 in establishing his lace business in Limerick, and saw little return on his investment for a number of years, until his workforce was fully trained.²⁴ In 1834, another Englishman, William Lloyd, came to Limerick to assist Walker in managing his business, but after eighteen months left to establish his own lace manufacturing concern. In 1839 Walker opened a second lace factory in Lower Moore Street, Kilrush.²⁵ In 1836, Walker's landlord in Mount Kennett compelled him to leave and he moved to the Newtown Mahon/Mulgrave Street area.²⁶ By 1840, he had formed a partnership with Samuel Lambert (died 1854) under the name of Walker and Lambert.²⁷ Walker produced a wide variety of lace products which in 1841 were available in Robert McClure's 'Limerick Lace Warehouse' at 27 Patrick Street. They included caps, capes, collars, flounces, mantillas, scarves, shawls and veils.²⁸







Why Limerick?

Walker's decision to locate his enterprise in Limerick was based on sound business sense. The city had grown hugely in the seventy years prior to his arrival, when the Georgian city was constructed (1770-1840), and the necessary infrastructure created to attract and support new industry. As a result a tradition of factory and textile manufacture already existed in Limerick. However, deindustrialisation had created a large pool of available workers and a desire to attract new industry. Ironically, some contemporaries portrayed Walker as a philanthropist rather than a businessman, 'an ornament to society and a benefactor to his species' who conferred 'great and enduring benefits' on Limerick.²⁹ It is probably more accurate to characterise him as an opportunistic entrepreneur who chose Limerick because of its commercial advantages.

In the first place, Limerick was a business-friendly city. Between 1750 and 1815, Georgian Limerick underwent an economic revolution, which transformed it into one of the most dynamic cities in Ireland. The population increased from 11,000 in 1706 to 48,000 in 1841, the fastest growth rate of any Irish city except Belfast. An important measure of economic growth is provided by customs receipts, which in Limerick increased from £16,000 in 1751 to £70,000 in 1821. Even when the Irish economy stagnated from 1815 to the 1840s, culminating in the Great Famine, Limerick continued to enjoy economic growth. Customs receipts in the port increased from £70,000 in 1821 to £148,000 in 1840.³⁰ At the same time, the necessary infrastructure was created to support an export centred business such as Limerick lace. The port of Limerick developed rapidly in the decades before and after Walker's arrival. Between 1770 and 1830, a chain of private quays was erected by local merchant families, the Harbour Commissioners were established in 1823 and a new floating dock constructed between 1849 and 1853.³¹ These were complemented by the development of a comprehensive road network in eighteenth century Ireland and the coming of the railway to Limerick in 1848.³²

Secondly, Limerick in 1829 was suffering the effects of deindustrialisation, which meant that there was both a large pool of labour (and of particular interest to Walker, unemployed women) and a surplus of unused commercial buildings available. Nineteenth century Ireland outside North-East Ulster did not experience industrialisation and actually underwent a process of deindustrialisation, largely due to its close proximity to the world's first and most dynamic industrial economy.³³ Like other Irish cities outside Ulster, Limerick did not develop into an industrial city, a phenomenon clearly illustrated in the census returns. A comparison between Limerick and the archetypal industrial city of Belfast reveals that in 1871, the proportion of their workforces in industrial employment were similar (35 percent in Limerick and 42 percent in Belfast). By contrast, Belfast's workforce was 74 percent industrial in 1911, while Limerick's had fallen to 24 percent industrial by 1926.³⁴ As a consequence of this deindustrialisation, the Limerick élite, acutely conscious of the city's waning industrial base, were committed to economic regeneration and welcomed enterprising immigrants.³⁵ Walker was only one of a number of entrepreneurs who moved to Limerick from elsewhere in the nineteenth century, including the Englishmen John Russell and Joseph Matterson who established the city's



Pattern created from a rubbing of Limerick lace (Courtesy of Veronica Rowe)

Limerick gloves with walnut shell. Limerick gloves were famously able to fit inside a walnut shell (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)

It was not just the cheapness of production, but the superior cleanliness emanating from Irish [Limerick] centralised production which gave it a market edge.

first bacon factory (1820), the Scotsman Sir Peter Tait who opened the Limerick Clothing Factory (1850) and the Canadian Sir Thomas Cleeve, who founded the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland (1883). In consequence, industry did not disappear from Limerick and in some areas of manufacture such as bacon and clothing it acquired world-wide renown.³⁶

Thirdly, Limerick had a tradition of both factory based and textile manufacturing. Although Limerick did not become a typical industrial city such as Belfast, Glasgow and Birmingham, its workforce became familiar with some of the most important elements of industrialisation, particularly the factory system. The factory system was first pioneered in the textiles industry. In contrast to the pre-industrial workforce, factory employees were familiar with working for fixed hours in large groups and with the consequent necessity for punctuality, discipline and obedience. Limerick had bacon factories, clothing factories, even at one stage the largest brush factory in Europe.³⁷ More pertinently for Walker, the city also had a pool of unemployed female textile workers possessed of skills similar to those required for lace making, who had formerly worked in Limerick's once thriving but now declining glove making and cotton industries.³⁸ In particular, the manufacture of cotton and checks had employed up to a thousand people at its peak.³⁹

Lastly, Limerick 'had no established structures of subcontract.' In England, manufacturers of net had to work with so-called 'lace mistresses', who acted as 'middlemen' and employed the embroiderers who finished the lace. Walker had no such constraints in Limerick, and was thus able to realise greater profits and exercise direct control over the workforce.⁴⁰

Limerick Lace in the Context of British Industrialisation

Walker's greatest achievement was the creation in Limerick of a unique mode of production not to be found anywhere else in the world at the time: the embroidering of machine made net in a factory setting. Traditionally, lace making was done at home under what was known as the putting-out, workshop or domestic system. Nowadays, the International Labour Organisation uses the term 'home work' to describe paid work carried out by a person in their own home or in premises other than the workplace of the employer, 'which results in a product or service as specified by the employer.'⁴¹ Under this system, an entrepreneur sub-contracted work to agents working in their own homes, often supplying them with the necessary raw materials and then selling and distributing the finished product. This was common in the pre-industrial textile industry, including lace making. Home work was particularly associated with the textiles industry. For the home workers, many of whom were women, the advantages included the freedom to work in their own home at their own pace and the possibility of combining it with childcare, farmwork and housework. The disadvantages included long hours, poor pay, and general exploitation.⁴²

For employers, the putting-out system resulted in quality control difficulties, as home work was often done in an unsuitable or insanitary environment and without their direct supervision. The factory system, one of the defining features of the Industrial Revolution, solved these problems by concentrating the workforce in one central location, under the employer's immediate supervision.⁴³ However, the lace making process introduced by the invention of machine made net, which was a combination of factory and hand made produce resulted in the creation of a parallel hybrid workforce, made up of part factory and home based workers. In Nottingham and its environs, the net was made in factories while the embroidery was done by an army of women and children working at home.⁴⁴

Walker's principal innovation was to end this dual system and concentrate the work of embroidering the net in factories where standards of both quality and hygiene could be strictly controlled. Sharpe and Chapman note that 'it was not just the cheapness of production, but the superior cleanliness emanating from Irish [Limerick] centralised production which gave it a market edge.'⁴⁵ Productivity was also increased due to the regular working hours enforced in the factory, in contrast to the more relaxed and unsystematic methods used by home workers.⁴⁶ This innovation ranks him among the leading pioneers in both British and Irish industrialisation.⁴⁷

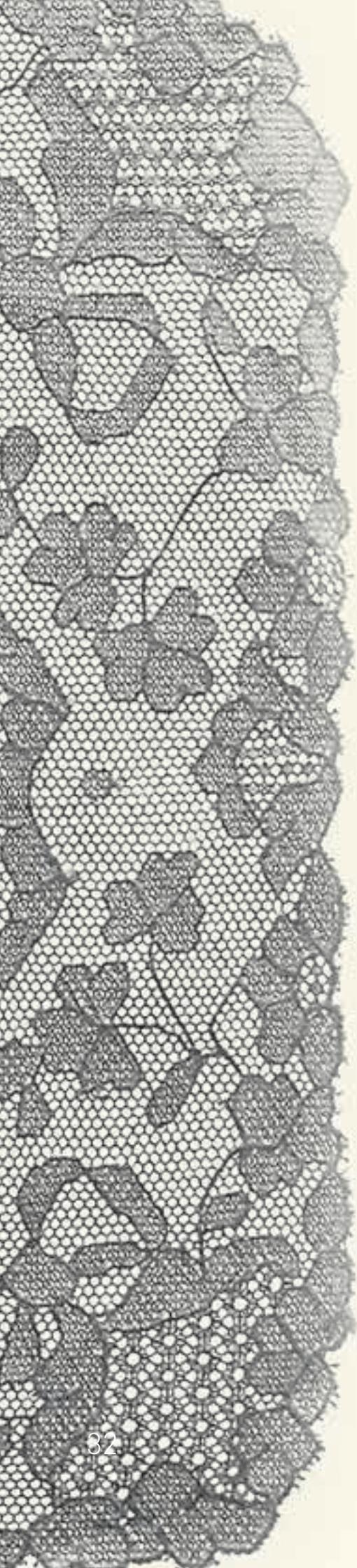




Walker's Lace: Success and Failure

In the years following Walker's arrival in Ireland, Limerick lace acquired widespread brand recognition. The earliest references to the term 'Limerick lace' in the *Freeman's Journal* appeared in 1838, in the *Belfast Newsletter* in 1839 and the *London Times* in 1840.⁴⁸ By contrast, the term 'Carrickmacross lace' was first used only in 1872, some fifty years after the actual product first appeared.⁴⁹ The creation of 'Limerick lace' as a recognised style of lace at such an early stage in its history was to be of immense significance for its enduring appeal. It contributed greatly to the longevity of Limerick lace, which is 185 years old at the time of writing. The contrast with earlier examples, such as Tallow and Headford lace, which faded into obscurity, is striking.

Walker attached a lot of importance to quality and his efforts were not in vain. Even in his own lifetime, Limerick lace attracted much favourable commentary and was patronised by senior society figures. In 1837, Samuel Lewis described it as it having being 'brought to great perfection.'⁵⁰ In 1839, the *Freeman's Journal* carried a report that 'the Limerick lace is prized all over England as the finest that can be got.'⁵¹ Some of the most interesting and informative accounts of Limerick lace come from travel writer and journalist Samuel Carter Hall (1800-89) and his wife Anna Maria (1800-81) who published accounts of their Irish tours of 1838, 1840 and 1853. In 1841, the Halls wrote that Limerick lace 'has been brought to so high a state of perfection as not only to rival but surpass that of any district in England' and 'that it may vie in delicacy and beauty of finish with anything of the kind wrought at the present time in Europe.'⁵²



A luxury item such as lace had to attract the support of Royal and aristocratic figures, who as leaders and patrons of fashion played a major role in advertising and marketing (this will be examined in more detail in chapter 5). Both the British Royal Court in London and the Viceregal Court in Dublin were of great significance in this regard. An early patron of Limerick lace was Maria, Countess of Mulgrave (1798-1882), wife of the serving Lord Lieutenant or Viceroy, first lady of Ireland from 1835 to 1839 and as such an influential fashion leader amongst the Irish élite.⁵³ Lady Mulgrave ordered dresses not only for herself but also for prominent European Royal figures, Louise of Orleans, Queen of the Belgians (1812-50), and Sophie of Sweden, Grand Duchess of Baden (1801-65).⁵⁴ By 1839, Limerick lace had captured the dizzy heights of the London beau monde and had 'for some months, in the Court and fashionable circles, eclipsed all others.'⁵⁵ In 1840, it was described as 'being specially patronised' by the Duchess of Kent, Queen Victoria's mother.⁵⁶ The summit of Royal patronage was scaled in 1841 when the Queen herself received Limerick lace from the Limerick public man Thomas Spring Rice, Lord Monteagle.⁵⁷ Four years later, she was recorded as wearing a dress made entirely from Limerick lace at a public event in London.⁵⁸

Within a comparatively short time of its foundation, Walker's enterprise enjoyed considerable success. He was lucky in that lace had become fashionable once more after a long period of eclipse; and his venture also benefited from the low wages paid to his staff; the elimination of the middlemen; and his own undoubted drive and determination. So confident was he in the skills of his workforce that he once offered 'a large wager that he would select 100 Irish girls from among his workers, who would produce any given piece of lace to be wrought in a state superior to any similar work to be made by the like number of girls to be found in France, Flanders, Saxony or Germany'.⁵⁹

The end of Walker's career has been the subject of conflicting accounts and it has even been asserted that the transition to full mechanisation had a devastating effect on his business. According to Mrs Bury Palliser, he sold his business in 1841, but the purchaser became bankrupt, so that Walker never received the purchase money and died with 'his ingenuity and industry ill-rewarded'.⁶⁰ Sharpe and Chapman state that Walker himself went bankrupt in 1842 as a direct result of the full mechanisation of lace.⁶¹ On balance, such theories seem unlikely for two reasons. First, his obituary in the *Limerick Chronicle* implied that his business was still flourishing at the time of his death. More importantly, his partner Samuel Lambert continued to operate the business successfully for many years after Walker's death.

A cultivated man, interested in the arts and literature, Walker had rented Woodfield House, near Broadford in County Clare for a number of years and he died there on 31 October 1843. His wife Margaret died a few months later.⁶² In view of his having married into the lace industry with which he became synonymous, it is ironic that so little is known about his wife, or whether they had any children. No known portrait of him survives.⁶³ The *Limerick Chronicle's* long and very fulsome obituary of Walker described him as being 'kind, courteous and generous' and being 'invariably liberal and indulgent' to both his domestic and factory employees. Making liberal use of alliteration, it reserved its most extravagant language for his supposed philanthropic largesse to the women of Limerick: 'What myriads of young, innocent, feeble, friendless, females have been, by his means, rescued from ruin and wretchedness.'⁶⁴ Whether such tributes were fully deserved will be examined in Chapter 5.



After Walker: Limerick Lace 1843-70

In 1856, an admiring commentator wrote that 'out of Mr Walker's parent institution sprung many branches which still continue in prosperous existence.'⁶⁵ Between the 1830s and 1860s, several lace factories operated in Limerick. The city's second lace factory was established in 1835 by Walker's former manager William Lloyd, initially at Clare Street and later in Abbey Court off Nicholas Street. In 1841, there were 400 women and girls working for him, aged from eight or nine to thirty. In 1836, Leicester Greaves (1809-47), a Cork lace maker with no known connection to Walker opened a factory in Limerick on Patrick Street, where he employed 200 females by 1841.⁶⁶

Walker's own business was taken over by Samuel Lambert, as one half of the Lambert and Bury partnership. Subsequently, the factory moved to Upper Glentworth Street. Meanwhile, Lloyd's factory at Abbey Court was taken over by James Forrest and Sons, owners of a prestigious retail outlet at 100 and 101 Grafton Street, Dublin. Later, Forrest's also moved to Glentworth Street. In 1846, Robert McClure (1795-1870), another of Walker's former managers operated out of 7 Brunswick (now Sarsfield) Street, while his son David McClure (1828-64) conducted a lace factory in three houses, 17-19 Clare Street. David Kinnear made lace at 11 Clare Street and John Martin at Wickham Street.⁶⁷ Indeed, Glentworth and Clare Streets became the principal centres for lace making in Limerick, and in the case of the latter, the tradition was to be continued by the Good Shepherd Convent until 1990.

Walker and many of his successors produced tambour work, but needlerun, the second category of Limerick lace, was introduced to the city by Jonas Rolf (or Rolph), a lace merchant and manufacture of Coggeshall and Nottingham, and a director of Courtaulds, the British textile manufacturers. In the late 1830s, he established a factory in 20-21 Clare Street (which subsequently relocated to Patrick Street) and brought over Mary Mills, an experienced lace maker and designer from Coggeshall to train his workforce. Her husband also worked in the business as an accountant. In the 1870s and 1880s, Mary Mills had her own lace business in St John's Square, which was eventually taken over by Cannock's department store on George's (now O'Connell) Street.⁶⁸ Thereafter, the production of Limerick lace was divided between both tambour and needlerun lace.

The Beginnings of Limerick Lace Making in Convents

In the 1840s, Limerick lace making was introduced to a number of convents and convent-run institutions, both in Limerick and elsewhere.⁶⁹ The establishment of institutions, such as prisons, workhouses, hospitals, and lunatic asylums was a feature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The state at both national and local level assumed a host of new functions in areas such as health, education, social welfare, water supply, sanitation, and culture. Various categories of people were either permanently or temporarily housed in these institutions, many of which became the largest and most imposing buildings in their area.⁷⁰

In the 1840s, while the factory system still dominated the industry, philanthropists began making Limerick lace. By mid-century, the numbers of Irish women involved in philanthropy had grown significantly, including Catholic religious sisters and Protestant laywomen. Religious orders had a number of advantages over lay philanthropists: they had much greater institutional continuity, belonged to much larger organisations with greater financial resources and enjoyed more popular support from the fervently Catholic general public.⁷¹

The role of the female religious orders expanded rapidly in mid-nineteenth century Limerick. The Presentation Order arrived in 1837, the Sisters of Mercy in 1838 and the Faithful Companions of Jesus in 1844. All of these were principally involved in education, though they were also active in other areas; for example the Sisters of Mercy established an orphanage at Mount Saint Vincent and from 1861 provided nurses to the Limerick Union (now St Camillus') Hospital. Gradually the nuns created a network of institutions all over the city.⁷² As part of this, lace making enterprises in Limerick were conducted by the Good Shepherd, Mercy and Presentation orders.

One of the most active and prominent female religious orders in Limerick was that of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd of Angers, a French order popularly known as the Good Shepherd nuns. Although founded in 1641, the Good Shepherd order only took on its modern form in 1835, and was dedicated to the 'rescue' of prostitutes and other 'fallen women.' To this end, they established a chain of Magdalen asylums all over Europe.⁷³ The Good Shepherd nuns were introduced to Limerick in 1848 to take over an existing Magdalen refuge on Clare Street established in 1826. Starting with only three sisters, they expanded their facilities in succeeding decades, established a complex of buildings including a reformatory for girls (1859) an industrial school (1873), the main convent (1890s) and a large chapel (1928-31).⁷⁴ Other Irish houses were established by the Good Shepherd nuns in Waterford and New Ross, and in 1860 Ireland became a separate province of the order, with Limerick as the headquarters.⁷⁵

In 1850, lace making was introduced to the Good Shepherd house in Limerick, by Mother Mary of St Louis de Baligand, a Bavarian aristocrat who served as second superior of the foundation (1850-60). To this end, she brought over a Belgian lace expert named Emilie van Verevenhaven (1821-1913) to teach the residents the skills of hand made Valenciennes bobbin lace. Soon after, the Belgian government, fearing competition from Ireland, sent a representative to Limerick in order to induce van Verevenhaven to return. On his arrival, he found that the astute nuns had already safeguarded their precious recruit by persuading her to join the order under the name of Sister Marie de Saint Philomene. She lived there for sixty-three years and taught many generations of residents (or 'penitents' as they were known) how to make lace. At the time of the 1901 census, she was the oldest Good Shepherd nun in Ireland.⁷⁶ The Good Shepherd convent continued to make bobbin lace until 1890, when they changed over to Limerick lace.⁷⁷

Lace Making in Other Convents

While to many, the making of Limerick lace is closely associated with the Good Shepherd convent on Clare Street, it is not often realised that it was also made in other religious houses based in the city. The most significant were the Presentation Convent in Sexton Street and the Mercy Convent at Mount Saint Vincent, on O'Connell Avenue. Lace making was introduced to the Presentation Convent in 1847 at the time of the Great Famine.⁷⁸ Very little is known about this enterprise which seems to have ceased production by the 1870s but was again in operation by 1908. However, its significance

is demonstrated by the many samples of Presentation Convent lace in the Limerick Museum.⁷⁹ Lace making in the Presentation Convent was conducted by Sister Brigid Power (1853-1939), who was 'gifted with a high degree of artistic talent, especially in needlework and lace making.'⁸⁰ In the early decades of the twentieth century, every fifth and sixth class pupil attending the Presentation Convent Primary School had to learn Limerick lace making for two hours per week. After leaving school, some worked in a lace making enterprise attached to the school, while others became lace makers with Cannock's, Todd's and the Mercy Convent, Mount Saint Vincent.⁸¹

The Sisters of Mercy also made lace. Mother Elizabeth Moore, the dynamic foundress of the order in Limerick employed two teachers from Belgium to teach Valenciennes lace 'to local girls, who when they mastered the craft, were paid according to the quality and quantity of their output. Two Sisters supervised the work and became proficient lace makers.' However, lack of sales resulted in the enterprise closing down.⁸² The Sisters of Mercy also taught and made lace at St Mary's Knitting Industry in Mount Saint Vincent Convent and from 1901 to 1911 at St Lelia's girls day Technical School, Pery Square Limerick, a forerunner of the Municipal Technical School, O'Connell Avenue.⁸³

Even less well known is the manner in which Limerick lace was manufactured in other parts of Ireland. In general, the Great Famine provided a major stimulus to the establishment of lace manufactories, as a means of famine relief, such as those at Tynan, Dunlavin and Ardee, by mainly Protestant but also some Catholic philanthropists. Likewise, Limerick lace was disseminated widely through the efforts of Catholic religious sisters anxious to provide employment at the time of the Famine. As a result, Limerick lace ceased to be tied to its place of origin and became a style (or in modern parlance a brand or label) in the manner of some of the most celebrated continental laces, often manufactured in locations far from their place of origin, while retaining the name. The same was also true of Carrickmacross lace. Eventually, several kinds of Irish lace were often manufactured in a single establishment.

Although more famous for Irish needlepoint lace, Youghal was also one of the earliest centres for Limerick lace outside its place of origin and commenced in 1847, when an experienced lace maker was brought from Limerick.⁸⁴ After the city itself, the second most important centre of Limerick lace was probably Kinsale, County Cork. In 1847, Mother Francis Bridgeman of the local St Joseph's Convent of Mercy introduced a lace maker from Limerick, while the Board of National Education sent an embroidery teacher which enabled an industrial school to be established there in 1848. The standard of design and workmanship in Kinsale were at their height in 1890s when two talented designers, Cecilia Keyes and Albinia Collins, were attached to the enterprise and up to 140 girls were employed there in 1909.⁸⁵ Limerick lace was also made in the Convent of Mercy, Dunmore East, County Waterford; the Irish Sisters of Charity Convent in Benada Abbey, County Sligo and the Presentation Convent, Cahirciveen, County Kerry. It was also made in the Poor Clare Convent at Kenmare, which like Youghal, was more famous for the manufacture of Irish needlepoint.⁸⁶

Limerick Lace as a Mass Industry

Limerick lace manufacturing was both the largest in the history of Irish lace and one of the largest industries of any kind to operate in Limerick over the past two centuries. At its peak in the early 1850s, between 900 and 1850 individuals were employed in Limerick city making lace. From the 1830s until the 1890s, Limerick city had the largest number of lace workers in the country and until its collapse in the 1860s, accounted for a very large proportion of the national total: 44 percent in 1841, 49 percent in 1851 and 52 percent in 1861.⁸⁷

However, quantifying the actual size of this workforce is surprisingly difficult for two reasons. In the first place, the two principal sources, census returns and the testimony of contemporaries, do not usually correspond. Secondly, the census returns frequently underestimate the number of lace workers, due to many of them being home workers, while from 1871, most married women were not officially classified as being in the workforce.⁸⁸ With these caveats, an attempt can be made to determine the numbers employed in Limerick lace making. At the very least, the census returns provide data on the minimum number employed in the industry between 1841 and 1936.



In the city and suburbs of Limerick, there are upward of 1,000 women and children employed at this trade, maintaining themselves and their families, amounting to three or four thousand persons

Among the earliest reliable figures for numbers employed in Limerick lace are those provided by Charles Walker himself to the Irish Poor Enquiry of 1836, when he was described as employing 'from 300 to 400 children from all parts of the city.'⁸⁹ However, William Lloyd had commenced production in the same year, so Walker's workforce did not constitute the total number of lace makers in Limerick. A more comprehensive figure is provided by Samuel Lewis, who wrote in 1837 that Walker employed 400 and Lloyd 250.⁹⁰ The census returns of 1841 records five lace manufacturers in Limerick, employing 528 workers. It also lists 279 unspecified 'factory workers' in the clothing category, some of which may have been lace makers.⁹¹ In the same year, Mr and Mrs S C Hall estimated that a total of 1,700 were employed by three lace manufacturers, consisting of 1,100 working for Walker and Lambert (800 in the Limerick and Kilrush factories and 300 home workers), 400 for William Lloyd and 200 for Leycester Greaves.⁹² Even when the Kilrush factory is subtracted from this total (and a report from 1843 estimated that the workforce there numbered 100) and it is assumed that a proportion of the home workers lived outside Limerick city, the two figures for 1841 are virtually impossible to reconcile.⁹³

For the early 1850s, statistics provided by the census and by contemporary observers are less contradictory, but still differ significantly. In 1849, Lord John Manners (later the 7th Duke of Rutland) wrote that there were half a dozen lace factories in Limerick employing 'about one thousand souls.'⁹⁴ In 1851, the census returned five manufacturers employing 930 workers, the highest number ever recorded in a census return.⁹⁵ In the same year, the catalogue of the Great Exhibition in London estimated that 'in the city and suburbs of Limerick, there are upward of 1,000 women and children employed at this trade, maintaining themselves and their families, amounting to three or four thousand persons.'⁹⁶ In 1853, John Francis Maguire estimated that 1,840 worked for five major and thirty smaller businesses. The largest were Lambert and Bury (700), James Forrest (500), David McClure (250), Jonas Rolf (60) and Mrs Leycester Greaves, who had succeeded her late husband at the helm (30). The thirty smaller businesses employed 300 between them.⁹⁷

Two other estimates, those of the Catalogue of the Great Industrial Exhibition, Dublin and of Mrs Bury Palliser, in 1853 and 1855 respectively, put the number of lace makers in Limerick at 1,500.⁹⁸ The former listed the principal lace makers in Limerick as being Lambert and Bury (600) and James Forrest (400).⁹⁹ In County Limerick, the census returns record an increase in the number of lace makers from 14 in 1841 to 239 in 1851, mainly due to the Curragh lace industry established by the de Veres. However, the 1861 census returned only 75 lace makers in the county, illustrating the ephemeral nature of this enterprise.¹⁰⁰

The Collapse of Limerick Factory Made Lace

While it is unlikely that full mechanisation brought about the collapse of Walker's business (as factory lace continued to be manufactured on a large scale in Limerick for another twenty years), in the long term, it certainly dealt a serious blow to both full and



hybrid lace making by hand all over Europe. Paradoxically, in the short term, hand made lace remained popular due to its élite status and in the 1850s and 1860s, hybrid lace such as that of Limerick suffered the most serious decline, squeezed between fully mechanised and hand made lace.¹⁰¹ In 1860, duties on foreign lace were removed, which resulted in large quantities of imported lace coming into Britain and Ireland.¹⁰²

In Britain, this trend is somewhat difficult to discern, because the census returns make no distinction between hand and machine made lace, though much can be learned by examining data relating to centres of hand made lace. Thus, in the East Midlands of England (Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire), the number of female lace makers declined by 94 percent in forty years, from 32,000 in 1871 to 2,000 in 1911.¹⁰³ In Limerick city, the collapse was even more spectacular. Between 1861 and 1891, the numbers declined from 760 to 97, representing a decrease of 91 percent.¹⁰⁴

The 1860s and 1870s saw the demise of factory made lace in Limerick, and consequently in Ireland. Florence Vere O'Brien correctly blamed 'the introduction of first-rate machine made lace at Nottingham, which undermined the demand for Limerick lace on a large scale.' She did not attribute it to the death of Albert, the Prince Consort, husband of Queen Victoria, in 1861, and the consequent lengthy period of Court mourning, a theory which was popular with some Limerick lace workers later in the century.¹⁰⁵ The census of 1861 returned 760 lace makers, which represented a relatively small decline from the peak numbers recorded in 1851 but by 1871 the number had fallen to 247.¹⁰⁶ The testimony of observers concurs. In 1864, Mr Baily, the manager of James Forrest and Sons told the Children's Employment Commission that the industry 'in the last few years has fallen off very much. Six or seven years ago, we had 500 persons in this factory, and the former owner had had 600 or 700... at the present time we have only about 80 persons in the factory,' while David McClure testified that the numbers he employed had dropped from 548 to 120.¹⁰⁷ Mrs Bury Palliser estimates that the number employed had fallen to 500 by 1865.¹⁰⁸ The census returns and observers continued to produce differing statistics, though both agreed that Limerick lace was in decline. The 1881 census returned 159 lace workers in Limerick city but an informed estimate put the number at 300 in 1883.¹⁰⁹

As a result, hundreds of lace workers were thrown out of work and reduced to making lace at home which they sold on the streets. In 1859, Anglican priest Samuel Reynolds Hole visited Limerick and described how

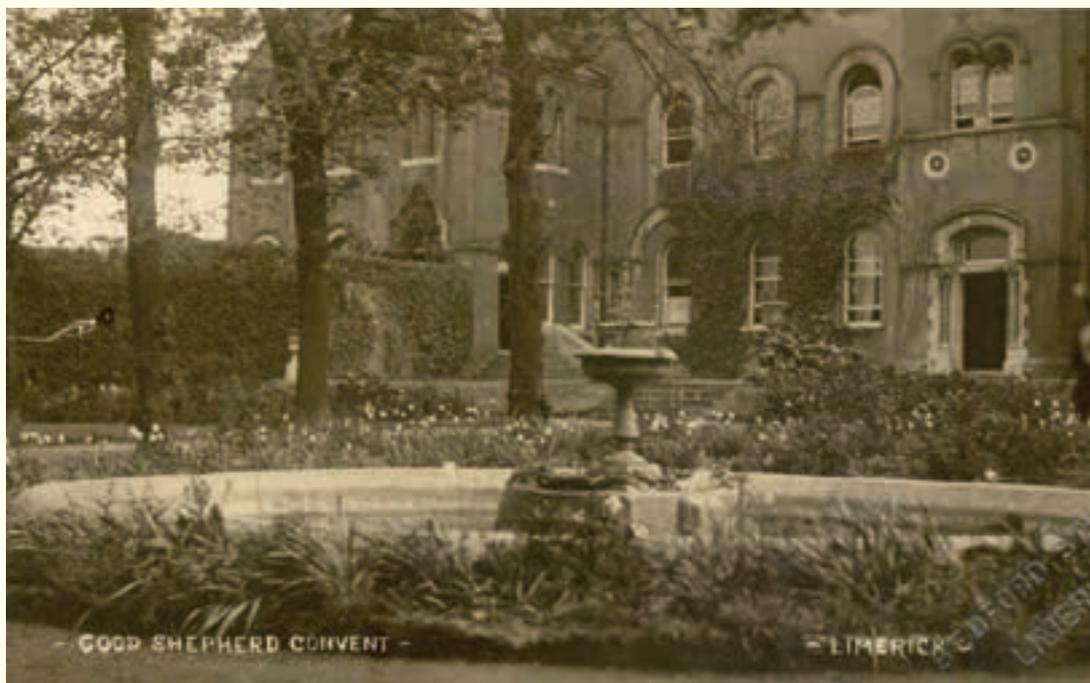
No sooner did we emerge from Mr. Cruise's very excellent and extensive hotel, than we were attacked and surrounded by the lace-girls, in their blue cloaks, drooping gracefully, with heads uncovered, or rather most becomingly covered with thick and glossy hair. At first, we recklessly resolve to cut a way through with our umbrellas, or perish in the attempt, but the utter hopelessness of such a fearful step induced us finally to capitulate, the Siege of Limerick was raised, and commercial relations peacefully established between the besiegers and besieged.

I did just venture to inquire what use I could possibly make of four superficial inches of fine linen, surrounded by very delicate openwork, not less than a foot in width, and was immediately answered, "And shure, yer honner'll be for buying the handkerchief, to dry up the tares of the swate young lady, as is waping for ye over the says." We would have it of course, and the "splendid pair o'slaves," and a miscellaneous assortment, which created an immense sensation on our return home, and were declared to be both pretty and cheap.¹¹⁰

In the late 1870s, the only lace 'factory' in the city was in Cannock's department store on George's (later O'Connell) Street. Cannock's employed lace makers in house from the early 1870s until the 1920s, and initially recruited many of its workers from the recently closed Forrest's factory. In reality, Cannock's would be more accurately described as a workshop rather than a factory, employing between thirty-five and seventy lace makers, although in the 1880s, it accounted for around half of the total number employed in Limerick lace.¹¹¹ In the late 1870s, Limerick lace was also made in the Good Shepherd and Mercy convents and by home workers for Todd's department store on George's Street.¹¹²

Limerick lace seems to have declined in quality as well as quantity. The standard of design has always been of vital importance in the fashion industry and initially, Limerick lace seems to have been reasonably well-served in this regard. Charles Walker himself had a background in printing and engraving, while according to the Halls, his erstwhile manager William Lloyd made annual visits to 'Brussels, Caen and other parts of France [sic] to collect new designs, and he is consequently enabled to produce specimens as elegant and highly wrought as any of continental manufacture.'¹¹³ Lord John Manners commented that the designs and patterns of Limerick lace were all French and that Leycester Greaves bought all his patterns in France.¹¹⁴

By contrast, the 1850s and 1860s saw a marked decline, despite some high profile commissions, such as the 'extensive order' which James Forrest received at the end of 1857 for the wedding dress of Victoria, Princess Royal, eldest daughter of Queen Victoria.¹¹⁵ By 1865, Susannah Meredith could dismiss Limerick lace as 'having run its course before crochet began' (in the second half of the 1840s).¹¹⁶ In the same year, Mrs Bury Palliser wrote that 'the manufacture, aiming only at cheapness, has produced a lace of inferior quality, without either novelty or beauty of design; from which cause, Limerick lace has fallen into disrepute.'¹¹⁷ It was not until the 1880s that a revival of Limerick lace began but under very different conditions from those encountered by Charles Walker.





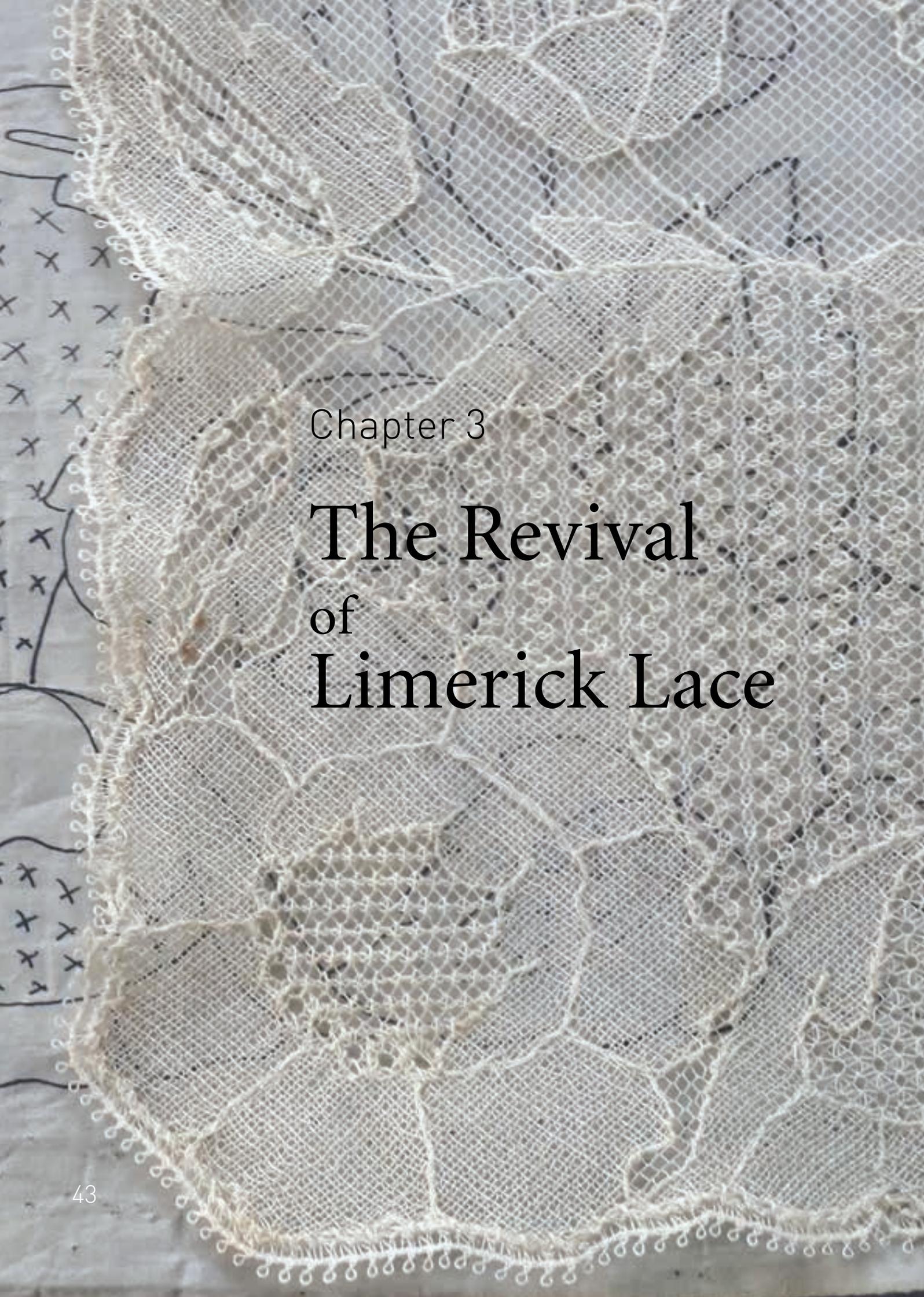
ENDNOTES

Limerick Lace as a Mass Industry

- 1 Nellie Ó Cléirigh and Veronica Rowe, *Limerick Lace, A Social History and A Maker's Manual* (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1995), p. 11.
- 2 Tambour is the French word for 'drum.'
- 3 Tambour lace is heavier than needlerun and as a result became less fashionable in the post-First World War period.
- 4 Sharpe and Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation', p. 327.
- 5 Ó Cléirigh and Rowe, *Limerick Lace*, pp 11, 69-88.
- 6 Helland, 'Caprices of Fashion: Hand made Lace in Ireland 1883-1907', p. 200.
- 7 See David Lee and Debbie Jacobs (eds.), *Made in Limerick: History of Industries, Trade and Commerce*, Volume 1, (Limerick: Limerick Civic Trust, 2003).
- 8 Under the Factory Acts, a factory was classified as having more than fifty employees and a workshop had fifty employees or less.
- 9 See chapter 4.
- 10 Florence Vere O'Brien, 'The Limerick Lace Industry' in *The Irish Homestead Special: Some Irish Industries* (Dublin: the Irish Homestead, 1897), p. 24.
- 11 John Ferrar, *The Directory of Limerick, containing Accurate and Complete Lists of all the Persons in Commission, Office, Employment or Business in the City* (Limerick: John Ferrar, 1769), p. 11.
- 12 David Fleming and John Logan (eds.), *Pauper Limerick. The Register of the Limerick House of Industry 1774-1793* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2011), pp 12-94. The original manuscript of the register is kept in Limerick Archives.
- 13 For a contextual account of Walker's enterprise, see Sharpe and Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation', pp 325-51.
- 14 Anon., 'Limerick Lace' in the *Journal of the Society of Arts*, Vol. 4, No. 207 (7 November, 1856), pp 796-97.
- 15 For a good account of this lace enterprise, see Jean D Duddy, *Coggeshall Tambour Lace: A Short History* (Essex: Writing Life, 2003).
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- 18 Anon., 'Limerick Lace', p. 797.
- 19 *Munster News*, 8 February 1899.
- 20 Anon., 'Limerick Lace', p. 797.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 797.
- 22 Sharpe and Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation', p. 332.
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- 24 *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 November 1843.
- 25 *Clare Journal*, 30 May 1839. Tom Prenderville, 'The Timeless Prestige of Kilrush Lace', consulted on the website of Clare County Library at www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/kilrush_lace.htm.
- 26 Ó Cléirigh and Rowe, *Limerick Lace*, p. 12.
- 27 *The New Triennial & Commercial Directory, for the Years 1840, 41 & 42, of the Cities of Limerick, Waterford & Kilkenny* (Limerick, F. Kinder & Son, 1840).p. 250.
- 28 *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 May 1841.
- 29 *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 November 1843.
- 30 Patrick J. O'Connor, *Exploring Limerick's Past. An Historical Geography of Urban Development in County and City*, (Newcastle West, County Limerick: Oireacht na Mumhan Books, 1987), p. 42.
- 31 Kevin Donnelly, Michael Hoctor and Dermot Walsh, *A Rising Tide, The Story of Limerick Harbour* (Limerick: Limerick Harbour Commissioners, 1994), pp 11-20.
- 32 For these developments, see Kevin B Nowlan (ed.), *Travel and Transport in Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973) and David Broderick, *The First Toll Roads: Ireland's Turnpike Roads, 1729-1858* (Cork: Collins Press, 2002).
- 33 Geary, 'Deindustrialization in Ireland to 1851', pp 512-41.
- 34 *Census of Ireland, 1871*, Vol.2, Table XIXa, p. 610; Vol.3. Table XIXa, p. 144; 1911, Vol.3, Table XIX, p. 12; *Census of Population 1926.*, Vol.2, Table 5, pp 32-94.
- 35 Sharpe and Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation', pp 333-34.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 For the brush factory, see *Illustrated London News*, 10 April 1847.
- 38 Lisa Foley, 'An Entirely Fictitious Importance? Reconsidering the Significance of the Irish Glove Trade: A Study of Limerick Gloves, 1778-1840' in *Costume*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2014), pp 160-71.
- 39 Sharpe and Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation', p. 333.
- 40 *Ibid.*, pp 332 and 338 .
- 41 International Labour Organisation, *Home Work Convention*, Convention No. 177 (Geneva: International Labour Organisation, 1996).
- 42 Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures, 1700-1820: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain* (London:Routledge, 2005).
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp 146-203.
- 44 Sharpe and Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation', pp 332-36.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- 46 However, Walker also employed some home workers. Ó Cléirigh and Rowe, *Limerick Lace*, p. 12.
- 47 A similar innovation was to be introduced in the manufacture of Donegal Tweed in the early twentieth century when Robert Temple (1866-1958), proprietor of Magees in Donegal Town, concentrated tweed making in a factory environment for the first time to improve quality control. See Joe McGarrigle, *Donegal Past and Present*, (Donegal Town: privately published, 1995), p. 70.
- 48 *Freeman's Journal*, 16 February 1838; *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 April 1839 and *Times*, 3 July 1840.
- 49 Ó Cléirigh, *Carrickmacross Lace*, p. 16.
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- 52 Mr and Mrs S C Hall, *Ireland, its Scenery, Character, Etc.*, (London: How and Parsons, 1841-43), Vol. 1 (1841), pp 340-41.
- 53 The Viceroy's wife was termed the Vicereine.
- 54 Mrs Bury Palliser, *A History of Lace* (London: S Lowe, son and Marston, 1865), p. 415.
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- 56 *Freeman's Journal*, 17 March 1840.
- 57 *Limerick Chronicle*, 5 May 1841
- 58 *Times*, 31 October 1845 and *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 8 November 1845. It was made by William Lloyd.
- 59 *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 November 1843.
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- 62 *Clare Journal*, 4 January 1844.
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- 64 *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 November 1843.
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Chapter 3

The Revival of Limerick Lace

The Revival of Limerick Lace



In the 1880s, the fortunes of Limerick lace began to rise again as part of a general resurgence of Irish lace. In 1883, a number of events heralded what was later described as 'A Renaissance of the Irish Art of Lace-Making.'¹ Two exhibitions that were supposed to showcase Irish lace had the opposite effect and instead highlighted that it had in fact hit its lowest point. The first was an Irish lace exhibition held in the Mansion House, London which was opened by the Duke of Connaught, third son of Queen Victoria and the second was the Cork Industrial Exhibition which included a prominent display of lace. In turn, the exhibitions prompted James Brenan and Alan Cole, two important figures in British and Irish cultural life, to promote a revival of lace making in Ireland. However, from the point of view of Limerick lace, the most important event of 1883 was the decision of Florence Vere O'Brien (1854-1936) to make her home in the Limerick area.²

The second coming of Limerick lace had three main features. Limerick lace making reverted to the pre-industrial model as production shifted from the factory to the workshop and the home. In 1897, the main lace manufacturers in Limerick were Cannock's, whose workshop employed around sixty in-house; Florence Vere O'Brien, who employed thirty five home workers; Todd's who had an unspecified number of home workers; and the Good Shepherd Convent, where Valenciennes lace was made by industrial school children and Limerick lace by around six other girls.³ Also, while the previously dominant commercial model continued to function as exemplified by Cannock's and Todd's, the philanthropic sector became far more prominent than it had been in the age of Walker and his fellow factory owners. It was led by the Good Shepherd nuns and Florence Vere O'Brien, the single most important figure in the revival of Limerick lace. Florence Vere O'Brien and the Good Shepherd nuns worked closely together, as she commissioned work from them and provided them with designs. Finally, while the Irish lace 'renaissance' resulted in the number of lace makers in Ireland increasing dramatically, the Limerick workforce remained virtually the same for reasons that will be examined below.

Lace Workers Class

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Scholarship Competition. 1910

Name	School	Rank	Notes
Josephine M. Namara	Cannock's	1st	Scholarships
Maggie Clarke	St. Lelia's	2nd	
Maggie Daly	St. Lelia's	3rd	
May Curry	Cannock's	4th	
Josephine Flannery	St. Lelia's	5th	
Donna Flannery	St. Lelia's	6th	
Winnie Fitzgerald	Cannock's	7th	
Sarah Clohesy	St. Lelia's	8th	
Alice Guerin	St. Lelia's	9th	
Madgie O'Halloran	Cannock's	10th	
Ina Luson	Cannock's	11th	
Lily Degan	St. Lelia's	12th	
Elic Flavin	St. Lelia's	13th	
May Clohesy	St. Lelia's	14th	
Mary Hughes	St. Lelia's	15th	
Mary H. Barrett	St. Lelia's	16th	
Jamie Hourigan	St. Lelia's	17th	

15, 16 & 17 show very respectable power of drawing
H.A. Prop. 1910

Nov. 3. 1910.

Florence Vere O'Brien (1854-1936)

Florence Mary Arnold (later Arnold-Forster) was born into a family background that was to have a major influence on her work with Limerick lace. The Arnolds and their relatives were one of the most intellectually distinguished families in Britain. Her grandfather was Dr Thomas Arnold (1795-1842), headmaster of Rugby School, immortalised in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and creator of the Victorian public school which educated the British upper classes for the ensuing 150 years. After being orphaned in 1858-59, Florence and her three siblings were brought up very happily by their maternal aunt and her husband William Edward Forster (1818-86) and later assumed the surname Forster. He was a senior Liberal party statesman, responsible for the introduction of universal primary education in England and Wales (1870) and the secret ballot (1872) and who served as Chief Secretary for Ireland from 1880 to 1882. Other influential relatives of Florence included her uncle Matthew Arnold (1822-88), a writer and thinker; brother Hugh Oakley Arnold-Forster (1855-1909), a British cabinet minister; and cousin Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), novelist and author of *Brave New World*.⁴

Well read and widely travelled, Florence became a 'highly intelligent, sociable, accomplished, and well informed' individual.⁵ She was also very artistic and had studied drawing in London with a number of teachers.⁶ In 1878, on her first visit to Limerick, she met Robert Vere O'Brien (1842-1913) and they were married in 1883. They lived initially at Old Church near Limerick city and had a family of two sons and two daughters.⁷

Florence came from a family with a long tradition of public service and philanthropy. Her adoptive father, William E Forster, had been born a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers) although he was expelled for marrying the Anglican Jane Arnold. He was a man of integrity, a benevolent employer, campaigned against slavery and was involved in Irish famine relief. In addition, the Arnolds were a very public spirited family, who frequently played a central role in the many political, social and religious controversies of the Victorian era.⁸ Not surprisingly, Florence inherited 'a strong sense of duty to help in any community she might find herself.' However, she also inherited the distinctive ethos of the Quakers, which combined a strong social conscience with great efficiency and aptitude for business. In contrast to many other philanthropists who promoted lace making, Florence always conducted her enterprises in a professional and competent manner.⁹

The role of Florence Vere O'Brien (as she became on marriage) in the revival of Irish lace, has to be set in the context of the local support provided by her marriage into a group of enlightened gentry in North Munster termed the Shannon Estuary Group; the impact of an artistic movement known as Arts and Crafts; and the promotion of Irish cottage or home industries by both philanthropic and public bodies.

The Shannon Estuary Group

Born into a tradition of humanitarianism and liberalism, Florence Vere O'Brien married into another similar tradition. Nineteenth century Limerick and Clare produced a remarkable, intermarried and closely knit coterie of enlightened landed families who practiced philanthropy on a large scale, over several generations and over a wide geographic area. As they generally had their principal residences on the shores of the Shannon Estuary, they can be described as the 'Shannon Estuary Group'.¹⁰ The principal families of the group were, in County Limerick, the Perys of Dromore; Dunravens of Adare; Spring Rices of Mount Trenchard; Monsells of Tervoe and de Veres of Curragh Chase; and in County Clare, the O'Briens of Dromoland and O'Briens of Cratloe Woods House.¹¹

The group included significant political figures such as Thomas Spring Rice, first Lord Monteagle (1790-1866), the most significant Limerick public man of the nineteenth century, a social reformer and member of the British cabinet; William Smith O'Brien (1803-64), leader of the attempted rising of 1848; and William Monsell (1812-94), later the first Lord Emly, a leading Catholic Liberal statesman. Its most prominent literary figure was Aubrey de Vere (1814-1902), one of the most notable Irish poets of the nineteenth century.¹² Other important members of the group included Mary Spring-Rice (1880-1924), who was involved in the Howth gun-running of 1914; author and social





reformer Charlotte Grace O'Brien (1845-1909) and the 4th Earl of Dunraven (1841-1926), a supporter of land purchase and eventually Home Rule.¹³

In what may be regarded as a virtual manifesto of the Shannon Estuary Group, Thomas Spring Rice wrote of the duties of a benevolent landlord:

It is a sphere of personal privation and of personal exertion. But when a mind is awake to that first of all delights, the power of becoming extensively and permanently useful, all privations are forgotten, all labour is well repaid. A peasantry capable of improvement and grateful for every benevolent assistance, look up to the landlord as to a protector and friend. He may not only assist their distresses, but may enable them to assist themselves.¹⁴

Robert Vere O'Brien was steeped in the traditions of the Shannon Estuary Group. He was a nephew of William Smith O'Brien on his father's side and of Aubrey de Vere on his mother's side, while his maternal grandmother was a sister of Thomas Spring Rice. Of particular relevance is the group's interest in promoting cottage industries. The fourth Earl of Dunraven ran a short lived tobacco business in Adare (1908-16) and the Monteagle family promoted local industry including a sawmill, a flourmill, a proposed cement factory, an ice storage facility and prospecting for minerals.¹⁵ Even more pertinent is the involvement of members of the group in the promotion of embroidery and lace making. In 1822, the year of a minor famine in the West of Ireland, Charlotte, Lady O'Brien of Dromoland, mother of William Smith O'Brien, introduced the manufacture of satin-stitch embroidery in east County Clare as a relief scheme which employed 400 children at its peak. Gradually, the numbers diminished until one of her daughters revived it at the time of the Great Famine, though emigration removed her workers as fast as she trained them.¹⁶ In the 1840s, Mary, Lady de Vere, sister of Thomas Spring Rice and grandmother of Robert Vere O'Brien, set up a lace making enterprise at Curragh Chase which, according to one estimate, employed 1,500 at its peak in 1857, but declined rapidly in the 1860s. This 'Curragh Point' lace was highly regarded and even Queen Louise of the Belgians purchased a dress from Lady de Vere's lace enterprise. Curragh lace was a type of needlepoint, quite distinct from the Limerick lace made in the city.¹⁷

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The Role of the Arts and Crafts Movement

Nicola Gordon Bowe has written that 'the Irish Arts and Crafts Movement provides a distinct visual counterpart to the better known literary Celtic revival.'¹⁸ The revival of Irish lace was part of the Arts and Crafts international movement in architecture and the decorative arts which originated in Britain, spread all over the Western World and lasted from 1850 to 1914 (though its highpoint was between 1880 and 1910). It was founded by artist and writer William Morris (1834-96) and inspired by the writings of art critic and social thinker John Ruskin (1819-1900). Reacting against the supposed low standards in the decorative arts as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the ensuing replacement of craftsmanship with mechanisation, the Arts and Crafts Movement sought to revive traditional hand made craft methods, using simple designs and natural materials. Inspired by an idealised image of the Middle Ages and possessed of an anti-industrial ethos, it had a strong socialist flavour, deplored the alienation and dehumanisation of industrial workers and wished to revive the medieval craft guilds. The movement aimed to give the decorative arts the same status as the fine arts and was frequently inspired by motifs such as flora and fauna, medieval art and vernacular design.¹⁹

The Arts and Crafts Movement soon spread to Ireland 'where it ultimately followed its own course, and produced a body of work of remarkable interest and merit.'²⁰ Thus the Irish movement drew much of its inspiration from the two greatest periods in Irish applied arts, the Golden Age (seventh to twelfth centuries) and the Georgian period (eighteenth century). It also became intertwined with the Celtic and Irish Literary Revivals and in consequence became involved in some of the political and cultural conflicts of the time. Many of the most famous and iconic products ever created in Ireland, such as Donegal tweed, Harry Clark stained glass and Dun Emer tapestries were products of the movement. One of the most interesting aspects of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland was the manner in which women played a much larger role in it than was common in contemporary society.²¹

Although Ireland was generally unaffected by industrialisation (and the consequent destruction of traditional craftsmanship), there was widespread concern that its art industries suffered from poor design due to the divorce between art education and the workplace. In 1888 H E Keane wrote that 'a distorted harp, a few caricatured shamrocks, occasionally an Irish deerhound with a round tower beside him as though it were his kennel- these oddly assorted emblems furnished the stock-in trade of many a designer.'²² Nowhere was this more apparent than in lace making, 'the most widespread handicraft in Ireland in the nineteenth century.'²³ The low standards and declining state of the industry, which the two 1883 exhibitions had demonstrated, prompted a strong revival spearheaded by James Brenan (1837-1907) and Alan Summerly Cole (1846-1934).

As well as being one of the most popular painters in nineteenth century Ireland, Dubliner James Brenan was a leading figure in Irish art education, serving successively as headmaster of the Cork School of Art (1860-89) and the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art (1889-1904). He also devoted much of his career to promoting the applied arts in Ireland, particularly through the provision of improvement in education and training. His experience of organising the fine arts section of the Cork Exhibition of 1883 led him to take a particular interest in lace making. Brenan introduced lace making into the curriculum of the Cork School of Art and (under the auspices of the Department of Science and Art, South Kensington) into several convents in Munster, starting in 1884 with the Convent of Mercy, Kinsale and the Poor Clares Convent, Kenmare. In 1883, he invited Alan S Cole to undertake a lecture tour of Ireland to promote the revival of lace.²⁴

Like Florence Vere O'Brien, Londoner Alan Cole sprang from the English intellectual elite. His father was Sir Henry Cole (1808-82), a leading figure in the promotion of British decorative arts and design, organiser of the Great Exhibition in London's Crystal Palace, founder and first director of the South Kensington (later Victoria and Albert), Museum and first superintendant of the Science and Art Department in South Kensington (a government body which promoted education in science, art, and design in Britain and Ireland).²⁵ Alan Cole served as Assistant Secretary of the South Kensington Museum and was an expert in textiles, especially lace.²⁶



In 1883, he wrote a letter to the London *Times* which effectively launched the resurgence of the Irish lace industry. 'Irish lace is not in great demand and the Irish lace industry is probably in decline,' he wrote, due to 'want of life and freshness' which in turn was due to 'want of new designs which respond to public taste.' Cole suggested that lace making in Ireland could be revived through emulating the example set by the industries of Italy and Belgium and by having high quality designs distributed to the 'peasant' workers through the local lace dealers.²⁷ His Irish tour 'resulted in a widely-circulated report which influenced virtually all the lace schools and centres in Ireland.'²⁸

Alan Cole's lecture tour included Limerick, where a major art exhibition was being held in the Athenaeum Building on Cecil Street and Cork in conjunction with the Industrial Exhibition.²⁹ In general, he found that despite the prevalence of poor designs, the skills of the lace makers were very good. At Cole's instigation, drawing and lace design classes accredited by the Department of Science and Art, Kensington were set up in the Cork School of Art and a number of convents in the following two years.³⁰

Alan Cole's interest in Irish lace was not just aesthetic. He wanted to make it commercially viable, and to establish structures 'through which lace could effectively be produced, promoted and marketed.'³¹ In 1884, he also established the 'Private Committee for Promoting Irish Lace' with the object of raising funds to be used as prizes for lace designs. Among its members were prominent figures from the Shannon Estuary Group such as Lord Emyl, Lord Monteagle and William Smith O'Brien's son Edward. The Committee first met in 1885 and inaugurated the Irish Lace Prize Fund, which operated for a number of years. By way of example, in 1886, the Committee was able to award prizes to 50 out of a total of 200 designs submitted.³²

The Promotion of Cottage Industries in Ireland

Closely related to the Arts and Crafts movement was the campaign to promote cottage industries in Ireland.³³ In the 1850s, an industrial revival movement had been launched in Ireland, which aimed to arrest the deindustrialisation process, particularly after the disastrous famine years.³⁴ Most of the effort was concentrated in the textile industry and on promoting female employment in areas such as lace making, embroidery, knitting and shirt making. The revival enjoyed some temporary success but eventually petered out at the end of the decade. One of its principal weaknesses was the 'inherent tension.. between philanthropy on the one hand and free enterprise on the other.'³⁵

Similar issues bedevilled the 'home arts and industries project' which began in the 1880s. It was a programme of cultural philanthropy under which female members of the élite in Britain and Ireland worked to encourage and promote cottage industries, particularly in the Celtic fringe of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.³⁶ While 'the craft workers and the crafts existed' prior to these interventions, these cultural philanthropists intervened in two crucial areas: firstly, the improvement of design, technique and equipment, and secondly the promotion of the crafts both nationally and internationally.³⁷ To this end, they formed organisations, usually dominated by women from the highest ranks of the peerage such as the immensely rich Scottish aristocrat Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland. These organisations were instrumental in bringing the crafts of the Celtic fringe to the attention of London society and even making them items of high fashion.

In Ireland, the two most important such organisations were the Donegal Industrial Fund, and the Irish Industries Association. The Donegal Industrial Fund was founded and led by Englishwoman Alice Rowland Hart (1848-1931), the activities of which fund were confined to that county and effectively created the modern version of Donegal tweed. The Irish Industries Association was established in 1886 by Ishbel, Countess of Aberdeen (1847-1939), wife of John, Earl of Aberdeen, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and operated on a national scale.³⁸ Its aims were to encourage the production of Irish crafts, to market them, and to conduct a 'Buy Irish' campaign.³⁹ Although dominated by the landed gentry, the Irish Industries Association had similar aims to many other organisations, such as Sinn Féin, demonstrating that it was one of the few areas in which all sectors in Irish society could agree at this time. Speaking of her grandmother Florence Vere O'Brien, Veronica Rowe remembered that 'the great advantage she said, in a time of a lot of upheaval, embroidery and lace were a non-contentions issue. You could put a stand or a show at the courthouse and no one had an issue [with it].'⁴⁰

In Ireland, a number of government departments and other interested bodies also became involved in the promotion of cottage industries. The Congested Districts Board operated from 1891 to 1923 and was established by the British government as part of the Conservative Party's policy of 'killing Home Rule with kindness.' Its purpose was to alleviate poverty in the West of Ireland through the provision of public works and infrastructure and the encouragement of cottage industry.⁴¹ One of the leading promoters of Irish economic regeneration was Sir Horace Plunkett, founder of the Irish co-operative movement. In 1894, he established the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society and in 1899, the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction was established at his suggestion. Both bodies soon became involved in encouraging home industries.⁴² Finally, several national (primary) schools set up so-called 'industrial departments' to teach handicrafts to girls and women who had already left school. By 1895, twenty seven such enterprises were in existence, nearly all of which were administered by nuns.⁴³

The concerted efforts of all these bodies produced apparently impressive though temporary results and a veritable boom in cottage industries characterised the decades before the First World War. As part of this, large new lace making enterprises were coaxed into existence in counties that had little or no previous tradition in that area, such as Donegal, Mayo and Sligo, while existing enterprises, such as those of Counties Cork and Kerry, increased significantly. The number of lace workers in Ireland expanded dramatically, from 574 in 1891 to 2,099 in 1901.⁴⁴ Clearly, either a lace boom or bubble had been created.



Florence Vere O'Brien with her daughters Flora (left) and Jane (right), 1905. Jane was the mother of Veronica Rowe (Courtesy of Veronica Rowe)



Clockwise from left:

Designs by Agnes Buckley for the 1899 RDS Annual Show (Courtesy of RDS Library, Dublin)

Designs by Agnes Buckley for the 1899 RDS Annual Show (Courtesy of RDS Library, Dublin)

Medal won by Florence Vere O'Brien's Limerick Lace School at the St Louis World Fair, 1904 (Courtesy of Veronica Rowe)





Students in Florence Vere O'Brien's Limerick Lace School, 1907 (Courtesy of Veronica Rowe)

Medal won by Florence Vere O'Brien's Limerick Lace School at the Chicago World Fair, 1893 (Courtesy of Veronica Rowe)

A view of Limerick, c. 1890.

The Beginning of Florence Vere O'Brien's Enterprises

When Florence Vere O'Brien came to Limerick, the lace industry was at a low ebb. The number of lace workers in the city had declined from 159 in 1881 to 97 in 1891.⁴⁵ In 1886, Alan Cole estimated that '110 scattered workers are... now finding employment in the Limerick lace making.'⁴⁶ In the 1880s, some of Walker's former employees were still living in Limerick.⁴⁷ In her memoirs, Florence Vere O'Brien recalls that she first encountered Limerick lace at the city's railway station where it was sold by street traders. She noticed that while it was 'often good in workmanship and sometimes in design, [it] was apt to be made in such coarse materials as to be more suitable for furniture than for flounces or for handkerchiefs.'⁴⁸ Veronica Rowe remembered that 'my grandmother spoke so highly of the workers in Limerick - that they loved new designs and were very enthusiastic.'⁴⁹ Tapping into the spirit created by the Arts and Crafts movement, Florence Vere O'Brien 'quickly realised that there was a need for better materials and good designs' although it is not clear whether she intended establishing a lace making business from the beginning.⁵⁰ Florence Vere O'Brien began by obtaining Brussels net and thread from Mary, Lady de Vere, the widow of her husband's uncle (material which she in turn had inherited from the Curragh lace enterprise of the 1840s and 1850s); borrowed a design from the wife of another landowner, Madam Elizabeth O'Grady, of Killballyowen, near Bruff, County Limerick; and commissioned an elderly Limerick lace worker named Mary Blake to embroider it on the Brussels net. Florence Vere O'Brien's husband paid for this inaugural piece.⁵¹

Veronica Rowe remembered that 'my grandmother spoke so highly of the workers in Limerick - that they loved new designs and were very enthusiastic'

Subsequently, some former lace makers who had worked in Forrests' Factory (including Peggy Kiely, who remembered Charles Walker and thus provided a direct link between the founder and the reviver of Limerick Lace) came to Florence Vere O'Brien. An article in the *Evening Telegraph* described how she took on the mantle of Walker and his successors: 'the old workers that had survived -about thirty-one- have been taken on by this lady, and it is found that they have admirably preserved the beautiful technique which, over half a century ago, some of them learnt in the factories..it is satisfactory that these women preserved the continuity of the industry, so that it cannot be said that lace making became extinct in Limerick, even though the factories were closed.'⁵² Florence Vere O'Brien supplied them with materials and designs, which they worked on in their own homes, following which the finished pieces were returned to Florence Vere O'Brien who sold them as 'Limerick lace.' This was to be her *modus operandi* for the next forty years. From these tentative beginnings, her business developed into a thriving concern. By the 1880s, Florence Vere O'Brien's enterprise was regarded as being unusual, because most lace making in Ireland was now concentrated in convents.⁵³

Throughout her career, Florence Vere O'Brien took a keen interest in the design process and always strove for the highest quality designs. She made use of designs based on antique lace, and often produced her own. Her grand daughter Veronica Rowe recalled that 'most of her designs were based on Clare flowers- on things that she could see in the garden. Just very simple- which made them [have a] great impact.'⁵⁴ She also forged links with the Good Shepherd convent, encouraging them to upgrade both their lace making enterprise and the designs they used, even giving them some of her own.⁵⁵ She frequently commissioned designs from art school trained designers, such as Alice Jacob of the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art and Emily Anderson of the Cork School of Art.⁵⁶ She also drew on two contemporary Limerick designers, Michael Hayes and Eileen O'Donohue.⁵⁷

The son of a baker, Michael Hayes (1857-1915) studied at the Limerick School of Art and the Kensington School of Art (now the Royal College of Art). He was a versatile designer in areas as diverse as furniture, tableware and interior design, and in gold and silver work. One of his finest interiors is still extant in Southill House, Limerick city. In 1885, Hayes won seventeen out of a total of forty-nine prizes awarded by the Irish Lace Prize Fund and in 1886, he won eight out of fifty. He married and made his home in London, where he worked as a designer all his life.⁵⁸

Eileen O'Donohue (1892-1960) was a niece of Honoria Dunne, manageress of Florence Vere O'Brien's lace school and having learnt lace making in Limerick was sent to the Convent of Mercy in Kinsale for further study. She also attended summer design courses run by the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin and studied for an Art Teacher's Certificate from the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction. Eileen



'most of her designs were based on Clare flowers - on things that she could see in the garden. Just very simple - which made them [have a] great impact'

O'Donohue worked in the lace school as a lace maker, while producing designs and served as the last manageress on the death of Honoria Dunne. In accordance with Arts and Crafts practice, she frequently made use of floral motifs in her lace designs.⁵⁹

Limerick Lace Schools (1889-1922)

Florence Vere O'Brien liaised with the other two leading figures in the revival of Irish lace, Alan Cole and James Brenan, both of whom she first met in 1886. In that year, Cole visited Limerick and was favourably impressed by Florence Vere O'Brien's enterprise. From their collaboration sprang the most important enterprise in her life, the Limerick Lace Training School. Many lace making enterprises were based in schools, which taught skills, provided workrooms and were used as depots where the produce was sold. Generally pupils were obliged to attend and work until training was completed, when they usually became home workers, using the school as their depot.⁶⁰

In 1888, Cole again visited Limerick to deliver a lecture and display a sample of lace from the South Kensington Museum in the Chamber of Commerce. Heavily involved in the organisation of this event were members of the Shannon Estuary Group, including Lord Emly and Donough, the son of William Smith O'Brien. In his lecture, Cole suggested that a working committee should be established to assist Florence Vere O'Brien in her work of promoting Limerick lace, that lace design should be taught in the Limerick School of Art and that drawing classes be established for young lace workers. The proceedings concluded with Florence Vere O'Brien being asked to call together the suggested working committee.⁶¹

Shortly after, the proposed committee was formed consisting of Robert and Florence Vere O'Brien, Donough O'Brien, Messrs Moran and Murray, respectively the managers of Cannock's and Todd's, Nicholas Brophy, Principal of Limerick School of Art and Alexander Shaw, proprietor of one of the city's bacon factories.⁶² Support was forthcoming from other local notables, including Lord Emly and Catholic Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer and the project was formally launched at the end of 1888. In May 1889, the school opened in Bank Place, with two teachers and eight pupils (which had increased to twenty by June) in two rooms, and managed by the committee. After a few years, it became clear that the latter arrangement was too cumbersome, so in 1893 Alexander Shaw asked Florence Vere O'Brien to take it over as her own private enterprise.⁶³ Florence Vere O'Brien herself described how 'in 1893, it was found convenient that the old and the young workers should be under the same management and accordingly, Mr O'Brien [her husband] and I, at the request of the committee, took over the lace school and the young workers there, who are now [1897] amalgamated with my old outside workers, under my own superintendance.'⁶⁴



The school in Bank Place was duly closed and in November 1893, Florence Vere O'Brien opened her own 'Limerick Lace School' at 112 George's Street. In contrast to the Bank Place establishment, this new school was her private enterprise, administered by her alone and entirely financed by her husband to the tune of 30 shillings a week, at the time a considerable sum. Her staff consisted of a manageress (Honorina Dunne), a superintendant and two teachers and the number of pupils increased from five in 1893 to eight in 1897.⁶⁵ In 1894, Florence Vere O'Brien wrote that the object of the school 'is to give free instruction in lace making to young girls who may wish to take up the industry in after life, either at their own homes or in one or other of the existing factories in the city.' However, she also took 'paying students.'⁶⁶ In 1900, it moved to 48 George's Street where it remained until its closure in 1922.

Florence Vere O'Brien was an energetic and organised person. From 1890 onwards, she lived in Ennis which necessitated what was by contemporary standards a lengthy commute to and from Limerick.⁶⁷ For nearly thirty years (1893-1922), she conducted the lace school, her own private lace making business and from 1895 onwards, Clare Embroidery, a similar cottage industry which at its peak, employed twenty seven girls and ceased production in 1938, two years after her death.⁶⁸ Florence Vere O'Brien also possessed a flair for business, a trait sorely lacking in many other lace making philanthropists.⁶⁹ Similarly, she realised that it was also important to maintain high standards. Veronica Rowe remembered that her grandmother was 'very artistic [but] she was insistent- if [Limerick lace makers] were going to make a comeback it would have to be on quality.'⁷⁰ Her Limerick lace business had thirty outworkers in 1897 and fifty six in 1906 while sales increased from £30 in 1885 to £889 in 1898 (in which year it made a profit for the first time).⁷¹

During the long tenure of Nicholas Brophy as head of the Limerick School of Art (1860-1911), support was given to the local lace industry. In the 1890s, the School of Art gave prizes for the best lace designs produced by its students, which were used by Florence Vere O'Brien's pupils in their work. In 1901, the School began design classes for lace workers, which were attended by pupils of Florence Vere O'Brien's school and employees of Todd's and Cannock's.⁷²

Florence Vere O'Brien's lace school enjoyed considerable local prestige and was recognised as contributing to local economic regeneration. In 1906, a protective Irish trade-mark had been adopted under the Trade Marks Act of 1905, which was regarded as an important achievement for the 'Buy Irish' campaign of the Irish Industries Association. It also helped put an end to the counterfeiting of Irish laces by makers of inferior produce.⁷³ Similarly, Limerick Corporation granted Florence Vere O'Brien's Lace School the right to use the city's coat of arms as a badge of excellence.⁷⁴

Florence Vere O'Brien's two Limerick lace enterprises continued until 1922. The First World War dealt them a heavy blow, but they finally came to an end due to other factors. The worldwide 'collapse of the lace industry' after 1918 was undoubtedly significant.⁷⁵ Florence Vere O'Brien had lost her husband in 1913, which resulted in a reduction in her income and in the subsidy available for the Lace School. She turned sixty in 1914 and was no longer in a position to oversee three important enterprises. Instead, she continued with Clare Embroidery until her death, along with a number of other interests, such as women's health and the welfare of ex-servicemen. Florence Vere O'Brien died on 8 July 1936, just five days after her eighty second birthday.⁷⁶

Limerick in the Context of the Irish Lace Bubble

Limerick lace flourished at the time of the second Irish lace boom and the number of locations where it was manufactured increased rapidly. An analysis of three lists from 1903, 1907 and 1908 showing where Limerick lace was made in Ireland produces a total of twenty-eight enterprises of which nine were in Limerick city. In 1908, lace was made at or for the following enterprises in the city: Cannock's, Todd's, Florence Vere O'Brien's Lace School, J Kirby and Co, Mrs Maude Kearney, Good Shepherd Convent, Presentation Convent, Mount St Vincent Convent and St Lelia's Girls Day Technical School, Pery Square Limerick (run by the Sisters of Mercy). It was also made at nine locations in County Cork, three in County Tipperary, two each in Counties Kerry and Sligo, and one each in Counties Galway, Mayo, and Dublin.⁷⁷

The census returns indicate that late nineteenth-century Ireland underwent a 'lace boom' which resulted in a spectacular increase in the number of lace makers. From a low of 557 in 1891, their number increased to 2,099 in 1901 and reached an all time high point of 3,004 in 1911.⁷⁸ In 1907, eighty four separate lace making enterprises exhibited at the Irish International Exhibition in Dublin.⁷⁹ Never before or since had there been so many lace makers in Ireland. The lace revivalists seem to have succeeded beyond their wildest expectations. What is also of interest is how in terms of numbers employed, Limerick lace did not share fully in this boom. Between 1891 and 1901, the national figure increased by 265 percent, while the Limerick figure only increased by 25 percent. The sheer scale of the Irish lace boom of 1891-1911 and Limerick's share in it requires explanation.

To begin with, while lace making undoubtedly became more widespread in the 1890s, the sheer size of the increase in that decade strongly suggesting that it was partially due to many home workers hitherto not included in the census returning themselves as lace makers for the first time. However, the principal explanation lies in the artificial stimulus which the industry received from the plethora of philanthropists, agencies and funding bodies in these decades. Also, Bourke has described how the seemingly impressive lace revival ultimately failed.⁸⁰ She writes that 'despite significant investment, by 1912, most lace making schemes in Ireland had vanished.'⁸¹ Lace industries sprang up from nothing, flourished for a few years and then collapsed. As early as the 1880s, Alan Cole had been concerned at the lack of commercial acumen of many Irish lace making enterprises.⁸² Many philanthropists had no experience or skills in business and administration, the level of training was frequently low, standards of design often poor and the enterprises were constantly being weakened by emigration. The lace boom was really only a bubble.⁸³

The census returns chart the progress of this 'lace bubble' and demonstrate how it burst very quickly. All the gains for the period 1891 to 1911 were lost by the 1920s and 1930s.⁸⁴ The number of lace workers in the future Free State had been 422 in 1891, peaked at 2,434 in 1911 and declined to 336 in 1926.⁸⁵ The lace bubble was particularly large in some counties. In Mayo, lace making employed 3 in 1891, 667 in 1911 and 7 in 1936. For the same years, the numbers for Donegal were 3, 149 and 16 and for Monaghan 17, 355 and 4.⁸⁶

By contrast, Limerick lace experienced a revival, but not a bubble. After the collapse of the lace factories there in the 1860s, the numbers employed in Limerick lace remained comparatively small. According to the census, the number of lace makers in Limerick city fell from 159 in 1881 to 97 in 1891, and after a slight increase to 121 in 1901, fell further to 86 in 1911.⁸⁷ This is close to the estimate of 110 lace workers in Limerick made by Alan Cole in 1887.⁸⁸ Indeed, it would seem that at this period, the majority of workers making Limerick lace were to be found outside Limerick. The three lists of 1903-08 already mentioned indicate that two-thirds of the enterprises where Limerick lace was made were outside Limerick. Similarly, a sample of thirteen exhibitors of Limerick lace at the Dublin International Exhibition of 1907 indicates that they employed a total of 686. Of these, only one, Florence Vere O'Brien's lace school with a workforce of sixty, was actually situated in Limerick.⁸⁹

Limerick did not participate in the lace bubble for a number of reasons. One is that the city was not in the operational area of the Congested Districts Board. Another is that the co-operative movement and Department of Agriculture concentrated their activities in rural Ireland. A third is that lace making in Limerick was far more established and better organised than most of the 'bubble' enterprises. Cannock's and Florence Vere O'Brien's school, the two largest lace makers in Limerick, were well run by astute and experienced managers.

Nevertheless, the number of lace workers in Limerick decreased to twenty three in 1926 and this decline culminated in the 1936 census, which returned seven lace workers in Limerick.⁹⁰ The census returns of 1946 stopped listing lace workers as a separate category, supposedly due to their numbers being so few. In reality, Irish lace in general and Limerick lace in particular were far from dead in 1946 and indeed had many more decades of life ahead.



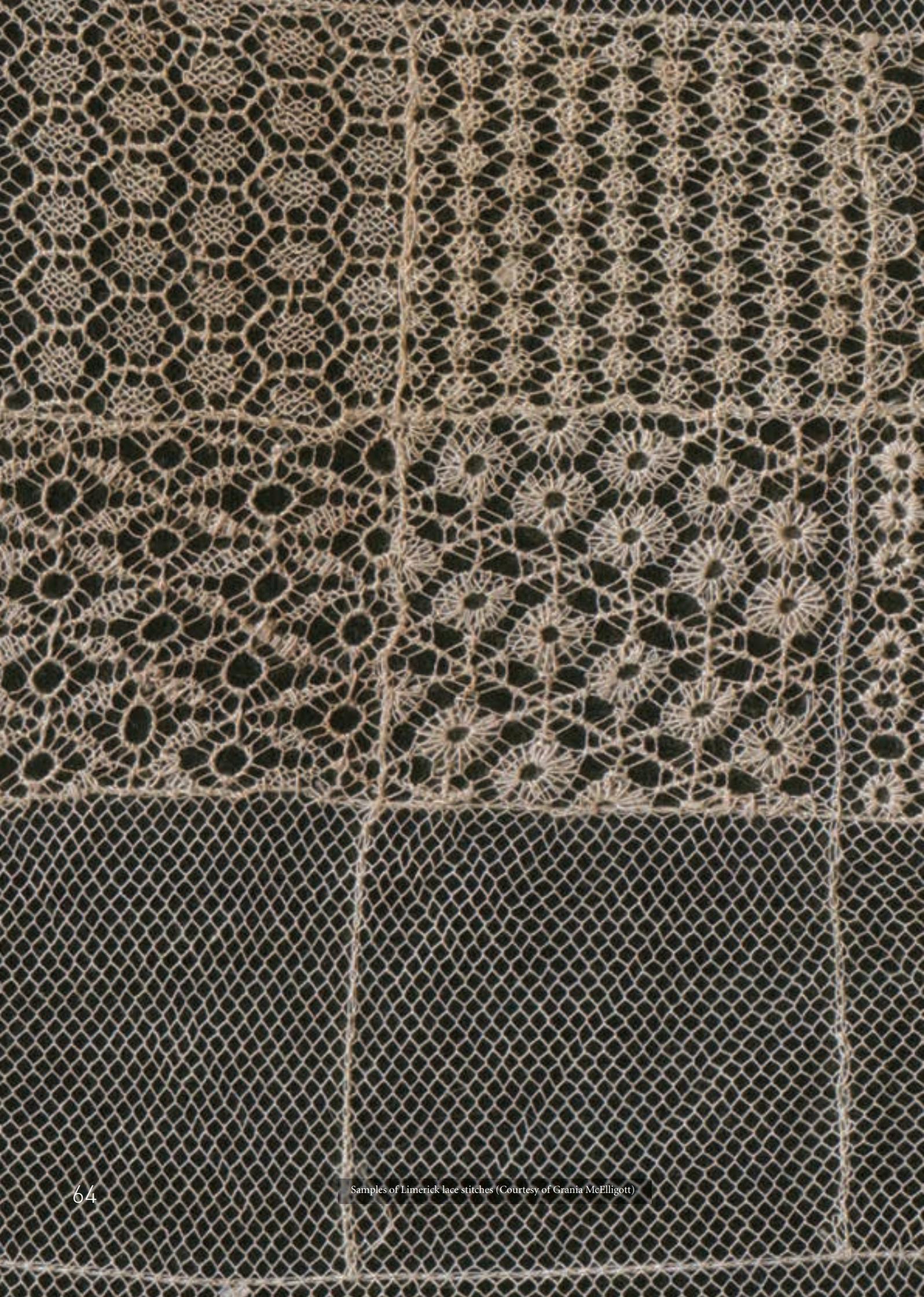


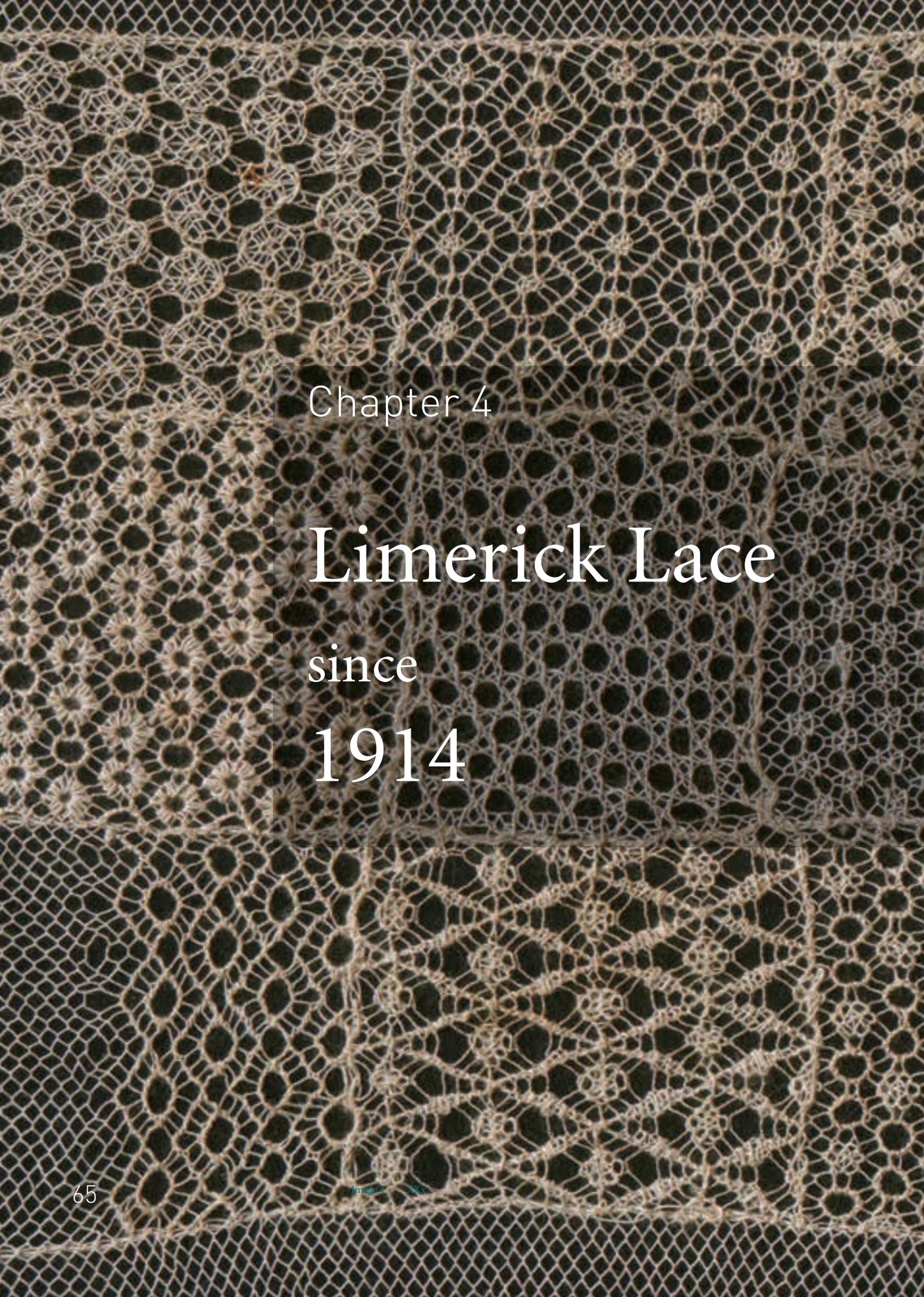
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The Revival of Limerick Lace

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Chapter 4

Limerick Lace

since

1914

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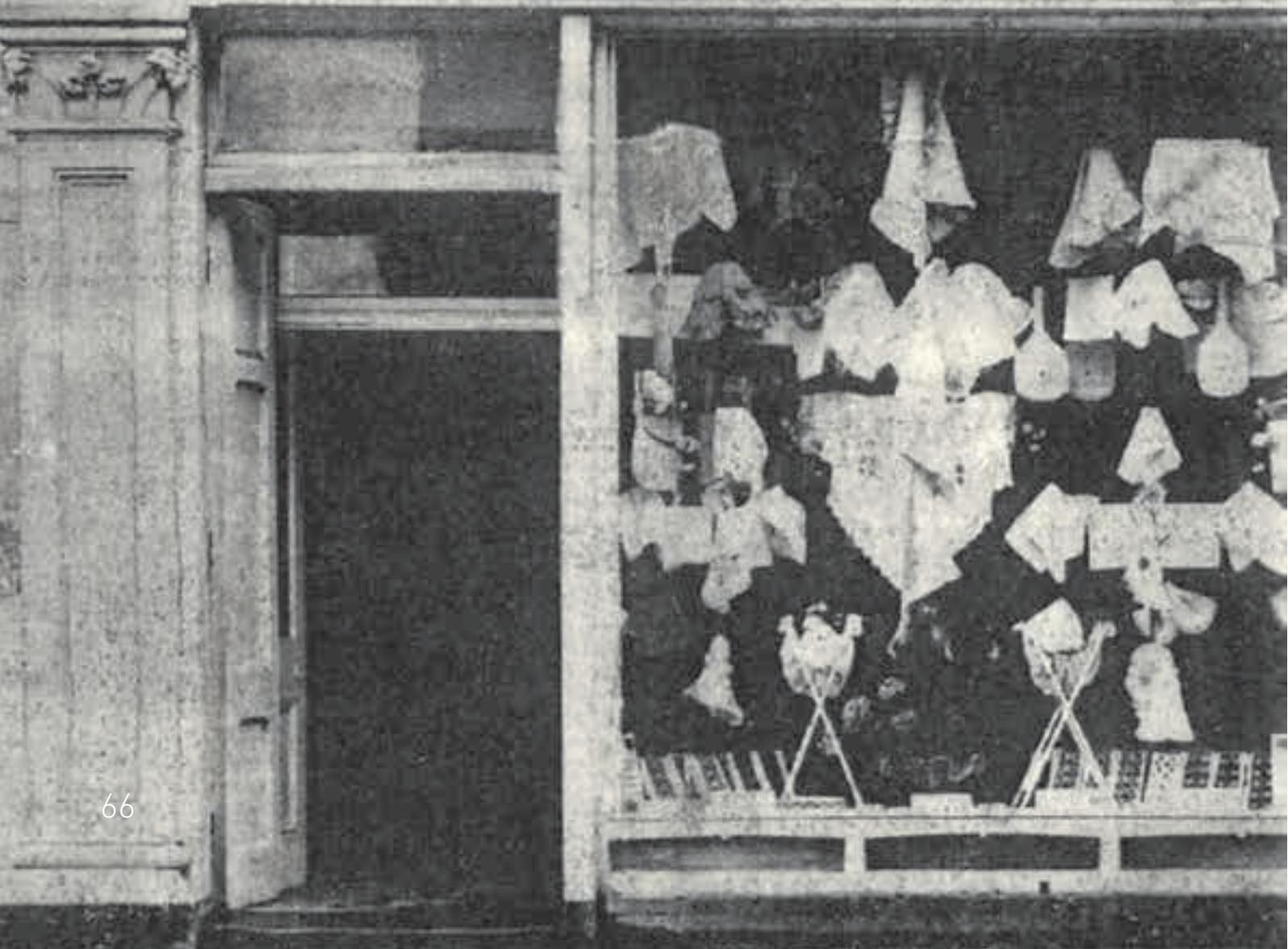
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Limerick Lace since 1914



The Collapse of the World-Wide Lace Industry

After 1914, the Irish lace industry, including the Limerick variety, went into decline as part of 'the collapse of the lace industry' all over the world. The hand made lace industry 'could not hope to succeed in a world where there was little need for lace, where there was no clientele prepared to pay the necessarily high prices, nor lace makers prepared to work for starvation wages.'¹ After the First World War women's fashions became simpler inspired by the designs of Coco Chanel. No longer worn as part of everyday wear, lace was now only worn for special occasions, such as First Communion and weddings and by the clergy. Both machine made and part machine made (Limerick) lace were also severely damaged by the emergence of alternative and better-paid employment for young women.

Irish and Limerick lace also suffered a number of specific setbacks. In 1909, the United States introduced a prohibitive tax on imported lace, which was increased from 60 percent to 90 percent in 1922, and effectively shut Irish lace out of the American market. China flooded the American market with counterfeit 'Irish laces' manufactured at a fraction of the cost of the real product.² Also, the newly independent state actively encouraged women to become fulltime housewives and to refrain from any other type of work.³

Nevertheless, Limerick lace continued to be an iconic Irish decorative art for much of the twentieth century. The manufacture of tambour work in Limerick declined after the First World War, but needlerun lace continued to be made.⁴ The decline of Limerick lace, while real, is exaggerated in the census returns, which shows that the number of lace makers in Limerick city dropped from eighty six in 1911 to twenty three in 1926 and seven in 1936.⁵ However, the surprising resilience of the commercial manufacture of Limerick lace, established by Walker ninety years previously, clearly demonstrate how the census continued to underestimate the number of lace makers in Limerick. Both Cannock's and Florence Vere O'Brien continued in business until the 1920s, but new lace making enterprises were also established by Maude Kearney (1904) and James Kirby (1908) which also employed significant numbers. Maude Kearney alone employed at least fifty and there may have been as many as 100 lace workers in Limerick during the 1920s and 1930s, representing a significant contribution to the local economy and a large multiple of the numbers recorded by the census. Lace workers were concentrated in two main areas: Thomondgate, the catchment area for Maude Kearney's business and Clare Street, where the Good Shepherd Convent was situated.

It is only since the Second World War that Limerick lace has declined to the extent of ceasing to be an industry and becoming a small scale craft or heritage product. According to the 1946 census, lace workers disappeared from the national workforce as they were no longer listed as a separate category. Even so, there continued to be lace makers in Limerick city long after they disappeared from the census returns.





Maude Kearney (1873-1963)

After the retirement of Florence Vere O'Brien, another capable business woman emerged to continue the tradition established by Walker. At a time when most Irish women were housewives, Maude Kearney was the dominant figure in Limerick lace for half a century. Like Florence Vere O'Brien, Maude Kearney came from a distinguished artistic background. Her father James Hodkinson (1826-1916) was the founder of J. Hodkinson and Sons the leading specialists in church decoration throughout Ireland.⁶ A native of Manchester, who studied under Augustus Welby Pugin (1812-52), the great English architect and pioneer of the Gothic revival, James Hodkinson established the family business in 1852 and moved permanently to Ireland around 1862, settling first in Cork and later in Limerick city in 1876. He set up his home and business at 53 and 54 Henry Street, Limerick, from where the company still operates today.⁷

Maude Hodkinson was born in Sligo, where her father was working on Sligo Cathedral at the time. She grew up surrounded by pattern and design, and in latter years assisted her father with his design work. From her mother, Delia, she inherited her needlework skills. Maude Hodkinson was educated at the FCJ Convent, Laurel Hill, Limerick and the Crawford Municipal School of Art in Cork where she studied art, design and lace making. Later she taught lace making there specialising in Limerick and Carrickmacross lace. Always a shrewd businesswoman, she also taught lace privately all over Munster, and in 1900 was told that her services would no longer be required by the Crawford School of Art because she did not confine her teaching to that institution. However, her students in the Crawford School presented a petition asking for her to be reappointed and 2 January 1901, it was decided 'that Miss Hodkinson be appointed as teacher of the Limerick lace class for the whole session.'⁸ In 1904, Maude Hodkinson married Eugene (Hugh) Kearney (1869-1934), an auctioneer and they lived at Riverside, Thomondgate, a house on the banks of the Shannon, belonging to Walker's Distillery.⁹

Around the time of her marriage, Maude Kearney established a lace making business which she called the Thomond Lace Industry. It proved to be highly successful and operated for some fifty years until the 1950s. Conscious of the fact that available lace patterns were generally quite traditional and formal, she chose to imprint her own character on her work and designed all her own patterns. Although influenced by her surroundings which varied from the rigid ecclesiastical styles to the formal and traditional, Maude Kearney's artistic inclinations allowed her to use a more natural freedom to create her own designs, to which she gave names such as 'Isabel collar', 'Wheatsheaf', 'Castleton', 'Judith Wedding Veil', and 'Saint Agatha Alb.' She trained her workers in lace skills and provided them with the patterns, net and needles required to make the lace.¹⁰

At the height of its success, Thomond Lace employed between fifty and eighty workers (far in excess of the number of lace workers returned in the census). Some of these women worked on the larger pieces of lace such as priests' vestments and altar cloths on trestles set up in one of the rooms in Riverside, overlooking the river, whilst others worked on smaller pieces of lace items such as collars and handkerchiefs in their own homes.¹¹ In 1919, Maude Kearney offered to purchase the lace business of Florence Vere O'Brien who was contemplating retirement, but the deal never went ahead.¹²

A very astute and independent business woman from an early age, Maude Kearney was intensely focused and driven in her aim to promote her work both at home and abroad. She travelled regularly to Brussels to purchase the highest quality of hexagonal net, finest muslin and cotton thread used to make her laces. She also travelled to trade fairs in Europe and the USA to promote Irish lace. The range of her production was quite extensive and included dressing table sets in a variety of shapes and sizes, handkerchiefs, jabots, collars and cuffs, elbow to wrist sleeves, stoles and veils. Her Limerick and Carrickmacross lace was sold through Clery's, Walpole's and Switzer's in Dublin. She also designed a large selection of ecclesiastical garments and altar cloths, most of which were commissioned for Catholic churches in the USA.¹³

Maude Kearney and her family moved to Dublin in 1926, where she lived for the rest of her life, but continued to run her business in Limerick. On her frequent business trips to Limerick, she stayed with the Hodkinsons on Henry Street. Her business was so successful that she was able to buy each of her four remaining children (after her son died young) a house in Clarinda Park, Dun Laoghaire. She retired in the early 1950s and died in 1963 at the age of ninety.¹⁴





My grandmother Maude Hodkinson Kearney came to live with us when I was about five years of age, and history repeated itself when she began to teach me how to stitch, just like my mother had been taught at an early age. Maude Kearney's daughter Grania O'Dowd (my mother) played a major part in helping with the business. It was fascinating to watch Maude design her lace with an incredible dexterity and fluidity of movement. Her ability to fill both large and small spaces with perfectly proportioned designs was a tribute to her artistry. Watching the subsequent transformation of the net through the myriad of tiny, intricate stitches, into a vast array of pattern and design was mesmerising.

The essence of lace is defined by the beauty and the delicacy of its stitches. I am so grateful to have inherited all of Maude's patterns, so exquisitely and artistically crafted, along with a large collection of her own handmade lace. Favourites among these have to be her little sets of samplers using stitches named Fish Eye, Bird's Eye, Seed and many others as well as an exquisite mother-of-pearl handled fan embroidered with the date May 1908.

Maude Hodkinson Kearney by Grania McElligott





James Kirby (1870-1959)

In 1907, James Kirby, a native of County Kerry, established a lace factory and retail outlet at 23 Glentworth Street, Limerick. Within six months of opening, he was employing a staff of thirty, which again illustrates how the census returns underestimated the numbers employed in Limerick lace.¹⁵ Kirby insisted on high standards and his advertisements for workers indicated that 'all lace makers employed by us in future must either have a sound knowledge of drawing or possess certificates showing that they are pupils in the art classes of the Municipal Technical Schools.'¹⁶ Later, he moved to 20 O'Connell Street, where he remained until 1922. A staunch nationalist who 'for long years took an active part in the movement to revive the native language, native industry and native culture in every shape and form,' Kirby's business was informed by his support for Sinn Fein's philosophy of economic revival and self-sufficiency. Ironically, his support for Irish manufacturing and the 'Buy Irish' campaign was shared by Lady Aberdeen and the Irish Industries Association, which illustrates how these ideas enjoyed cross party support at this time.¹⁷

Subsequently, his son Patrick Kirby family opened a retail shop on Parnell Street, where household linens and curtain lace net was sold. The closure of the shop in 2003 marked the end of the century-old Kirby family connection with lace in Limerick.¹⁸

Good Shepherd Convent

The manufacture of Limerick lace in the Good Shepherd Convent on Clare Street was always conducted on a relatively small scale compared to the factories of the 1830s to the 1860s and Cannock's between the 1870s and 1920s. However, Maude Kearney, James Kirby, the Presentation Convent and the Sisters of Mercy had all ceased lace making by the 1950s, leaving the Good Shepherd Sisters as the sole Limerick lace making enterprise in the city. It is this circumstance, plus the continuation of their enterprise until 1990 that has made the Good Shepherd Sisters so closely associated with lace making in Limerick, despite the small size of their enterprise. There are several samples of lace from the Good Shepherd convent in the Limerick Museum.

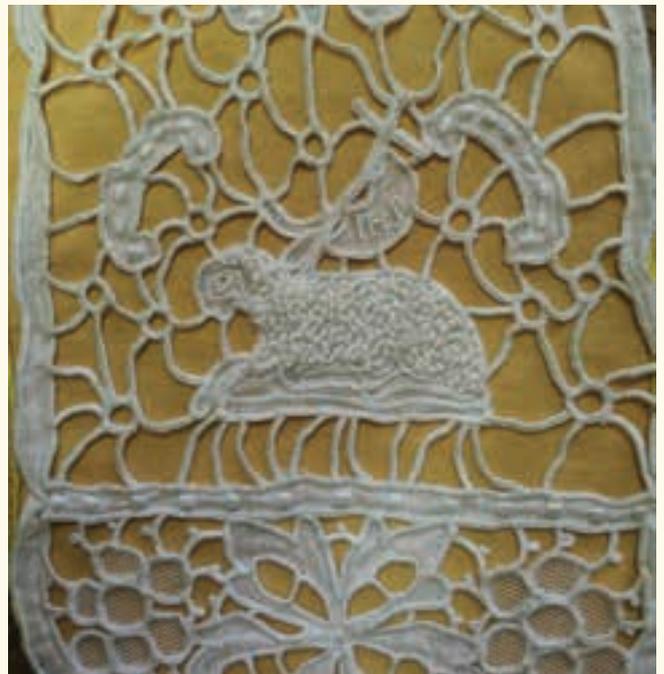
By the 1950s, the Good Shepherd nuns were the only religious order making lace in Limerick. The Good Shepherd Convent employed both home workers and residents in the making of Limerick lace.¹⁹ In 1950, the *Irish Independent* reported that Limerick lace was 'in danger of extinction through lack of workers.' It described the convent as 'a thriving centre' where 'the girls in the institution are taught this intricate craft by the Sisters' but noted that 'the outside workers, once so numerous in the Clare Street and Thomondgate districts, are now reduced to about six.' One of these home workers, Delia O'Loughlin (1897-1978) of Clare Street came from a family with no tradition in lace making but had 'learnt to thread the needle from an old lace maker that lived opposite.' She learnt lace making in the Presentation Convent, Sexton Street and at the time the *Independent* article appeared was teaching lace to the local Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA) guild.²⁰ Over the years, she made lace for Todd's and both the Mount Saint Vincent and Good Shepherd Convents.²¹

However, the work was described as being tedious, 'the electric light too harsh to work under and too few members [of the ICA] are able to give up the daylight hours to learn.' Delia O'Loughlin got up early in the winter to begin work and finished around four in the afternoon, making a handkerchief in a day. During the Second World War, the net and thread necessary for lace making (which were always imported) had been difficult to obtain, but were now plentiful again. 'Now Limerick workers use American thread to make the lace for which America is their best customer.' However, some deplored that the 'conventionalised designs' popular in the American market, such as 'Eire and the harp and the shamrock' were lowering the standard of design. The report concluded on a pessimistic note: 'Exquisitely designed church work is still being done, and occasionally orders come for wedding veils. But at Limerick Show this week, not a single piece of Limerick lace appeared in the Home Industries section.'²²

Almost twenty years later, in 1969, the *Limerick Leader* carried a report entitled 'The Lace Makers' which described the work of the Good Shepherd Sisters in Limerick. The unnamed Sister in charge of lace making stated that 'we have twelve girls working here.' The report described how 'the girls do the actual work in the lace manufacturing and Sister supervises.' The lace was not supplied to shops but ordered by customers. The

Thomondgate, Limerick where many lace workers lived (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)

Advertisement for James Kirby's Limerick lace shop, c. 1910 (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)



Above: An example of ecclesiastical lace (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)

Below: Examples of ecclesiastical lace made in the the Good Shepherd Convent (Courtesy of the Good Shepherd Convent, Limerick)





ENDNOTES

Limerick Lace since 1914

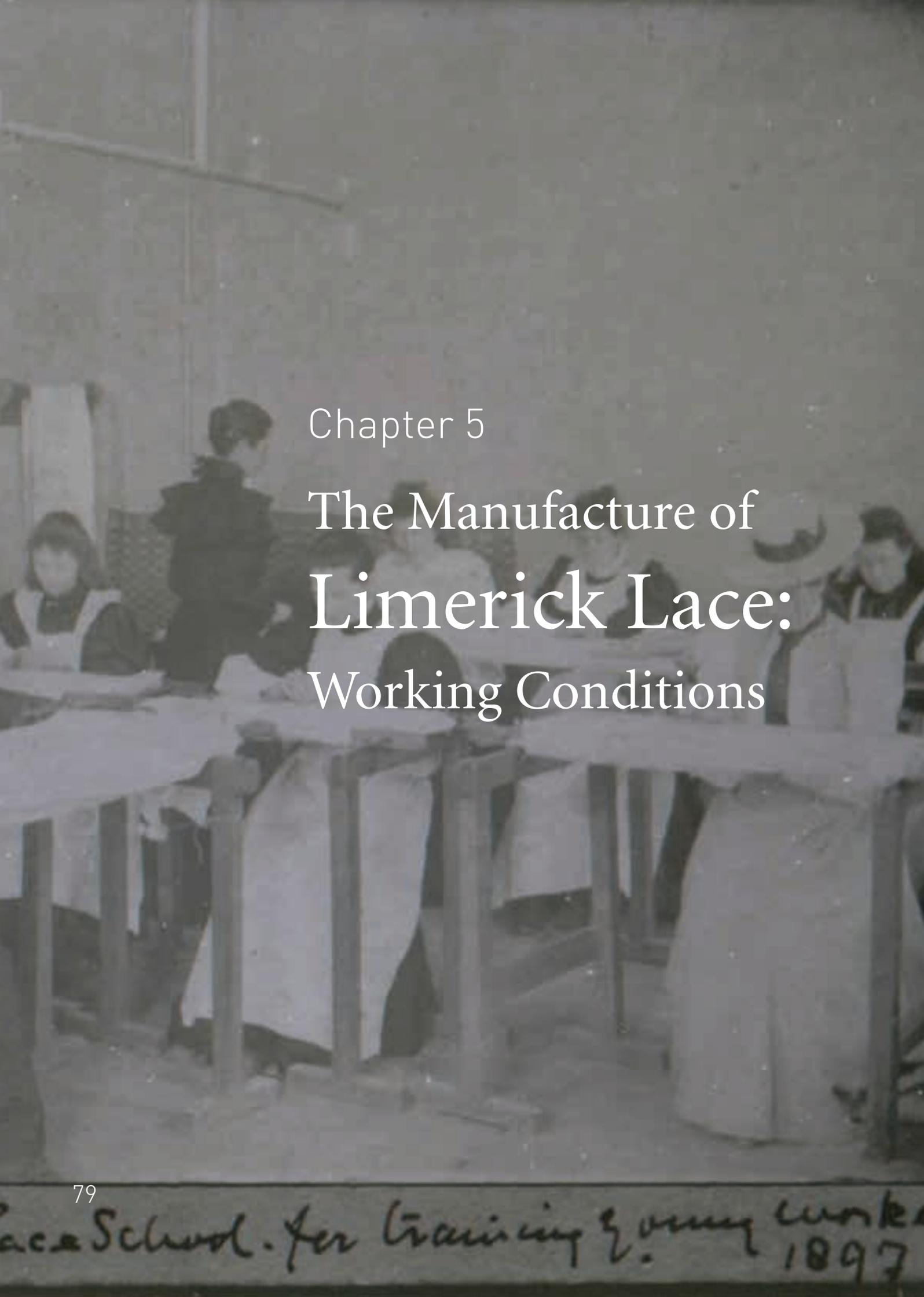
- 1 Levey, *Lace, A History*, p. 117.
- 2 Bourke, 'I was Always Fond of my Pillow', p. 157 and *Irish Independent*, 2 January 1926.
- 3 Bourke, *Husbandry to Housewifery*, pp 263-83.
- 4 Ó Cléirigh, 'Limerick Lace,' p. 112.
- 5 *Census of Ireland*, 1911, Munster, Table XX, p. 840; *Census of Population*, 1926, Vol.2, Table 5, p. 41; 1936, Vol.2, Table 5 p.41
- 6 For the history of J Hodkinson and Sons, see the company website at <http://prv.loveartdesign.com>.
- 7 The company has traded continuously since 1852, passing from James to his three sons (Maude's brothers), Louis, Harry and Alfred in 1916, then to Louis's sons Aubrey and Malcolm in 1955 and finally in 2004 to Aubrey's son Randel, the fourth generation. It specializes in the restoration and conservation of historic painted interiors and carries out the general painting and decorating of cathedrals, churches, convents, schools, and other buildings.
- 8 CP/CO/SP/M/004/Minutes of Technical Instruction Committee, Cork Corporation, 30 May, 1900; 2 January, 1901, in Cork City and County Archives.
- 9 Interview Randel Hodkinson with Matthew Potter, 25 August, 2014, Limerick Archives and information from Grania McElligott, 16 September 2014. Maude Kearney was Randel Hodkinson's great aunt and Grania McElligott's grandmother.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Maude Kearney to Florence Vere O'Brien, 3 May 1919 in Florence Vere O'Brien Papers.
- 13 Interview Randel Hodkinson and information from Grania McElligott.
- 14 *Irish Times*, 20 March 2010. Maude Kearney's daughter Nora Roberts (1918-2010) was the founder of the Texaco Children's Art Competition and wife of Ruaidhrí Roberts, general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions for thirty-five years.
- 15 *Irish Independent*, 27 September 1907.
- 16 *Limerick Leader*, 2 March 1908.
- 17 Ibid, 25 March 1959.
- 18 *Farranshone, A Memoir* (Limerick:Farranshone Residents Association, 2003), p. 5.
- 19 The term penitent, which means someone atoning for the sins, was used for residents in the Good Shepherd Convent .
- 20 *Irish Independent*, 2 September 1950.
- 21 Presentation Convent School Project, 1978.
- 22 *Irish Independent*, 2 September 1950.
- 23 *Limerick Leader*, 5 April 1969.
- 24 Information from Sister Teresa Byrne, of the Good Shepherd Order.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 For example, see *Limerick Leader*, 19 July 1952.
- 27 *Irish Times*, 19 July 1952.
- 28 These developments are described in Diarmuid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004).
- 29 Finola Kennedy, *Family, Economy and Government in Ireland* (Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute, 1989), pp 87-116.
- 30 Ó Cléirigh, 'Limerick Lace,' p. 112.
- 31 Pat Earnshaw, *Embroidered Machine Nets, Limerick and Worldwide* (Guildford: Gorse Publications, 1993), p. 14.

Photo of the Limerick Lace School



Students in Florence Vere O'Brien's Limerick Lace School (Courtesy of Veronica Rowe)

Mr. R. Vere O'Brien's Limerick L



Chapter 5

The Manufacture of
Limerick Lace:
Working Conditions

The Manufacture of Limerick Lace: Working Conditions





Working Conditions in the Nineteenth Century

In 1887, an anonymous contributor to the *Art Journal* wrote that

Poverty is the mother of the Irish lace industry: for Irish lace existed and still exists, not to supply the commercial demand for it, but to enable a poverty-stricken population to earn a meal of porridge or potatoes. Lace making was a way for many young girls and women to earn an income during times of economic hardship, very often it was the only thing between the maker and starvation.¹

In these lines, the author encapsulated the essential elements in Irish and Limerick lace making. This chapter explores the working environment of Limerick lace workers in both commercial and philanthropic enterprises. Borne of poverty, it was almost always poorly paid and conditions of work were generally difficult. The overwhelmingly female workforce had to contend with long hours, tedium and eye strain, while in the early decades of the industry, child labour was endemic.

Limerick lace was a child of the Industrial Revolution. It arose due to the mechanisation of the manufacture of net, while the factory system, one of the major features of industrialisation, was introduced by Walker as its mode of production. This was an age of harsh working conditions and exploitation with long hours of work, poor pay, severe discipline and dangerous conditions. A major imbalance between the power of the employers and the employees was also a feature of the early stages of industrialisation.²

During the Industrial Revolution, one of the principal sources of workplace conflict was the transition from a domestic to a factory setting. The pre-industrial workforce which had grown up in a rural traditional society had worked long hours, but often at a slow and more flexible pace according to their own desires and in their own homes. By contrast, factories were run like penal institutions, with harsh discipline, inflexible working hours and a depersonalised employer-employee relationship. In the early decades of Limerick lace, workplace disputes were rife, as the employers made full use of their legal powers to impose factory discipline on their frequently reluctant workforce.³

The Victorian period was also the age of reform and humanitarianism, when the state at both national and local level became involved in areas such as public health, education, social welfare and working conditions. Exploitative and harsh working conditions became the subject of public outcry, leading to legislative and regulatory intervention by the state.⁴ To some extent, these reforms came too late for Limerick lace. In its early decades, when lace making in Limerick was factory based, working conditions were governed by the harsh Master and Servants Acts which were heavily biased against workers and were not repealed until 1875. By contrast, the Factory Acts, which brought about much needed reforms, did not apply to Limerick lace until 1867, by which time the numbers employed were declining rapidly. Consequently, working conditions in Limerick lace were at the worst when the lace factories were at their largest from the 1830s to the 1860s.

The transition from factory to home work also had the peculiar consequence that more is known about conditions for lace workers in Limerick before the 1860s than subsequently. Factories were much easier to visit and describe than scattered private dwellings.

The Master and Servant Acts and Limerick Lace

The Master and Servant Acts had a major regulatory role in the Limerick lace industry. For over 500 years (1351-1875), this harsh code of law governed relations between employers and employees in Britain and Ireland. It represented an intermediary stage between forced labour, such as slavery and serfdom, and modern free labour. The Master and Servant Code was based on the belief that employer and employee had freely entered a contract (usually known as an indenture) the breach of which was a serious offence. Generally, employees were taken on for a year and were forbidden to leave before its expiry, while apprenticeships lasted for seven years. Heavily biased against employees, the Master and Servant Code gave employers the ability to prosecute and severely punish workers for breach of contract. This was very widely defined and employees were deemed to have broken their contract if they tried to move to another employer before it expired, if they disobeyed instructions, if they were deemed to be idle or negligent, or were absent from work or even unpunctual. Even more drastically, employee breach of contract was classified as a criminal offence where the state prosecuted the offender: the emphasis was on punishment and a sentence of imprisonment as well as a fine could be imposed. By contrast, breaches of contract on the part of employers were treated as a civil offence, where proceedings were instigated by private individuals, the emphasis was on conflict resolution and imprisonment was rarely used. Additionally, the magistrates who heard these cases were drawn from the élite, and were usually biased in favour of the employers.⁵

Although medieval in origin, the Master and Servant Code had been updated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many prosecutions were brought under the 1823 Master and Servant Act which defined employee breach of contract very broadly and imposed harsh punishments, including imprisonment, forced labour and even whipping. This severe legal code was widely used in Victorian times and between 1858 and 1875, over 10,000 prosecutions per year were undertaken under its provisions.⁶

South and Cronin have conducted separate studies which demonstrate that in the 1830s, the Master and Servant Acts were liberally employed in the Limerick lace industry.⁷ Thus, in July 1836, a number of William Lloyd's 'apprentice girls' were threatened with jail 'for neglecting their business and leaving his employment for another' and some fifty of David Kinnear's 'apprentice girls' were sentenced to one week's imprisonment each 'for neglect of duty.'⁸ In August 1836, two of Kinnear's male apprentices were sentenced to fourteen days imprisonment each 'for absenting themselves from their business' while Lloyd prosecuted a number of his apprentices 'for inattention to work, two of them were sent to prison for fourteen days, the others were discharged on expressing contrition and promising amendment'.⁹ In February 1837, Kinnear brought eighteen girls to court for absenteeism and they were each sentenced to fourteen days imprisonment.¹⁰ What was even more galling to Kinnear on this occasion was that many of them had set up their own small lace making businesses, 'a laudable manifestation of enterprise not appreciated by their employer.'¹¹ In April 1837, he took proceeding against several of his apprentices 'for gross neglect and non-attendance' and they were sentenced to from one week to twenty eight days imprisonment.¹²

Charles Walker was reported as having taken equally stern measures against his employees. In 1833, he brought three factory girls to court for leaving before their contract had expired. They refused to return due to low wages, but the court ruled that they should abide by the original indenture.¹³ In 1839, the harsh working conditions in Walker's factory were illustrated by the absence from work of several of his workers, who claimed that he had, contrary to the terms of their apprenticeship, made them work by candlelight, and even forced them to pay for the candles out of their earnings. Walker's response, incredible by modern standards, was that he 'admitted that many of the girls had worked by candlelight, but if they did, it was at their own request. He never kept them at work longer than twelve hours a day.' Seven of the girls were sentenced to fourteen days imprisonment if they do not return to work.¹⁴

Pilfering of lace by the workforce was also severely punished. In 1837, one of William Lloyd's factory girls, Honora Whelan, was found to have stolen some lace from the stock and having been tried and found guilty was subsequently transported for seven years. On this occasion, Lloyd complained that 'there were a great many petty thefts committed in his factory.'¹⁵



In view of the severity with which the Limerick lace manufacturers dealt with insubordinate workers, it is not surprising that when Dr John Ryan, the Catholic Bishop of Limerick visited the Lambert and Walker lace factory in 1842, he was 'very gratified at seeing the very great order and regularity of these establishments.' The Bishop learnt that 'two or three years ago, the average committals or imprisonment of the apprentices for inattention to their employment was from 200 to 250. For the last two years, they have been reduced to eight or nine! And as to any misconduct, it is very rare indeed.' This happy result had been brought about through the 'vigilant zeal of the Rev Mr Nolan [Fr John Nolan, curate of St Mary's Parish], with the active co-operation of the employer.'¹⁶

However, this 'progress' may either have been confined to the Lambert and Walker lace factory, or if it was a city wide trend, was only temporary. In 1842, Hannah Vaughan was brought to court by William Lloyd for leaving his employment in favour of another lace factory. The court ordered her back to work on pain of a month's imprisonment.¹⁷ In the same year, a local magistrate stated that 'the prevailing public opinion' in Limerick was that the apprentices in the lace factories were being 'unjustly fined and not fairly dealt with', a claim which infuriated Lloyd. In a letter to the *Limerick Chronicle*, the indignant factory owner wrote that 'I court the fullest inquiry and investigation into any or all the transactions of my establishment, and defy either the worthy magistrate or any other gentleman to show, in one single instance, that any, even the slightest injustice or arbitrary conduct has been practiced against any girl in my employment.'¹⁸ In 1846, Lord John Manners was highly critical of what he called 'the perplexing and harrasing character of many clauses in the indentures by which they are bound apprentices to the various manufacturers.' He noted that 'not a week passes without the city magistrates being called upon to adjudicate upon these indentures between servant and apprentice.' He cited an example of an indenture which forbade the girl to get married, 'in all things to conduct herself like a good, faithful and dutiful apprentice' and observe a host of other provisos. Breach of contract was punishable by fines and the girls worked twelve hour days, six days a week.¹⁹

The Factory Acts and Limerick Lace

In contrast to the Master and Servants Acts, the Factory Acts had less impact on Limerick lace making as the industry only came under the Factory Code in 1867, by which time most of the factories had closed and the numbers employed had dropped significantly. After 1867, the Factory Code governed enterprises such as Cannock's and the Thomond Lace Industry which employed in-house workers, but were not applicable to the numerous Limerick lace makers that were home based.

The Factory Acts was a series of acts introduced by the British Parliament to regulate working conditions in industrial employment in Britain and Ireland. These conditions included the length of hours worked, minimum age of commencing work, the prevention of accidents, mealtimes, holidays and methods of payment. Among the most important milestones in the progress of the Factory Acts were the introduction of enforcement through a paid inspectorate (1833), the inclusion for the first time of women and young people (1844), the introduction of the ten hour day (1847) and the inclusion of non-textile industries (beginning in 1860).²⁰ Until 1867, the Factory Code made a distinction between 'factories' which employed more than fifty and 'workshops' which employed less than fifty employees.

Many observers wanted to have the production of Limerick lace governed by the Factory Acts. In 1846, Mayor Edmund Fitzgerald Ryan of Limerick told Lord John Manners that 'a bill regulating the hours of labour in the lace factories would the greatest blessing to Limerick that the legislature could bestow.'²¹ In 1864, the Children's Employment Commission recommended that the Limerick lace factories should be brought under the Factory Code.²²

The lace industry in Britain was not included in the Factory Acts until 1861 in the case of fully machine made lace and 1867 in the case of part machine made (such as Limerick) and hand made lace. Also in 1867, the Factory Acts were extended to workshops.²³ Ironically, Limerick lace came under the provisions of the Factory Code precisely when the industry ceased to be factory based and became workshop and home based. The 1860s saw the closure of most of the city's lace factories and the reduction

in the workforce of the few still remaining. By the 1880s, the only factory making lace in Limerick was Cannock's, which employed around sixty, and thus might be more accurately described as a workshop. With this important exception, most Limerick lace from the 1870s onwards was made by home workers, who were not covered by the Factory Code.

Child Labour in Limerick Lace

Large numbers of children were employed in the manufacture of Limerick lace from the 1830s to the 1860s. The definition of a child has differed in different cultures and eras, but the British and Irish census returns in the nineteenth century frequently divided the workforce between those aged fifteen and over and those under fifteen. Accordingly, in the present work, the term child labour will be applied to those under the age of fifteen. While popularly associated with the Industrial Revolution, child labour has existed for centuries and the great majority of people began work as children. The division between the home and the work place is largely a product of the Industrial Revolution and in previous centuries, most children worked in the family household, workshop or farm. Others worked outside the home as apprentices, domestic servants, or labourers. The vast majority of children did not participate in formal education, but absorbed skills and work practices informally as part of their duties. Until the nineteenth century, child labour was not regarded as being evil or exploitative. The Industrial Revolution dramatically changed the nature of child labour and eventually led to its disappearance from advanced Western societies. Although exploitation and long hours had always been widespread features of child labour, industrialisation and the factory system made it far more visible and concentrated. In addition, the growth of humanitarianism, rising standards of living, the development of mass education and the Victorian emphasis on the family made child labour seem both unacceptable and unnecessary.²⁴

The earlier Factory Acts limited the incidence of child labour, but did not apply to Limerick lace until 1867. Not surprisingly, one of the most striking features of the industry in its early decades was the prevalence of child labour. In 1835, Walker advertised in the *Limerick Star and Evening Post* looking to recruit 100 workers, children aged from ten to twelve years old, to take up seven-year apprenticeships.²⁵ According to the 1841 census, 402 lace workers in Limerick city (76 percent of the total) were under fifteen years.²⁶ In 1843 a correspondent for the *World* magazine visited Lambert's lace factory in Mulgrave Street and noted the prevalence of child labour:

Here there are 350 girls from 9 or 10 to 20 years of age, employed in the various departments... our attention was arrested by some children of a very tender age – so young that they could scarce lisp their names – who were seated at an embroidery table and plying the needle with as much apparent assiduity as their seniors. We found that even these infants were able to throw from ten to eighteen pence into the treasuries of their elder sisters.²⁷

Lord John Manners, who was a Conservative MP interested in social reform, visited an unspecified lace factory in Limerick in August 1846, which employed two hundred girls, many of whom were drawn from 'the poorest of the Limerick poor.' Among the 'great drawbacks to the system' which he condemned was the early age at which the girls started work, usually as young as six or seven.²⁸ In 1897, Florence Vere O'Brien described how some of the factory girls in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s 'began at the age of six, to practice the art of handling the tambour needle, first in pricking outline patterns on calico, and afterwards working on 'botch' net or practice pieces.'²⁹

More puzzling in view of the absence of a statutory prohibition of child labour is its rapid decline in Limerick lace after 1841. The 1851 census returned 162 lace workers in Limerick city under fifteen (17 percent of the total), all of whom were female, which represents a sharp decline both absolutely and proportionately.³⁰ A possible explanation is that so many child workers had been recruited and trained by the lace manufacturers in the 1830s, far fewer replacements were required in the following decades. Subsequently, child labour continued to decline, with the under fifteens numbering only twelve (7 percent of the total) in 1871 and one (1 percent of the total) in 1891.³¹



‘Before the plainest kerchief is completed, it must pass through seven or eight hands. There is first the pattern drawing, then tambouring, and successively needlework, table-purling or finishing, satin-stitching, cutting, framing, packing, making up, etc., all [of] which respective stages of the business are conducted by distinct classes of workers’

Favourable Accounts of Limerick Lace Factories

Despite considerable evidence of harsh working conditions, the Limerick lace factories received praise from a number of sources. According to some authorities, Charles Walker was a benevolent and considerate employer. Undoubtedly the most extravagant such characterisation appeared in his *Limerick Chronicle* obituary which portrayed him as being closer to a fairy godfather than a factory owner. ‘With the enthusiasm of a philanthropist – the patience of a philosopher – and the untiring energy of an ardent and enlightened intellect, he at his outset, identified himself with the interest of Ireland and the improvement of her people,’ wrote his journalist-admirer, who confidently expected that future generations of Limerick lace workers, ‘when they shall have heard of the teacher and protector of their precedessors, [will] praise his name and bless his memory.’³²

Over forty years later, Florence Vere O’Brien wrote that ‘some of my old workers still living in Limerick can remember Mr Walker and have a very good word for him, as a kind-hearted man who gave his workers cheap potatoes when they were scarce and dear.’³³ Support for these recollections is provided by the *Cork Examiner* which in 1843 reported that Walker had ‘given out this spring forty acres of potato land to the poor of his locality [Broadford, County Clare]. Any person wanting seed for his land, Mr Walker advances it to him and waits for payment until January next, giving the poor man employment, ad interim, to pay for it all.’³⁴

Almost as enthusiastic were Mr and Mrs S C Hall, whose descriptions of Limerick’s lace factories were widely circulated and did more than those of any other observer to create the favourable reputation which they subsequently enjoyed. The Halls wrote that

The utmost attention is paid to the social and moral condition of the workers; and good habits are studiously taught them as well as their business; they are remarkably clean and well ordered; and their appearance is healthy and comfortable. Their health is carefully watched by medical practitioners, who attend upon them in their houses in cases of illness, the expense of which is defrayed by the masters.³⁵

They also described how ‘very many of the apprentices have sums varying from one pound to twenty pounds deposited in the savings bank- a considerable portion of them earning more in a week than the day-labourer, and the employment continuing the whole of the year.’³⁶

In 1853, John Francis Maguire MP, founder and proprietor of the *Cork Examiner* and his friend Professor George F Shaw of Queen’s College (now University College) Cork visited the lace factory of Lambert and Bury, which had formerly been Walker’s establishment and were also impressed. Maguire wrote that they were

Greatly struck by its admirable management, the order and system that pervaded such a very extensive establishment, and the general air of neatness and comfort manifest in the appearance of the young persons employed. And I may also add that I was informed, on the authority of those who were qualified to speak on the subject, that the girls employed in this, as in the other lace factories in Limerick, were among the best conducted of the orderly and moral population of that noble city.³⁷

Pay and Conditions in the Lace Factories

Between the 1830s and 1870s, Limerick lace was made under classic factory conditions. The lace factories were substantial buildings housing a large workforce under strict supervision. One of the prominent characteristics of the factory was the division of labour. The pre-industrial craftsman made an entire object on his own from start to finish. By contrast, factory work necessitated the division of production into a series of simple tasks, each of which was performed repetitively by a single employee. In 1843, Lambert and Bury’s factory in Mulgrave Street was organised in this manner:

Before the plainest kerchief is completed, it must pass through seven or eight hands. There is first the pattern drawing, then tambouring, and successively needlework, table-purling or finishing, satin-stitching, cutting, framing, packing, making up, etc., all [of] which respective stages of the business are conducted by distinct classes of workers.³⁸

‘It frequently happens that there are two or three members of the same family in the factory, and it may easily be received what cheer their united earnings can throw around an otherwise miserable hearth’

The Limerick lace factories were not purpose built. Walker set up his first lace factory in a disused commercial premises which was ‘a large building with spacious rooms and afforded ample accommodation for the workers.’³⁹ Later he relocated to Mulgrave House, a private house in Mulgrave Street and from there, his factory moved to the Philosophical Rooms, Glentworth Street (later the site of the Lyric Cinema). In 1843, Mulgrave House was described as being in ‘a healthy part of the city.’ It formed ‘a square of one-story buildings, and is lighted from the roof and side walls.’ This account went on: ‘Nothing pleased us more than their [the lace workers] cheerful, healthy and comfortable appearance. In fact, an authority would have admitted that great numbers of them were well qualified to sustain the reputation of Limerick, not only for lace, but for beauty.’⁴⁰ Nor was lace manufacture in the city like many English factories, which were ‘hotbeds of vice and disease. We can vouch how different it is in Limerick, where every factory worker we saw had the glow of health on her cheek.’ The workers’ morality was also strictly policed by the redoubtable Fr John Nolan, already mentioned as the unofficial enforcer of the Master and Servant Code. He acted as chaplain to the lace factories, visited them regularly and set up Sunday schools to provide the workers with an education on their day off.⁴¹

In 1864, John Edward White, one of the assistant commissioners attached to the Children’s Employment Commission described McClure and Carman’s lace factory on Clare Street, as ‘three adjoining uninhabited dwelling houses communicating inside... the rooms had a neglected appearance and a fire-place was bricked up.’ He described Robert Honour’s lace business in an unspecified part of Limerick as ‘an untidy room in a dwelling house’ where a workforce of usually twenty (sometimes twenty-five or thirty) women were employed making lace on frames as in the larger factories.⁴²

From the 1830s to the early 1860s, Limerick lace factories were overcrowded, due to the very large numbers employed. By 1864, space was less of a problem, as the workforce had declined considerably. In 1864, Mr Baily, manager of Forrest’s lace factory told the Children’s Employment Commission that ‘the factory was built for assembly rooms. Only one room is now in use, but both are lofty; the lowest, I should say, eighteen feet high.’⁴³

In 1843 a correspondent for the *World* magazine wrote that Lambert’s factory employed ‘350 girls from nine or ten to twenty years of age, employed in the various departments of handicraft necessary to the production of lace.’ It found a number of positive features such as ‘the wages of the girls in Mulgrave House and the other establishments average from 3s 6d to 4s per week. It frequently happens that there are two or three members of the same family in the factory, and it may easily be received what cheer their united earnings can throw around an otherwise miserable hearth.’⁴⁴ Likewise, in 1846 Lord John Manners praised the ‘scrupulous cleanliness’ required for lace making in Limerick, which would compel the lace maker ‘to set an example to the filth and squalor around her’ and give her ‘habits and tastes’ which he hoped she would retain for life. He also noted that, due to the extreme poverty of their backgrounds, their meagre earnings were frequently of critical importance to their families.⁴⁵

The sheer size of the workforce employed in making Limerick lace meant that it had a major impact on the local economy. In 1836, Walker told the Poor Law Commission that

Of the 300 families employed by me, there are families of 200 of them dependent upon the wages of those females for their support.. among many others, a very distressing case came to my knowledge in 1832 during the cholera [epidemic]. The father and mother of a family of four children died of the cholera. The eldest girl was a child of twelve, the next a boy of eight years old; the other two very young, one of them not two years old. These had no place to sleep in and for twelve months subsisted on the earnings of the eldest girl, who was in my factory and never got more than 1s 6d per week.⁴⁶

Lace workers served a seven year apprenticeship and worked long hours from 6am to 6pm. In 1837, the Halls described all 800 of Walker's workers as being apprentices, earning from 3s 6d to 7s a week.⁴⁷ They also wrote that they were comparatively well paid; 'a considerable portion of them earning more in a week than the day labourer and the employment continuing during the whole of the year.'⁴⁸ By 1847 at the height of the famine it is reported that women worked beyond a twelve hour day to earn between 15s and 20s per week. In 1856, it was stated that

'the girls began to earn respectable wages as soon as they had acquired a competent knowledge of the work; three shillings and sixpence per week was about the average sum they could draw; and as they progressed, it amounted to five, six, seven or eight shillings a week, in many instances equalling, and in some instances exceeding the earnings of the head of the family.'⁴⁹

In 1864, Mr Baily, manager of Forrest's lace factory told the Children's Employment Commission that a few of his workforce were 'engaged in drawing out patterns to be copied, cutting out, etc.' The youngest girls got around 3s a week and the others up to



6s or 7s. In the past, they used to teach the girls crochet, but due to the collapse of that part of the industry, the factory now concentrated on the manufacture of tambour lace. He testified that 'we used to take children from about eleven years old upward and teach them, but now seldom have girls under fifteen, not finding children suitable, though we have one or two employed in odd ways.' He also stated that it had been customary in the other lace factories to bind the girls as apprentices for a number of years, but that Forrest did not do so. The girls had the option of working from 9.00am to 7pm with an hour for dinner or until 6.00pm without a break, and according to Baily preferred the latter arrangement. He also testified that 'years ago, when there was more demand' the girls would have sometimes worked 'for some special purpose' until eleven or twelve at night, but were paid extra and given 'something to sustain them.' However, 'for about three months last summer, they worked over their time as long as it was light enough, perhaps till nine.' Generally, it was the better and more experienced staff who worked these extra hours.⁵⁰

Robert Honour testified that 'there are scarcely any learners in the trade now, because there are so many persons know how to do the work than there is employment for.' Also, he corroborated Baily's testimony when he stated that 'my hands work by the piece and generally come in summer from 6 or 7 am to 6 or 7 pm.' Sometimes, they worked by candle light, 'but not often and very seldom beyond eight, except for some special purpose, such as a wedding, and then perhaps till twelve.'⁵¹

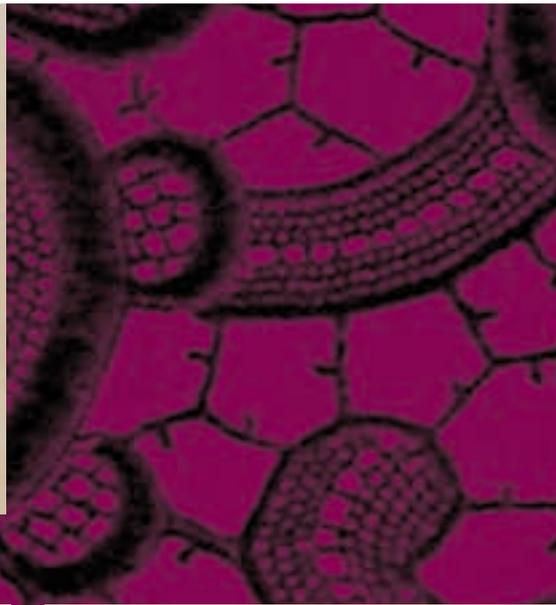
Some of the lace workers also gave evidence to the Children's Employment Commission, though its veracity must have been compromised to some extent by the presence of their employers at the same sessions. Margaret Brown, aged fourteen, had commenced work with Forrests at the age of nine. She stated that the staff never worked beyond six o'clock and all left at the same time. Lunchtime lasted for either fifteen or thirty minutes. She was paid 2s 6d or 3s a week. She could 'read a newspaper, write badly and was at compound addition' when she left school. She had stopped attending Sunday school three months previously but intended returning during the summer. Mary Ann Hinkey was aged eleven and a half, and 'cut out muslin with scissors.' She had attended school every day until she had started work in the lace factory 'just lately.' She could read, write and 'do long division.' Kate Fahan aged seventeen started work for McClure and Carman when she was eight. The apprenticeship lasted for seven years and she was now earning 3s 6d per week.⁵²

In Cannock's, conditions were improving just before lace working was discontinued. In 1920, an agreement between the Irish Drapers' Assistants Association and the three Limerick department stores, Todd's, Cannock's and McBirney's, was signed which introduced a minimum wage for all employees including lace workers and stipulated that the minimum starting age for an apprentice was fifteen and a half. The staff of the millinery work rooms, which included the lace workers, were to serve a three-year apprenticeship, after which their weekly pay was fixed at 25 shillings in the first year, after which it increased annually to 28 shillings (year two), 31 shillings (year three), 35 shillings (year four) and 37 shillings and six pence (year five).⁵³

An Attempted Appraisal of the Limerick Lace Factories

To the modern observer, there is a glaring contrast between the strictness with which Charles Walker treated his workers and the numerous accounts of his alleged kindnesses and indulgence to them. Similar observations could also be made about his fellow employers. Despite the harsh conditions already described, the favourable accounts by shrewd and well-informed observers cannot be dismissed as incorrect. It is tempting to conclude that either Walker was a hypocrite or the flattering accounts of his benevolence were mistaken. While these explanations may indeed be correct, two other factors must also be considered.

Firstly, the transition to factory work was most challenging for the first generation of Limerick lace workers. While some Limerick lace workers came from a factory environment, the majority did not and had to be familiarised with factory discipline.



'In their own little rooms – rooms often so dark and dingy in the most dilapidated quarter of the so-called English Town of Limerick, that it was a wonder how the lace could emerge, as it generally did, as clean and fresh as if made in the most well-appointed and roomy factory. Sometimes, I am bound to say, there were difficulties peculiar to cottage industries. Turf smoke in excess, a drunken husband, and once a cat who jumped through a beautiful run-lace flounce when in the frame, to the bitter disappointment of both the worker and myself.'

Secondly, Walker and the other lace manufacturers lived in what would now be considered an authoritarian age. Relationships within workplaces, educational establishments and families were hierarchical, discipline was often strict and punishments severe by modern standards. Authority figures, such as employers, schoolteachers and parents frequently combined sternness with kindness, and by turns dispensed rewards and penalties. When viewed in context, Walker may be regarded as neither saint nor devil, but rather as a product of his times.

Conditions in Florence Vere O'Brien's Lace Undertakings (1883-1922)

Florence Vere O'Brien recruited her home workers from the ranks of Forrests former employees. She described how they worked on the lace

In their own little rooms – rooms often so dark and dingy in the most dilapidated quarter of the so-called English Town of Limerick, that it was a wonder how the lace could emerge, as it generally did, as clean and fresh as if made in the most well-appointed and roomy factory. Sometimes, I am bound to say, there were difficulties peculiar to cottage industries. Turf smoke in excess, a drunken husband, and once a cat who jumped through a beautiful run-lace flounce when in the frame, to the bitter disappointment of both the worker and myself.⁵⁴

Indeed, the challenging conditions in which Florence Vere O'Brien's home workers made lace were often a good deal worse even than in this account. In 1913, 20 percent of Limerick city's housing stock consisted of 1,050 tenement houses, and another 15 percent were one-room flats. As late as 1932, one third of the city consisted of lanes and courts, without proper water supply or sanitary facilities. In 1911, an article in *The Irish Builder* contained the remark that there was nowhere in Ireland 'with worse slum dwellings than Limerick or where proper houses for the poor are more necessary'.⁵⁵

The working conditions in Florence Vere O'Brien's lace schools were more favourable. From 1889 to 1893, the first school was housed in two small rooms at the top of a Georgian house in Bank Place. In 1893, 'it consisted of two rooms in an old building in a squalid part of the city. There were perhaps twenty girls being taught there to make Limerick lace.'⁵⁶ Florence Vere O'Brien's second school was situated in the more fashionable George's Street, at Number 112 from 1893 to 1900 and Number 48 from 1900 to 1922. The rooms in both premises were large and bright with high ceilings and large windows. As the numbers attending the school were always quite small, overcrowding would not have been a problem. Pupils started in the school at the age of thirteen or fourteen.⁵⁷

Unlike some of the lace factory owners earlier in the nineteenth century, Florence Vere O'Brien was known to be a very kind and caring employer, an ethos which she had inherited from her Quaker background. She inspired fervent loyalty in her staff, one of whom, Eileen O'Donohue, described Florence Vere O'Brien as 'my friend, as well as my employer.' On the occasion of Florence's twenty fifth wedding anniversary in 1908, the pupils of the lace school and the home workers each gave her a present of lace they had made themselves, with accompanying testimonials signed by all the staff.⁵⁸

The wages paid by Florence Vere O'Brien to her home workers were fairly high by the standards of the times and the usual earnings of Irish lace makers in general. In 1894, her 'thirty-one elderly and highly-skilled lace-makers' who had formerly worked in lace factories were earning seven shillings a week.⁵⁹ In 1897, Alan Cole wrote that 'the rate of wages for the making of... Limerick lace, as paid by the schools, compare most favourably with the rate of wages paid by the employers in the town for dress making, or for making up tinned goods in the pork factories.'⁶⁰ In the same year, Florence Vere O'Brien wrote that 'we have eight young girls learning in the school, who have been taught gratis and the best of whom can now earn 7s per week.'⁶¹

A record she kept of the amounts paid to twenty three home workers for the year ending 1 November 1910 demonstrates that the highest earner made £20. 15s 9d and the lowest £4. 4s 10d. Seven earned between £15 and £20; eight got between £14. 15s and £10 and eight earned under £10.⁶² In 1908, a 'good worker' could earn up to 14s a week.⁶³

Working Conditions in the Presentation and Mercy Convents

From the 1840s onwards, Catholic nuns played a major role in Irish lace making and Limerick was no exception. Until recent decades, their activities received almost universal praise. In 1888, Florence Vere O'Brien wrote 'I do not know how Ireland would get on without the convents and the convent industrial schools.'⁶⁴ Although they have become the focus of considerable criticism in recent decades, it must also be remembered that they frequently undertook tasks that both state and society in Ireland, pre- and post- independence, were unable or unwilling to assume. These included institutional provision for orphans, the disabled and single parents.⁶⁵

The 1902 annual report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland included a valuable description of the 'Industrial Department' conducted by the Sisters of Mercy in Mount Saint Vincent Convent. It had been in operation since 1878 and had fifty five pupils on the rolls, including forty one 'externs.' They engaged in shirt making, dress making, machine knitting, embroidery and lace making. Some of the manufacture was for private orders and some of the clothing was used for the orphans and pupils of the attached industrial school. The pupils received no payment, but the report was at pains to point out that they received 'very efficient' teaching, which equipped them with useful skills. The report concluded by stating that 'the Department is in a very flourishing condition, the variety of industries taught is very extensive and the pupils show much skill and facility in the working of the articles.'⁶⁶

Working Conditions in the Good Shepherd Convent

In recent years, the revelations of abuse and ill-treatment in various institutions run by religious orders in Ireland has made the role of the Good Shepherd nuns one of the most controversial and contentious chapters in the history of Limerick lace.⁶⁷ First hand testimony of conditions in the Good Shepherd Convent, Limerick is provided by Gabrielle North (née O'Gorman) who worked there as a lace maker from 1963 to 1965.⁶⁸ Aged seventeen on admission, and originally assigned to the laundry, she refused to work there, a form of passive resistance called being 'on the Wran.' She recalled 'I was put in the lace department, there were three big frames with about nine ladies in all worked there...my frame had two ladies, one was called Helen, the other I think was Mary.' She received her training from a local woman from outside the convent, one of the few lace makers remaining in Limerick at the time. Gabrielle North estimates that the oldest of the lace makers was around sixty and she herself at seventeen, was the youngest. One of them had contracted poliomyelitis as a child and 'was very gifted and could do all the complicated stitches. Her name was Mary, a name given her by the nuns.'⁶⁹

Gabrielle North and her fellow lace makers worked from 9.00am to 6.00pm. They usually worked in daylight but also with electric light when necessary. The lace makers wore a uniform of drab brown or grey material at all times. Although the nuns visited the lace room from time to time, routine supervision was performed by 'ladies who had been in the Magdalen laundry for many years' and were known as 'auxiliaries.' In many respects, the convent regime was prison-like, as residents were committed to the institution against their will, not permitted to leave and 'received no pay at all' for their work. The regime was strict, although there was an absence of corporal punishment and verbal abuse, practices forbidden by the rules of the Good Shepherd order.⁷⁰ Instead, Finnegan writes that 'control was maintained...by discipline, silence, surveillance and work.'⁷¹ Gabrielle North stated that breaches of rules were punished by making the offender sit on a 'penance table' at mealtimes. This was a wooden seat measuring approximately one foot square placed in front of the nuns' table at the front of the dining room, in full view of all the other residents. Gabrielle North added 'I was on there many times.' On occasions, the offender would be required to alight from the penance table to make a public apology, part of which involved kissing the floor.⁷²

Ultimately, the Good Shepherd nuns, aware that they were greatly outnumbered by the residents, maintained control through compromise rather than the use of force. Finnegan writes that 'open confrontation was always to be avoided' and rebellious or high-spirited residents were sent away to prevent them inciting revolt.⁷³ Gabrielle North stated that 'I tried to escape but the nuns decided to let me go, they always said I was disruptive.' Accordingly, they arranged for her to move to Mount Carmel Hospital, Dublin, where she worked as a cleaner. She stated 'I will never forget that early morning call, one



of the auxiliaries telling me to leave the dorm as quietly and quickly [as possible] so no one was woken up because this may upset some of the women who were desperate to get out. I was so happy that I was being let go at last, freedom!⁷⁴ Gabrielle North stated that despite her negative experiences there, 'I think that if it had not been for the lace, I would never have stayed as long as I did..I am now proud [of her lace making skills] and I have pieces for my grandchildren and [would be] so delighted if the lace can be revived.'⁷⁵

In 1978, some secondary school students from the Presentation Convent, Sexton Street, Limerick visited the Good Shepherd Convent while researching a project on Limerick lace. They were taken to the lace room where they were five women at work, but only two making lace. One of these, Catherine,⁷⁶

Was working at a large frame. She had many d'oyleys [sic] finished and she had a handkerchief outlined. She also had a collar and cuffs worked. All her work was done in run-lace. She had been making lace for fifty years. She worked with great speed and skill.

The other, Helen, 'was working on a veil. The veil was three metres square.. [which will] cost £400 when completed. .. She has been making lace for thirty two years. She works with even greater speed than Catherine.'

Trevor Heaney, who worked as a 'maintenance man' in the convent in the 1970s remembered that

I used to go in to the lace room the odd time to have a look at some of the sewing machines. The ladies in there had very soft hands, which is understandable given the work they were doing. Some of them were up into their 80s maybe their 90s still sewing away at Limerick lace. There would be twelve or fourteen working in there.⁷⁷

John Kennedy who managed the laundry in the convent in the 1970s and 1980s testified that:

It could take a week to make one lace handkerchief for which they were charging the Americans peanuts... Now what they also did was embroidered table linen. So any one of the women who had a gift for needlework would be in the lace room. They also had the old type manually operated Singer sewing machines; you know the ones that you tilted the footplate to make it work. They were geniuses with their hands at needle craft, those women. Many of them went out then to the outside world with the crafts they learned here.⁷⁸

Gender and Lace Making

Sharpe and Chapman point out that 'lace was gendered work.'⁷⁹ Because the workforce was overwhelmingly female, the discourse surrounding lace making was different from that used when discussing more 'masculine' industries. In particular, the growing Victorian emphasis on the family and domesticity sharpened the dichotomy between the public sphere of paid work inhabited by men and the private sphere of unpaid work inhabited by women. This ideology placed the mother at the centre of the home, where she assumed the role of 'Angel of the House' in charge of child-rearing, house-keeping and general domestic life. Accordingly, it became increasingly unacceptable for women to take up paid work outside the home.⁸⁰

An interesting aspect of lace making is that 'partial mechanisation seems to have increased women's employment opportunities, whereas later full mechanisation reduced them.'⁸¹ This is clearly illustrated when lace making in Limerick and Nottingham is compared. In Limerick, the centre of partial mechanisation, the workforce was always overwhelmingly female. By contrast, the transition to full mechanisation in Nottingham from the 1840s onwards created employment opportunities for men as well, particularly in the operation of heavy machinery. At its height, the Nottingham lace workforce was one third male.⁸²

Even during the age of the large scale lace factories in Limerick, the domestic impact of female participation in the workforce attracted comment. In 1841, the Halls wrote that

'the influence of these establishments has been largely felt in Limerick and its vicinity. A love of industry has been extensively spread among the humbler classes, arising from the certainty that it will be amply recompensed; the cottages of the workers are conspicuous for neatness and good order'.⁸³

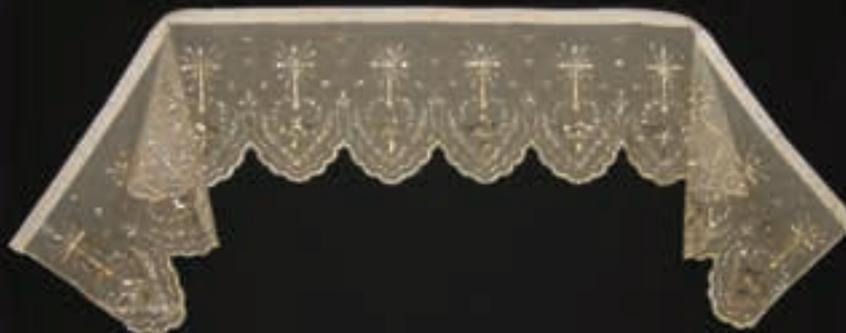
After Cannock's ceased to make lace in the 1920s, the majority of lace makers in Limerick were home based, and were able to combine it with housework and child rearing. The cult of domesticity gathered pace in the 1890s and in Ireland helped frame the debate on the revival of home industries. In relation to these, Bourke writes that 'in the minds of the promoters, the schemes achieved their major aim: to serve as an intermediate form of work between agricultural labour and housework.'⁸⁴ Often, the economic viability of home industries were regarded as being of secondary importance to the cultivation of domestic virtues. Lace making was regarded as being particularly suitable for promoting housewifery, and became 'a way of combining the virtues of housework with creative domesticity.'⁸⁵ It was compatible with fulltime housework but also helped develop home making skills. Lace had to be made in a clean and orderly environment, while the earnings it produced could be used to beautify the home, thus promoting self-respect. Even the low earnings were regarded as an advantage, as they taught useful virtues such as frugality and money management.⁸⁶

Lace Making as a Skill

Commercial lace makers had the 'satisfaction of making something both functional and attractive.'⁸⁷ They were highly skilled craft workers, in many instances they were continuing a family tradition of lace making and in the case of home workers they enjoyed a degree of autonomy. On the other hand, when working in a factory or workshop, they enjoyed the companionship of their colleagues. However, they also had to endure long hours, poor conditions and low wages, often paid by piece.⁸⁸ In most cases, commercial lace makers did so to help make ends meet, rather than for work satisfaction. Bourke concludes that despite the low rates of pay, women living in poverty and with few alternative sources of employment chose to make lace as it provided a vital supplement to the meagre earnings of the household.⁸⁹

Limerick lace makers were frequently praised for their skills. Charles Walker claimed that Limerick girls had a greater aptitude for lace making than was to be found in any other part of Europe and that they learnt the skills twice as fast as English girls.⁹⁰ Fifty years later, Florence Vere O'Brien commented on how the pupils of her lace school showed as great an aptitude for the work 'as their mothers and grandmothers in Mr Walker's day.'⁹¹

To some extent, 'the actual creative impulse was the designer's.'⁹² Patterns were usually produced by either trained designers, or self-taught managers of the lace making enterprise. Nevertheless, the patterns distributed to home workers were sometimes of such a general nature as to give the actual lace makers considerable scope for exercising their own judgement in the placing and execution of stitches to realise the overall design.⁹³



ENDNOTES

The Manufacture of Limerick Lace: Working Conditions

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- 2 For Ireland see Andy Bielenberg, *Ireland and the Industrial Revolution: The Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Irish Industry, 1801-1922* (London: Routledge, 2009).
- 3 Berg, *The Age of Manufactures*, pp 169-207.
- 4 The horrors of Victorian working conditions were highlighted by many great novelists of the period such as Charles Dickens, Mrs Gaskell and Charles Kingsley (who wrote on the ill-treatment of young chimney sweeps).
- 5 Suresh Naidu and Noam Yuchtman, 'How Green was my Valley? Coercive Contract Enforcement in 19th Century Industrial Britain' at <http://www.ejs.ucdavis.edu>, the website of the Economy, Justice and Society (EJS) is an interdisciplinary program involving faculty in the departments of Economics, Sociology, and the School of Education at the University of California, Davis, pp 1-46.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp 4-7.
- 7 Angela South, 'Child Labour in the Limerick Lace Industry' in David Lee and Debbis Jacobs, (eds.), *Made in Limerick, History of Industries, Trade and Commerce, Vol. 1* (Limerick: Limerick Civic Trust, 2003), pp 251-56.
- 8 *Limerick Chronicle*, 23 July 1836, cited in South, 'Child Labour in the Limerick Lace Industry', p. 252.
- 9 *Limerick Chronicle*, 20 August 1836, cited in South, 'Child Labour in the Limerick Lace Industry', p. 253.
- 10 *Limerick Standard*, 14 February, 1837, per Maura Cronin.
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- 12 *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 April 1837, cited in South, 'Child Labour in the Limerick Lace Industry', p. 254.
- 13 *Limerick Evening Post and Clare Sentinel*, 25 October 1833, per Maura Cronin.
- 14 *Limerick Chronicle*, 17 January 1839, cited in South, 'Child Labour in the Limerick Lace Industry', p. 254.
- 15 *Limerick Chronicle*, 8 April 1837, cited in South, 'Child Labour in the Limerick Lace Industry', p. 254.
- 16 *Freeman's Journal*, 26 April 1842.
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- 18 *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 May 1842.
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- 20 Desmond Greer and James W. Nicolson, *The Factory Acts in Ireland, 1802-1914* (Dublin ; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press in association with the Irish Legal History Society, 2003).
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- 22 HC 1864, *Children's Employment Commission (1862)*, p. 80.
- 23 E P Hennock, *The Origins of the Victorian Welfare State in England and Germany, 1850-1914: Social Policies Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 75.
- 24 Clark Nardinelli, *Child Labor and the Industrial Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
- 25 *Limerick Star and Evening Post*, 30 January 1835.
- 26 *Census of Ireland, 1841*, Table VI p. 210.
- 27 *Limerick Chronicle*, 20 November 1843, cited in Angela South, 'Child Labour in the Limerick Lace Industry' p. 253.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp 35-38.
- 29 Vere O'Brien, 'The Limerick Lace Industry', p. 24.
- 30 *Census of Ireland, 1851*, Part VI, Table V, p. 294.
- 31 *Census of Ireland, 1871 Vol.2*, Table XXa, p. 630; 18.Vol.2., Table XIX, p. 630.
- 32 *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 November 1843.
- 33 Mary Gorges, 'Irish Home Industries. Carrickmacross and Limerick Lace and Clare Embroidery' in *Chambers Journal*, Part 18 (June 1899), p. 377.
- 34 *Cork Examiner*, 5 May 1843.
- 35 Hall and Hall, *Ireland, its Scenery, Character, Etc*, p. 343.
- 36 *Ibid.*
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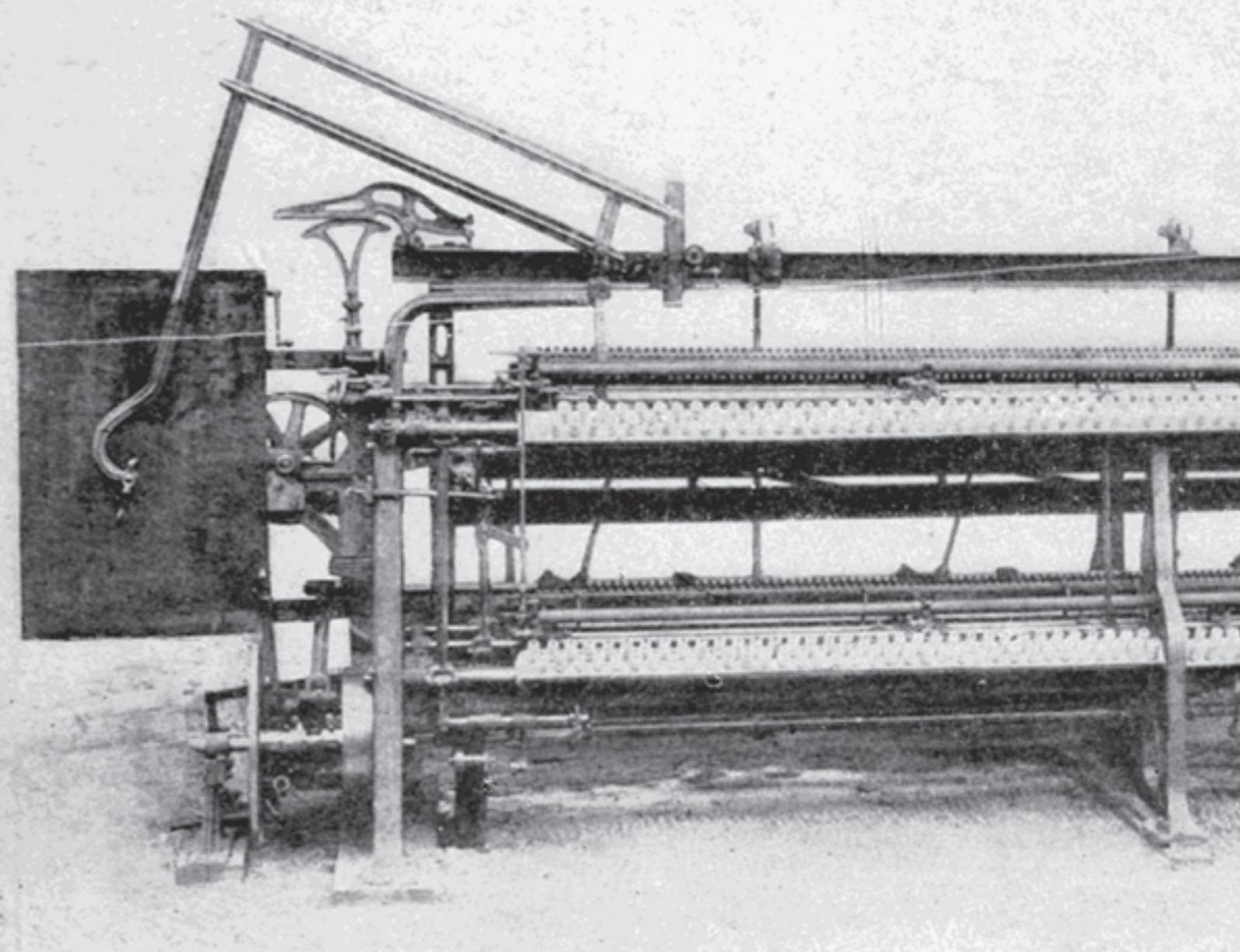
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Chapter 6

Marketing Limerick Lace

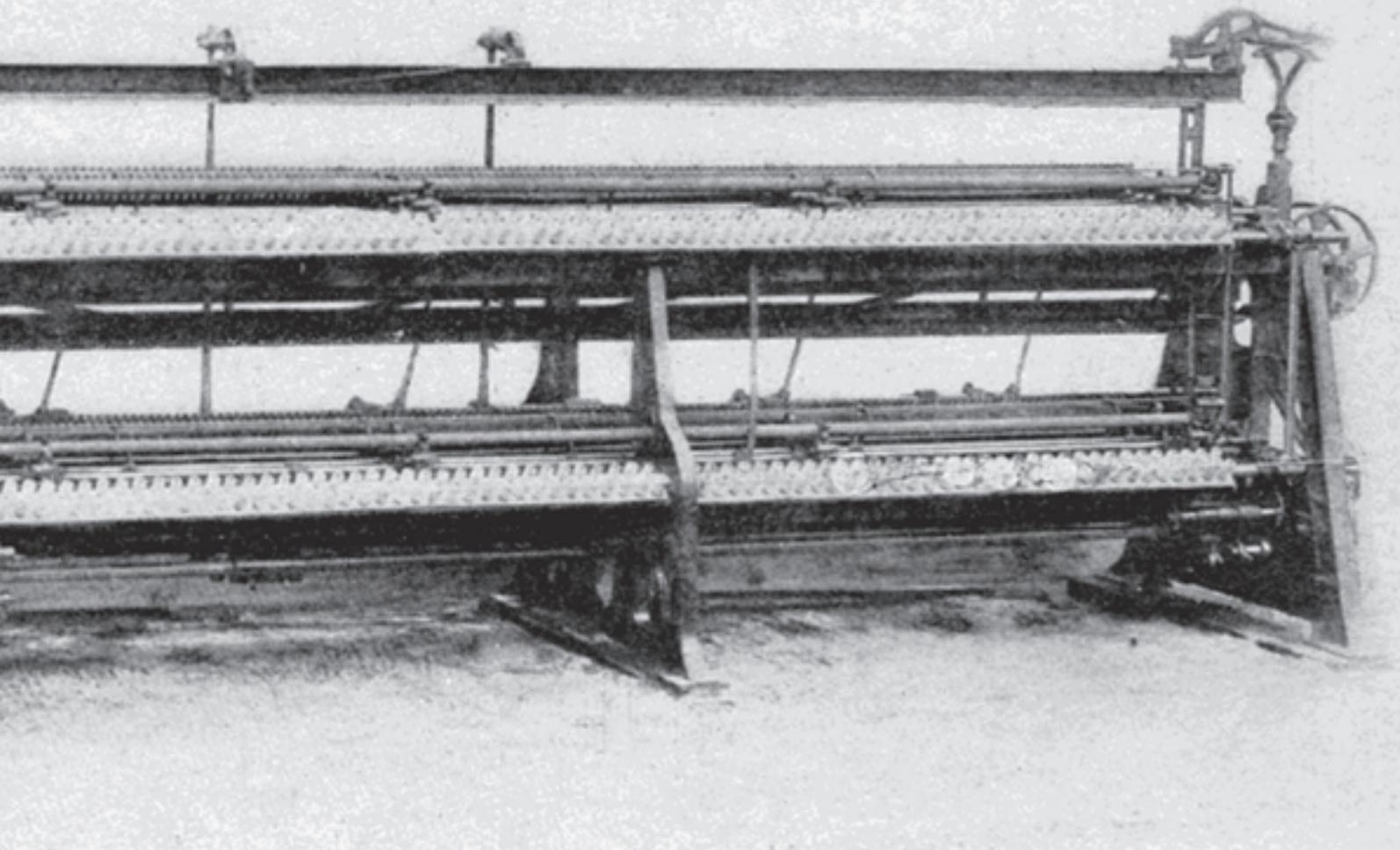


Marketing Limerick Lace

For 150 years, Limerick lace was one of the most prominent 'brand names' in Ireland and was actively marketed as a luxury product. Lace has been described as being 'more recognisably élite than almost any other fabric' and its history characterised as being 'intimately related to privilege, wealth and social status.'¹ Displaying lace on the body, in the house and in the church was an exercise in conspicuous consumption, just like wearing glittering jewels or constructing splendid buildings. At the same time, even 'more than most textiles, it also was subject to the whims of fashion.'² As a result, the lace industry was 'precariously dependant on rapidly changing tastes.'³ Periods of great prosperity were followed by deep depressions, a cycle that was complicated in the nineteenth century by the introduction of first machine made net and then machine made lace.

However, for much of the nineteenth century, hand made lace was very resilient in the face of mechanisation and even increased in popularity in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s. The hand made product set the patterns and styles for the machine made lace.⁴ In 1883, it was claimed that:

Though the hand may be independent of machinery, the machine can never be independent of the hand. Take away all hand made lace- and that produced by the machine will soon cease to be wanted; but increase the taste and skill and artistic excellence of the hand made lace and the machine will ever be required to imitate what is of acknowledged superiority and worth. It is a popular fallacy... that the machine and the hand are in antagonism, and that the one must compete with the other for price, to secure business.⁵



As a combination of machine and hand made, Limerick lace was also able to hold its own against the torrent of mechanised lace from Nottingham until the early twentieth century. The enormous increase in the market for lace, the increasing sophistication of marketing strategies and the improvement in design all contributed to the continued resilience of Limerick lace.

The Consumer Revolution

If the 'consumer society' can be defined as one which encourages the acquisition of ever increasing amounts of goods in excess of basic needs, the first such society in history was late seventeenth and eighteenth century England. Conspicuous consumption had always existed in advanced societies but was usually confined to a small upper class. The Consumer Revolution began in England as a result of the modernisation of the English economy due to the growth of a business ethos in English public life. This resulted in a wide range of luxury goods becoming available to a much wider cross section of society than ever before. Among the Consumer Revolution's principal features were the availability of a much wider range of goods, the percolation of luxury products downwards to the middle and lower socio-economic classes and the beginning of modern marketing techniques. Frugality was out and spending was in. The modern shop had emerged in late seventeenth century Paris and quickly spread to England. In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution resulted in continuous per capita economic growth and ever rising living standards for the first time in recorded history, so

consumerism entered its golden age, epitomised by the appearance of the department store and the trade exhibition. Shopping ceased to be a chore and became a recreation.⁶

Women played a predominant role in the Consumer Revolution. They presided over the home, supervised the design of its interior, and in the case of the more prosperous classes filled it with fine furniture, ceramics, metalwork and glassware. They were in charge of the domestic sphere and hospitality. After 1800, élite men's clothing made the transition from traditional peacockry and flamboyance to modern sobriety, leaving women as the main consumers of fashion, which changed at an ever more bewildering speed. Consumerism was driven by a fashion culture based on emulation, and women became preoccupied with keeping up to date with the latest styles in clothes, hairstyles, interior design and other forms of material culture. Not surprisingly they became the leading patrons of shops, department stores and trade exhibitions.⁷

The Market for Limerick Lace

Limerick lace was affected by these trends. After 1815, the boom conditions of the late Georgian era in Ireland generally did not recur and between 1815 and 1904 the Irish economy only doubled in size, compared to a fivefold increase between 1730 and 1815.⁸ A major exception was the mid-Victorian boom (1850-75), which resulted in a considerable expansion of the middle classes (prosperous farmers, shopkeepers, and professionals), particularly the Catholic bourgeoisie.⁹ Stephanie Rains's study of the evolution of consumerism in Victorian and Edwardian Dublin is equally applicable to other urban centres in Ireland.¹⁰

Limerick lace was the ultimate feminised industry. It was made by women, who increasingly worked under the supervision of other women, both clerical and lay. It was marketed by powerful women, from mother superiors to titled ladies. It was worn by women from all classes of society from queens to shopgirls. After 1800, lace became a female domain, closed to most men:

Few industries appeal to women like the making of lace. The fabric is so delicate and fine, so gossamer-like and yet so strong, and the tracings are so infinite in variety and beautiful in design, that woman regards the product of this manufacture as a prerequisite of her sex... Man ... after he is able to walk, he rarely ever uses lace of any kind. On the other hand, it is most intimately associated with all the great occasions of his sister's life: it forms the principal ornamentation of baby's christening robe; it adds to her charms when later she enters church as a bride; in middle age, it helps to throw back the years; and it is a lace cap which adorns granny's honoured head as her days draw gently to their close.¹¹

Lace was a luxury item which semi-mechanisation (as in the case of Limerick) or full mechanisation (in Nottingham) made much more widely available. In the nineteenth century, 'the major market for lace was the burgeoning upper middle class.'¹² No longer the preserve of a tiny élite, lace became more and more common, until by the mid-twentieth century, its usage spread to all classes of Irish society. Irish lace was a versatile product and was 'used for articles of costume, trimmings, flounces, handkerchiefs, etc., and for furniture purposes- cushion-covers, doyleys (sic), quilts, etc.'¹³ In the Limerick of the 1890s, Cannock's made lace for the church, tourists and theatrical costumes, while the Good Shepherd convent specialised in ecclesiastical lace.¹⁴

One major exception to the nineteenth century feminisation of lace was the Catholic Church, whose male clergy retained their traditional rich attire, which they wore on ceremonial occasions. In the late nineteenth century, the largest collection of lace in the world, worth £200,000 in 1898, was held by Pope Leo XIII.¹⁵ It included 'a quantity of rich Limerick lace', presented to the Pope by Bishop George Butler of Limerick, during a visit by the Irish Bishops to the Vatican in 1880.¹⁶ Ecclesiastical lace was used to trim both altar cloths and certain items of clerical dress, particularly the white outer tunic called either a rochet (worn by bishops) or surplice (worn by lower clergy).



Lace alb (Courtesy of Limerick Museum)



In Ireland, the Catholic revival which began in the 1820s gave a major stimulus to the lace trade.¹⁷ Between 1830 and 1930, the Catholic Church in Ireland built twenty four cathedrals and pro-cathedrals and over 3,000 churches, not to mention hundreds of convents, monasteries and orphanages, which frequently had chapels. Each of these required appropriate lace trimmed altar cloths.¹⁸ Likewise, the number of priests in the island of Ireland increased from 1,850 in 1800 to 3,200 in 1870, and by 1956, there were 5,000 in the Republic alone.¹⁹ Again, this created an increased demand for lace trimmed clerical garments.

In 1989, Mairead Dunlevy wrote that 'an important difference between the Irish lace industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is that the industry was successful in the latter because it concentrated on exports.'²⁰ By international standards, the Irish market was small, and although the standard of living gradually increased, continuing population decline meant that demand did not grow as fast as in other markets.²¹ Consequently, most Irish lace was made for export.²² Irish lace was primarily exported to English-speaking countries, where the consumer society had originated. It made less progress in the continental European market which was dominated by its own long established and highly skilled lace industries.

The British market was particularly important due to its increasing size, wealth and ease of access, due to Ireland's position as part of the United Kingdom. As a result, Limerick lace was greatly influenced by trends in London, one of the great fashion capitals of the world. Sharpe and Chapman write that 'all branches of English and Irish lace industry were dependant on fashion trends and their fortunes were largely dictated by the powerful and conservative West End market'.²³ In the nineteenth century, the dimensions of the élite in Britain expanded considerably, creating a larger market for luxury goods. The population of Britain increased from 16.2 million in 1831 (just after Charles Walker set up his lace factory in Limerick) to 20.8 million in 1851 and 36.9 million in 1901.

The market for lace was largely confined to the upper and middle classes, which multiplied rapidly both in wealth and numbers. At the apex of the social pyramid, the British peerage was the richest in the world, and provided an immense market for all the decorative arts, including clothing and interior design. By way of example, the Honiton lace for Queen Victoria's wedding dress cost £1,000 and at the time of her death, she had £76,000 worth of lace.²⁴ In addition, the British middle classes are estimated to have increased from 20 percent of the population in 1851 to 30 percent in 1901 which meant that the potential market for lace more than doubled within fifty years.²⁵ Limerick lace also targeted the other major English speaking countries such as the United States of America and Australia.

Although in terms of numbers employed the Irish lace industry was approaching an early climax in 1851, it remained small by international standards. One estimate put its total annual value at £22,000 with a thousand employees (an underestimate as the census returned 1,906 lace makers that year), compared to English hand made lace which was worth £150,000 and had 30,000 employees and English machine made lace which was worth £3 million per year and had 15,000 employees.²⁶ By 1907, the lace depot in Dublin recorded that the lace industry in Ireland was worth £100,000 annually.²⁷

Shops and Department Stores

At the time of his arrival in Limerick, Charles Walker was in partnership with 'an extensive lace merchant in London' named Henning, whose premises in London acted as a distribution centre for Limerick lace. Subsequently, Henning went bankrupt and Walker set up his own retail outlet in London, although he also made use of street traders and peddlers to sell his lace all over England.²⁸ In Limerick, Robert McClure had a premises called 'The Limerick Lace Warehouse' at 27 Patrick Street where the produce of Walker and Lambert was available to 'the ladies of Limerick and the surrounding Counties'.²⁹ Lambert and Bury had their own retail outlet in Old Bond Street, London, while James Forrest and Son had a famous shop on 101 Grafton Street Dublin for a century until it closed in 1929.³⁰



During her visit to Limerick in 1841, Mrs S C Hall purchased a number of lace items. She bought two lappets (decorative flaps on garments) for 8s 6d and 7s which she thought great value compared to what she could have bought in London. She also bought an elaborate collar featuring six different stitches for 10s which would have cost 16s in London and a beautiful shawl for £1 9s. However, these items were only so cheap because she was buying at source, in contrast to the London shops' retail price, which would incorporate the percentages taken by both middlemen and shopkeeper. 'At this period, Limerick lace was not considered cheap.'³¹

Limerick lace was also sold in shops and department stores. One of the most significant developments in the history of retail was the rise of the department store (or monster house), a large shop which sold a wide variety of goods in different 'departments' and was generally housed in a monumental building. The first department stores appeared in England and France in the 1830s and soon spread to Ireland. In 1843, the first monster house in Ireland, Arnott's, opened in Dublin, while the first two such businesses in Limerick, Todd's and Cannock's, opened in 1849 and 1850 respectively. Both Todd's and Cannock's became major manufacturers as well as retailers of Limerick lace. However, Limerick and other Irish laces were also sold in major Dublin and London department stores.³²

Specialist lace retailers also emerged. One of the most famous and probably the most significant was the Irish Lace Depot at 76 Grafton Street, Dublin, which was opened in the 1840s by Ben Lindsey. On his death in 1893, it was purchased by Lady Aberdeen and her Irish Industries Association, and later moved to larger premises on Molesworth Street. It closed in 1927.³³ The Hibernian Lace Company, 53 Lower Sackville (now O'Connell) Street, Dublin was also a significant retailer.³⁴ In 1885, Alice Rowland Hart opened a shop called Donegal House on Wigmore Street, off Oxford Street, in the heart of London's fashionable shopping area, to display the products of her Donegal Industrial Fund. Florence Vere O'Brien was able to sell lace there for a number of years due to her husband's cousin, Una Ashworth Taylor (1857-1922), being one of Hart's principal collaborators.³⁵

Royal and Aristocratic Patronage

As has already been mentioned, royal and aristocratic patronage was vital for advertising and marketing luxury goods such as lace. Although she was not considered to be a leader of fashion in the manner of her friend, the French Empress Eugenié, Queen Victoria's support for Limerick lace was of great significance, as the British Royal Court was a major centre of conspicuous consumption. Similarly, the appearance of Limerick lace at the elegant Irish Court in Dublin Castle played a major role in showcasing it to members of the Irish élite. Thus, at a drawing room there in 1841, several ladies wore petticoats, headdresses and trains of Limerick lace.³⁶ Local Limerick aristocrats, such as Lady Clarina and Lady Adare, also assisted the industry by wearing Limerick lace at the Irish Court.³⁷

Florence Vere O'Brien described Queen Victoria as a lifelong supporter of Limerick lace.³⁸ In 1838, the Queen wrote to her uncle King Leopold I of the Belgians asking him to 'tell Aunt Louise [his wife Queen Louise] that she will receive a box containing the Limerick lace dress (just like mine) which I lay at her feet.'³⁹ In 1844, Queen Victoria received lace manufacturer William Lloyd from Limerick city at Windsor Castle, who brought samples of his produce with him. She ordered several items and told him that his produce was 'very beautiful.' She also expressed her pleasure that such an elegant article of dress 'had been brought to such perfection in Ireland.'⁴⁰ As a result, he received a coveted royal warrant by being appointed 'lace manufacturer to the Queen' and in May 1845 was making her 'another magnificent robe with berthe [a type of collar], scarf and pocket handkerchiefs en suite [part of a set].'⁴¹ In 1848, at a drawing room (formal court reception) in St James Palace attended by over 1,600 members of London high society, she wore a satin dress trimmed with 'two deep flounces of Limerick lace', while her train was also trimmed with Limerick lace.⁴² On her first visit to Ireland in 1849, the Queen wore 'a pink silk dress and blue silk bonnet, both covered with Limerick lace.'⁴³ Soon after, James Forrest celebrated both her visit to Ireland and her patronage of Limerick lace by entertaining his 300 strong workforce to a banquet in Limerick.⁴⁴ Queen Victoria's



support for Limerick lace did not cease, even during her long widowhood. In 1886, she commissioned a Limerick lace 'deep flounce' and was presented with more Limerick lace on a visit to Edinburgh.⁴⁵ In 1894, on the occasion of her seventy-fifth birthday, she received a bonnet trimmed with Limerick lace.⁴⁶

The philanthropists of the 1880s and 1890s had a much better understanding of the importance of marketing than their predecessors. Their strategy incorporated a much more sophisticated campaign to tap into the aristocratic market and they became 'strategic marketers', possibly in imitation of the numerous industrial exhibitions that flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ This approach was epitomised by Lady Aberdeen whose Irish Industries Association was established to 'organize, coordinate, collect, supervise, develop, publicize and market the work of many small scattered industries, to provide teachers and designs appropriate to changing fashions, to help run industrial schools and to supplement the work of isolated single, philanthropic exertions.'⁴⁸ By 1907 the Irish Industries Association had raised £140,000 in England alone by organising thirty four exhibitions and sales in London and English provincial cities.⁴⁹ The Association was a strong supporter of Limerick lace and gave a grant of £100 to promote its instruction.⁵⁰

Lady Aberdeen made extensive use of both élite social events and exhibitions to showcase the result of these efforts. During her terms as Vicereine of Ireland in 1886 and 1905-15, she organised lace balls, fairs, bazaars and garden parties where she insisted that the ladies wore Irish lace. Both she and other vicereines hosted drawing rooms in Dublin Castle during the annual Dublin social season, at which debutantes were presented to them, dressed from head-to-toe in elaborate costumes of lace, ribbons and white feathers.

The high point of Lady Aberdeen's promotion of Irish lace on such occasions was her famous lace ball held in St Patrick's Hall, Dublin Castle on 5 March 1907.⁵¹ In advance of this event, Lady Aberdeen wore different lace trimmed dresses at three different Castle receptions, at two of which she wore Limerick lace. The ball itself was a glittering occasion attended by 'an immense crowd', although slightly marred by Lady Aberdeen being confined to a wheelchair due to rheumatism. It succeeded in its aim of assisting the Irish lace industry, for although many of the attendance wore their 'filmy treasures' of 'old Irish lace', most commissioned new pieces for the ball. Lady Aberdeen herself wore Youghal lace, but many of the other ladies wore Limerick, including the future revolutionary Countess Markievicz who appeared in 'an emerald green chiffon over silk, entirely veiled with beautiful Limerick lace, caught with black velvet rosettes and finished off with a black velvet sash.'⁵²

In the twentieth century, Limerick lace continued to be worn by the upper classes. In 1905, St Lelia's School, Pery Square received an order from Mrs Edith Roosevelt, wife of President Theodore Roosevelt of the USA.⁵³ In 1905, Guglielmo Marconi, the Italian inventor of radio married Beatrice O'Brien, a cousin by marriage of Florence Vere O'Brien, in a glittering society wedding held in London. The wedding dress was of Limerick lace, made by Florence's workers.⁵⁴ Limerick lace was popular with the British élite in the 1920s. In 1922, it was noted that 'fans during the coming London season are to be very gorgeous. They will be large and made of pheasant plumes on ebony sticks, and covered with Limerick lace bordered with a fringe of ermine tails.'⁵⁵

One of the most famous pieces of Limerick lace is a veil which was given as a wedding present to Princess Margaret of Connaught, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria on the occasion of her wedding to the future King Gustav VI of Sweden in 1905. In 1935, her only daughter Ingrid wore the veil when she married the future King Frederick VII of Denmark, and thus brought it into the Danish Royal family. Since then, all of Queen Ingrid's female descendants have worn this Limerick lace veil on their wedding day, including Queen Anne Marie of Greece in 1964, Queen Margrethe of Denmark in 1967 and Crown Princess Mary of Denmark in 2004.⁵⁶

National and International Exhibitions and World Fairs

One of the most characteristic innovations of the nineteenth century were the national and international exhibitions, which became one of the most important marketing tools for Limerick lace. The most prominent were the world fairs, also known as world expositions, large international exhibitions of the industrial, scientific, technological, and artistic achievements of the participating nations. Although the concept originated in a series of eleven national industrial expositions held in France between 1798 and 1849 to encourage and showcase improvements in industry and technology, the first world fair is generally considered to have been the 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations' held in the Crystal Palace, London in 1851. Subsequently, a series of 'expos' have been held at regular intervals, the most recent being that in Yeosu, South Korea, in 2012. Only those sanctioned by the Bureau of International Expositions are classified as world fairs and only one such has ever been held in Ireland, i.e. the Irish International Exhibition of 1907, held in Ballsbridge, Dublin.⁵⁷

In addition to the world fairs, a number of national exhibitions were also held, on the model of the French series of 1798-1849. Both international and national expositions presented major marketing opportunities. In Ireland, the first was the Irish Industrial Exhibition, held in Cork City in 1852. It was followed by the spectacular Great Industrial Exhibition (Dublin 1853), three more in Dublin (1865, 1872 and 1882) and two more in Cork (1883 and 1902). Limerick hosted a Munster-Connaught Exhibition in 1906.⁵⁸ Over six million visitors came to the 1851 Great Exhibition in London and 1.1 million to the 1853 Dublin Exhibition.⁵⁹ Medals of various grades and in numerous categories were awarded to prize winners at the exhibitions and were highly valued, as they provided unrivalled publicity.

The exhibition was one of the few creations of the nineteenth century aimed at the general population. Greenhalgh compared them to the present day shopping mall, with a deliberate traffic pattern for channelling the consumers, whom he labels 'leisured flaneurs'.⁶⁰ The nineteenth century exhibition had less to do with the commodities for sale than with the ideology of wealth and class. At the great public exhibitions the middle classes were afforded the luxury of 'rubbing shoulders' with the very wealthy, and according to KJ James, they were arenas 'in which female patronesses competed to claim pre-eminence in whichever organisation' they represented.⁶¹

Limerick lace was exhibited at world fairs from the beginning. At the London Great Exhibition of 1851, Lambert and Bury exhibited a flounce, a shawl, a scarf and a dress.⁶² At the 1852 Cork Exhibition, 'several cases of beautiful lace' were on display.⁶³ However, the first to display a large quantity of Irish lace was the Dublin Exhibition of 1853. Limerick's representatives included 'Madame de Beligand' of the Good Shepherd Convent, who exhibited two church vestments, a Brussels lace veil and several pieces of Valenciennes lace; James Forrest and Son of Grafton Street, who displayed numerous items, including a bridal dress and veil, ball and court dresses; Lambert and Bury; 'specimens of lace made by the orphans of Mount Saint Vincent'; 'Valenciennes Lace, St Mary's Convent, Limerick'; and Limerick lace made by the Sisters of Mercy Convents in Kinsale and Baggot Street, Dublin.⁶⁴ Queen Victoria came to Dublin to open this Exhibition and spent £2,000 on Limerick and other laces on sale there.⁶⁵

In 1855, Forrest and Sons won a second class medal at the Paris Exposition. Boyle adds that Forrest's accolade is even more significant because the lace made there was included in the same exhibition as the Empress Eugenié's dresses and the gold embroideries of the fashion designer Charles Frederick Worth.⁶⁶ Although Forrest and Sons exhibited at the Dublin Exhibition of 1865, there was no reference to Limerick lace being included, but entries were submitted by both the Good Shepherd Convent and Cannock's to the Dublin Exhibition of 1872 and medals were won by the latter. In 1883, the decline of Limerick lace was arrested by three exhibitions, the Irish lace Exhibition in London's Mansion House, the Cork Industrial Exhibition and the Limerick Art Exhibition held in the Athenaeum, Cecil Street. All three included displays of Limerick lace, but as already referred to in Chapter 3, the poor design of the modern exhibits compared to the older pieces displayed prompted James Brenan and Alan Cole to inaugurate the revival of which Florence Vere O'Brien later became the leading figure.⁶⁷







This revival resulted in the return of Limerick lace once again to a position of prominence at world fairs and other exhibitions. However, it is interesting to note that from the point of view of Limerick lace, the most successful of the world fairs were those of 1893 and 1904, both held in the USA, where there was a large population of Irish descent. It seems that Florence Vere O'Brien and others in the Irish arts and crafts movement concentrated their energies on these two, rather than other world fairs held on the Continent of Europe, where competition from the strongly entrenched indigenous lace industries was far greater.⁶⁸

In 1888, the Irish Exhibition, held in the Olympia Exhibition Centre, West Kensington, was the first to showcase Irish arts and crafts to a London audience and attracted a huge attendance during its five month run. It also provided an early forum for the display of the work produced by Florence Vere O'Brien's lace business. One of the most significant features of this exhibition was the Donegal Village, created by Alice Hart to display the products of her Donegal Industrial Fund, which was the first such reconstruction of an 'Irish village' ever created for an exhibition.⁶⁹ One of Florence Vere O'Brien's outworkers, Mrs Glynn, was installed in a room off the main 'street' of the Donegal Village, where she gave displays of Limerick lace making which attracted large crowds, due to the skill and rapidity with which she worked.⁷⁰ Limerick lace was also displayed by the renowned firm of G and H Laird, of Grafton Street, Dublin.⁷¹

Five years later in 1893, the World Colombian Exposition held in Chicago proved to be a major success for Limerick lace. Irish representation there was the idea of Alice Hart, but she and Lady Aberdeen were now rivals, which resulted in each of them creating an 'Irish village' in close proximity to each other at the Exposition. In this quarrel, Florence Vere O'Brien sided with Lady Aberdeen, and exhibited her lace at the latter's 'village.' As part of her preparations before the Exposition, Lady Aberdeen visited Limerick, where she met a number of makers of Limerick lace then employed by Florence Vere O'Brien, one of whom was aged eighty six and claimed to be the sole survivor of the four women who had made Queen Victoria's bridal veil (which had been in fact made of Honiton not Limerick lace).⁷² Subsequently, Lady Aberdeen chose forty Irish girls to exhibit various Irish crafts at the Chicago Fair, including Ellen Murphy who demonstrated 'how the pretty Limerick Lace is made' in one of the 'cottages' of 'Lady Aberdeen's' Irish village.' Some 27.5 million visitors attended the Fair, including US President Grover Cleveland and H Gordon Selfridge (who founded the iconic London department store in 1909). Selfridge bought some Youghal lace, while President Cleveland was presented with a Limerick lace handkerchief at the railway station. This was done at the instigation of Lady Aberdeen, on learning that he had decided not to visit her 'Irish village.' Indeed, she displayed impressive organisational and marketing skills throughout the Fair, as her 'village' made a nett profit of £50,000. Both of Florence Vere O'Brien's enterprises, the 'Lace Making School' and 'Mrs Vere O'Brien's Industry' were awarded medals, which brought them their first major international exposure.⁷³ In addition, the Chicago Fair resulted in the acquisition of wealthy American customers for Limerick lace.⁷⁴

One of Florence's biggest triumphs came at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, held in St Louis (1904) and attended by 19.7 million people. A bridal costume of Limerick tambour was awarded a prestigious silver medal and a tea gown designed by Josephine Murphy and made by Mary Kenna was awarded a bronze medal. The Limerick Technical School also exhibited lace in St Louis.⁷⁵ Also of interest is the manner in which the renowned English couturier Viola, asked to demonstrate the excellence of 'British' laces at the Exposition, displayed a wedding gown trimmed with Limerick lace, which had a train of chiffon and Limerick lace.⁷⁶

The Irish International Exhibition was held in Dublin between May and November 1907 and attracted an incredible 2.75 million visitors. The revival of Limerick lace was vividly demonstrated by its being shown by fourteen different exhibitors, of which seven were in County Cork (Riverstown Lace Class; Glengariff Lace Class; St Joseph's Convent, Kinsale; St Joseph's Technical School, Convent of Mercy, Bantry; South Presentation Convent, Cork City; Macroom Convent Industrial School; Crawford Municipal Technical Institute); two in Sligo (Convent of Mercy, Ballymote and Sisters of Charity, Benada Abbey, Tubercurry) and one each in Dublin (St Mary's Catholic Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Cabra); Kerry (Presentation Convent, Cahirciveen); Mayo (Convent of Mercy, Swinford); Tipperary (Presentation Convent Thurles) and Limerick (Florence Vere O'Brien's School, which won a first prize).⁷⁷

Marketing Limerick Lace after 1914

After the First World War, the introduction of simpler fashions resulted in lace being relegated from an essential element in fashionable female dress to a ceremonial fabric worn only for First Communions, weddings and similar formal events. Along with other lace, the Limerick product suffered a corresponding loss of sales both at home and, more importantly, in the export market. Almost by default, the Catholic Church became the major consumer of lace until it too fell prey to the simplification of church furnishings and clerical dress in the 1960s as a result of the changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council. Cardinals abandoned their enormous trains, bishops and priests discarded their lace trimmed garments, and church interiors were stripped of their elaborate altars and belaced altar cloths. Limerick lace continued to be produced mainly for export. Maude Kearney's Thomond Lace Industry only produced lace to order, the vast bulk of which was exported.⁷⁸

After the Second World War, the growth of mass tourism in Ireland created a new market for Limerick lace. Shannon Airport opened in 1945 and the world's first duty-free shop opened there four years later. As early as 1949, it was recorded that 'Americans travelling home from Shannon Airport are eagerly buying' souvenirs including Limerick lace.⁷⁹ The output of the Good Shepherd convent in the 1960s included christening robes, table cloths, wedding veils, handkerchiefs and church lace. Crochet, embroidery and Aran knitting was also done in the convent. A showroom adjoined the main work room and was always full of visitors, especially during the tourist season in the summer. In 1969, the Sister in charge of production told the *Limerick Leader* that 'I can't keep everyone who wants lace supplied with it' and it was claimed that visitors from 'five continents' had been attracted to Limerick by the lace. She also maintained that the lace making 'doesn't really pay, but we continue for the sake of the art and the lace tradition.'⁸⁰ In the same report, the *Limerick Leader* described the lace making enterprise of the Good Shepherd Sisters as 'a profitless service to themselves' and 'a free boon for tourism in Limerick.'⁸¹ However it was sometimes thought that the enterprise was hampered by the nuns not keeping up with current design trends. Whether or not lace making in the Good Shepherd Convent was a commercial or profitable enterprise is a controversial issue on which further research is required.⁸²

Gabrielle North recalled that 'we would be making it while American tourists would come and watch us make the lace and they would also buy it.' During her period in the convent, there was no shop there, so the nuns 'sold all items directly from the lace room.'⁸³ By 1978, a shop adjoining the lace room had been established. 'There were some beautiful pieces of lace on display there. There were also some vestments and hand-knots.'⁸⁴ John Kennedy who managed the laundry in the convent in the 1970s and 1980s stated that 'in my time the American tourists buses used to pull to the front door for many years to see the women making the lace and purchase the lace.'⁸⁵

From the 1950s onwards, all the high quality Limerick lace presented to dignitaries came from the Good Shepherd Convent. In 1954 on a visit to Rome, Dr Patrick O'Neill, Bishop of Limerick, presented Pope Pius XII with an alb (long white robe) decorated with a Limerick lace Celtic design featuring the Papal coat of arms.⁸⁶ In 1959, the women in the convent were commissioned to make a 25 piece luncheon set of napkins and place mats for the wedding of the Shah of Iran.⁸⁷ When US President John F Kennedy visited Limerick in 1963, Mayor Frances Condell presented him with a christening robe for the child he and his wife Jacqueline were expecting at the time, while his County Limerick relatives gave him a tablecloth. Both were of Limerick lace made in the Good Shepherd Convent. Sadly, the Kennedys' baby, Patrick, died a few months later, at two days old, and was reputedly buried in the Limerick lace christening robe.⁸⁸ On his visit to Limerick in 1964, President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia was given a Limerick lace tablecloth which had taken six weeks to make in the Good Shepherd Convent.⁸⁹

In Ireland itself, Limerick lace wedding veils were popular until the early 1970s. A bridal veil took two girls three to four weeks to make, but a three yard length veil could take six weeks. A survey of social announcements in the *Irish Times* gives some indication of downward trends in the usage of Limerick lace at this time. Reference to its being worn features in 121 wedding notices between 1950 and 1959, fifty six notices between 1960 and 1969 and only two between 1970 and 1979, both in 1970.⁹⁰ In succeeding decades, lace making continued in Limerick, both in the Good Shepherd Convent until 1990 and by home workers, though decreasing steadily in both output and numbers employed. By the early decades of the twenty first century, its survival was very much in doubt.

ENDNOTES

Marketing Limerick Lace

- 1 Helland, 'Caprices of Fashion: Hand made Lace in Ireland, 1883-1907', pp 193 and 216.
- 2 Ibid. p. 193.
- 3 Bourke, 'I was Always Fond of my Pillow', p. 158.
- 4 Sharpe and Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation', pp 341-42.
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- 6 Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J H Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa Publications 1982) and Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988).
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- 8 For the Irish economy in the nineteenth century, see Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 9 See Samuel Clark, *Social Origins of the Irish Land War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Marliyn Silverman and P H Gulliver, *In the Valley of the Nore. A Social History of Thomastown, County Kilkenny, 1840-1983* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1986) and P H Gulliver and Marilyn Silverman, *Merchants and Shopkeepers, A Historical Anthropology of an Irish Market Town, 1200-1991* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995).
- 10 Stephanie Rains, *Commodity Culture and Social Class in Dublin 1850-1916* (Dublin and Portland OR: Irish Academic Press, 2010).
- 11 'The Making of Lace' in *Britain at Work: A Pictorial Description of our National Industries* (London: Cassell, 1910), p. 237.
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- 13 A.S.C, *A Renaissance of the Irish Art of Lace-Making*, p. 10.
- 14 Vere O'Brien, 'Limerick Lace', draft of article published in *The Irish Homestead Special: Some Irish Industries*.
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- 16 *The Times*, 12 November 1880.
- 17 Bowe, 'The Irish Arts and Crafts Movement', p. 177.
- 18 Chris Brooks and Andrew Saint, *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 16.
- 19 Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-1875' in *American Historical Review*, No. 77 (1972), pp 626-44.
- 20 Mairead Dunlevy, 'Irish Lace, A Beautiful Craft Revived,' in *Ireland of the Welcomes*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (January-February 1989), p. 22. Author and museum curator Mairead Dunlevy (1941-2008) was one of the leading authorities on Irish decorative arts, particularly as they related to costume.
- 21 Bourke, 'I was Always Fond of my Pillow', p. 157.
- 22 Ibid., p. 158.
- 23 Sharpe and Chapman, 'Women's Employment and Industrial Organisation', p. 343.
- 24 Gersheim, *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion*, p. 29.
- 25 'Introduction' in Gertrude Himmelfarb (ed.), *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 24.
- 26 *Guide to the Industrial Exhibition*, p. 127.
- 27 Bowe and Cumming, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Dublin and Edinburgh*, p. 90.
- 29 *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 May 1841.
- 30 Maguire, *The Industrial Movement in Ireland*, pp 188-89.
- 31 ÓCléirigh, 'Limerick Lace', p. 111.
- 32 Ó Cléirigh and Rowe, *Limerick Lace*, pp 33-34 and Ó Cléirigh, 'Limerick Lace,' p. 114.
- 33 *Irish Independent*, 16 March 1948.
- 34 Ó Cléirigh and Rowe, *Limerick Lace*, p. 33.
- 35 Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, pp 53-54.
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- 45 Helland, 'Caprices of Fashion: Hand made Lace in Ireland, 1883-1907', p. 201; *Isle of Wight Observer*, 21 August 1886.
- 46 *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 31 May 1894.
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- 49 Ibid.
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- 51 Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, pp 129-33.
- 52 *Irish Times*, 6 March 1907.
- 53 *Limerick Leader*, 20 February 1905.
- 54 Helland, 'Caprices of Fashion: Hand made Lace in Ireland, 1883-1907', p. 207.
- 55 *Hull Daily Mail*, 3 April 1922.
- 56 orderofsplendor.blogspot.ie/.
- 57 John F Findling and Kimberley D Pelle, *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2008) and Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
- 58 For Irish exhibitions, see Fintan Cullen, *Ireland on Show: Art, Union and Nationhood* (London: Ashgate, 2012). For Dublin exhibitions, see F.E. Dixon, 'Dublin Exhibitions: Part I' in *Dublin Historical Record*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Jun., 1973), pp 93-100 and 'Dublin Exhibitions: Part II' in *Dublin Historical Record*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Sep., 1973), pp 137-146.
- 59 Findling and Pelle, *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, pp 9-20.
- 60 Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas*, p. 174.
- 61 K J James, 'Handicraft, Mass Manufacture and Rural Female Labour: Industrial Work in North-West Ireland 1890-1914' in *Rural History*, Vol.17, No. 1 (April, 2006), p. 50.
- 62 *Guide to the Industrial Exhibition*, p. 128.

- 63 *Illustrated London News*, 19 June, 1852.
- 64 J Sproule, *The Irish Industrial Exhibition of 1853*, pp 65-70.
- 65 *Newcastle Journal*, 17 September 1853.
- 66 Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers*, p. 84.
- 67 For the Limerick Exhibition, see *Limerick Chronicle*, 21 July 1883.
- 68 Findling and Pelle, *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, pp 116-2, 171-78.
- 69 Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, pp 50-57.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 71 *Irish Times*, 6 August, 1888.
- 72 *Irish Times*, 15 February 1893. It is possible that this woman was a former Honiton lace worker.
- 73 Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, pp 57-63, 91-105 and Ó Cléirigh and Rowe, *Limerick Lace*, pp 36-37.
- 74 Helland, 'Caprices of Fashion: Hand made Lace in Ireland, 1883-1907', p. 202.
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- 76 Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, p. 128.
- 77 Ó Cléirigh, 'Limerick Lace', p. 115.
- 78 Information from Grania McElligott, 26 September 2014.
- 79 *Gloucestershire Echo*, 19 January 1949.
- 80 *Limerick Leader*, 5 April 1969.
- 81 *ibid.*
- 82 Gabrielle North maintains that it was. See her contribution to the documentary 'Ireland's Hidden Bodies, Hidden Secrets', produced by Sue Lloyd-Roberts, and first broadcast as part of the 'Our World' series on BBC News channel on 27 September 2014.
- 83 Information from Gabrielle North, 25 September 2014.
- 84 Presentation Convent School Project, 1978.
- 85 Testimony of John Kennedy at <http://www.magdalenelaundrylimerick.com>.
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- 88 Gabrielle North believes that Patrick Kennedy was buried in the christening robe, a theory supported by their being no record of it in the John F Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston.
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Chapter 7

Conclusion

The Legacy of Lace Making in Limerick

Limerick and lace have a long history which began in 1829 when Charles Walker invested €20,000 in a new lace making factory at Mount Kennett. Lace making became one of the largest ever industries in the Limerick's history. At its peak in the 1850s, it employed between 900 and 1800 workers, and as late as the 1920s and 1930s, there were still an estimated fifty to one hundred lace makers in Limerick. Cumulatively, the earnings of several thousand lace makers over a century and a half made a major contribution to the city's economy. In 1856, the average starting wages of a worker in one of the Limerick factories was three shillings and sixpence per week while more experienced lace makers could earn between five and eight shillings a week (which was equivalent to the wages of the average labourer at the time).¹ The total annual earnings of lace workers in the early 1850s amounted to between £10,000 and £20,000, the modern equivalent of between 6.6 and 13.2 million euro per annum.² The Limerick lace industry was dominated by women as they made the lace, wore the lace, promoted it and designed the majority of the patterns. Indeed, in the case of two key enterprises, the Limerick Lace School and the Thomond Lace Industry, women managed the entire business.

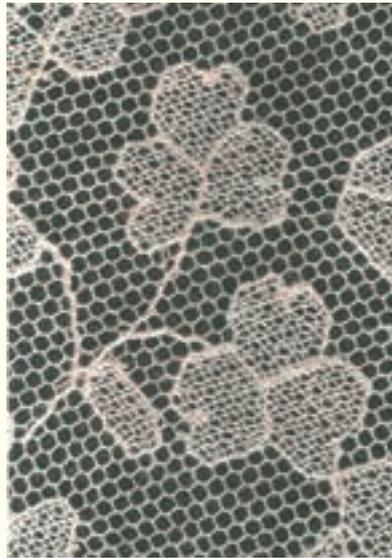
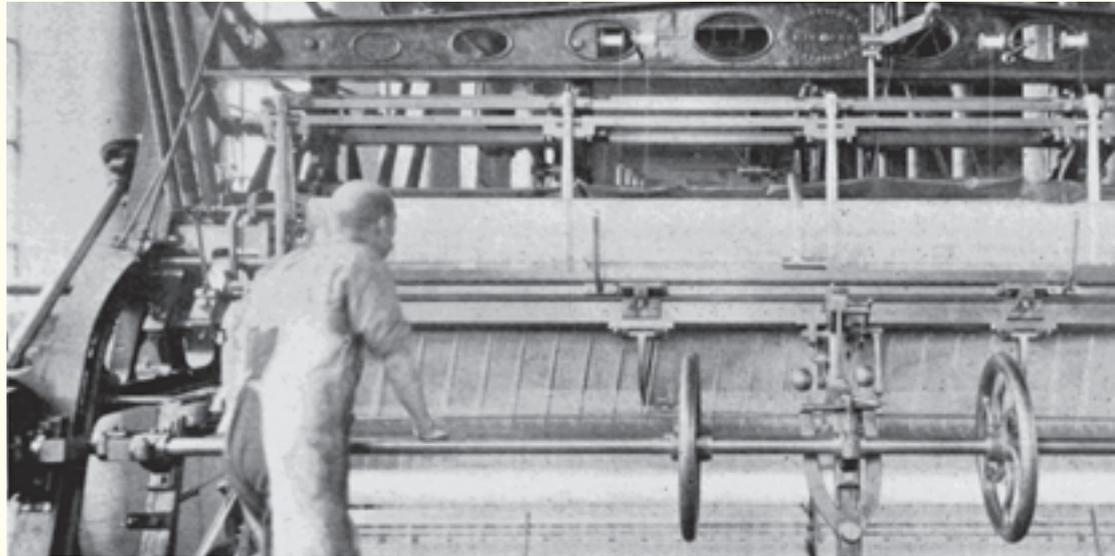
The social history of Limerick was altered by the lace industry. It provided employment to a significant proportion of the female workforce, who in turn supported or helped to support a large number of dependent relatives. In 1851, it was estimated that each lace worker maintained two or three other family members.³ In its early decades, lace making imposed the discipline of the factory on hundreds of women and girls. At the very least it provided women and girls with the means to provide for themselves and their families.

Limerick lace created a rich material culture. Over many decades, it produced a large output of lace products, from dresses, christening shawls and ecclesiastical robes to handkerchiefs and doilies. It was worn by thousands of women, including a few who figure prominently in the pages of history, such as Queen Victoria, American First Lady Edith Roosevelt and Countess Markievicz. Generations of churchmen also wore Limerick lace and used lace to decorate their churches, in Ireland and throughout the Irish diaspora. Even those less prosperous might briefly wear Limerick lace. In *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt writes that in 1940 at the christening of his brother Alphonsus, 'they dress the baby in the Limerick lace dress we were all baptised in [sic].'⁴ Limerick lace can be seen in museums all over the world, including Ireland, Britain, the USA and Australia.

Limerick lace also appears in the pages of literature. In *Ulysses*, when the fiercely nationalist Citizen (a thinly disguised portrait of Michael Cusack, founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association) bitterly denounces the destruction of the Irish economy by British oppressors, he includes Limerick lace amongst his list of great Irish industries:

And our potteries and textiles, the finest in the whole world! And our wool that was sold in Rome in the time of Juvenal and our flax and our damask from the looms of Antrim and our Limerick lace, our tanneries and our white flint glass down there by Ballybough and our Huguenot poplin that we have since Jacquard de Lyon and our woven silk and our Foxford tweeds and ivory raised point from the Carmelite convent in New Ross, nothing like it in the whole wide world.⁵

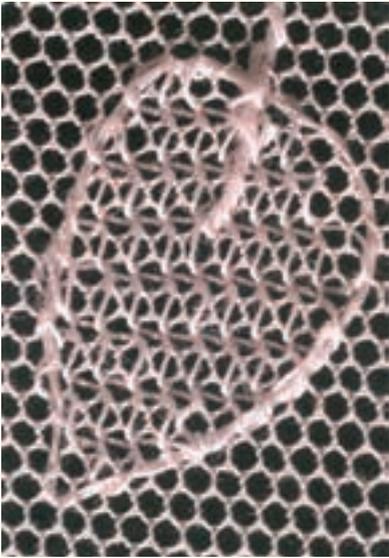
Limerick lace has endured for 185 years, having experienced two booms and two depressions. The significance of Limerick lace as perhaps the city's leading brand name has resulted in its usage in a number of contexts. During the 1920s and 1930s, one of the most famous horses in the world was the celebrated show jumper 'Limerick Lace' (1925-50) ridden by Major Ged O'Dwyer, of Bruff, County Limerick.⁶ In 2014, Limerick composer Bill Whelan marked his native city's designation as the first national City of Culture by writing a flute concerto for Belfast flautist Sir James Galway entitled 'Linen and Lace' in honour of the major textile industries associated with their respective native cities.⁷ Whelan's naming of his piece demonstrated how deep were the roots that Walker's 1829 foundation had put down in Limerick and that even after 185 years, Limerick lace still continued to be closely associated with the city.



Chauncy Gardiner, the central figure in the classic 1979 film *Being There*, is a simple-minded gardener who views the world through the prism of his profession. If he were to encapsulate the amazing story of Limerick lace in a similar manner, he might describe it as being transplanted from England by Charles Walker, sinking deep roots in Irish soil, and then enjoying a spectacular flowering in its first thirty five years. Later, it withered away for over twenty years, before Florence Vere O'Brien brought it to a second flowering. After 1914, Limerick lace began to wilt again, though Maude Kearney breathed new life into it and kept it alive for many years. Currently, it is dormant, but the roots planted by Walker are still strong, and promising green shoots are sprouting. The current research by Limerick Museum and Archives, of which the present book is a vital strand, explores and celebrates the skill of lace making and the individuals who played a role in this key part of Limerick's history.

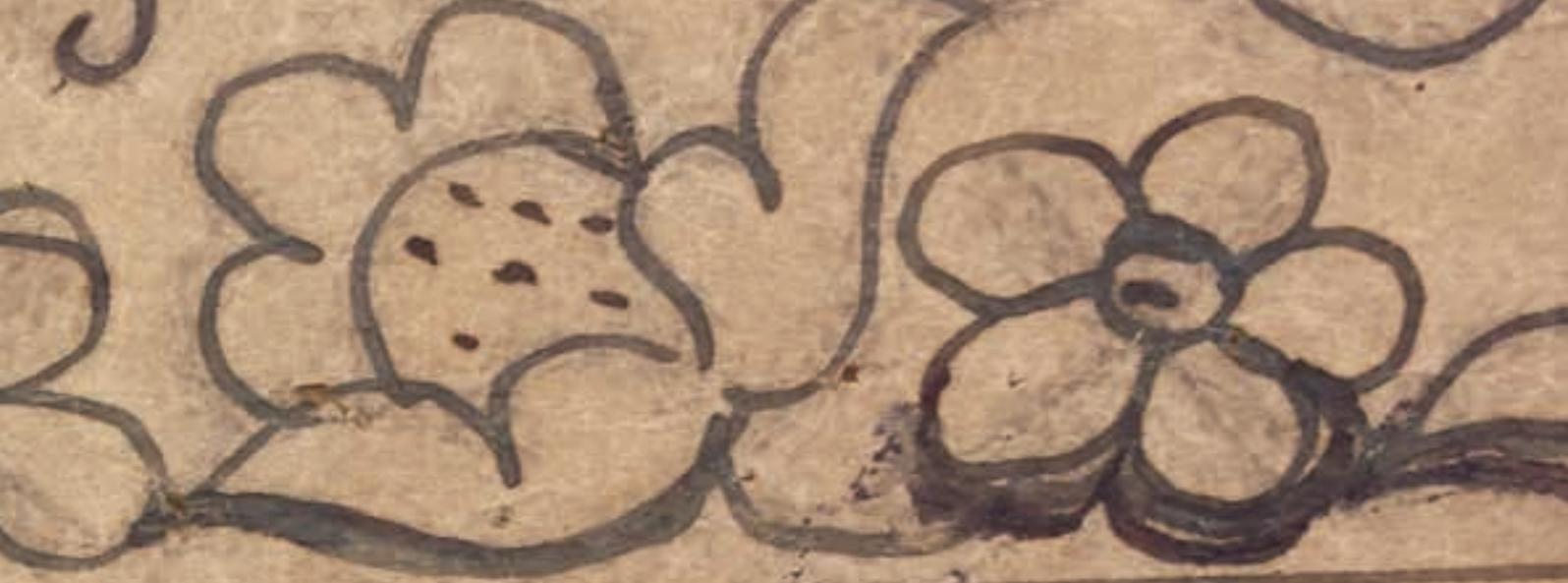
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- 2 See <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare>, Measuring Worth, a website dealing with historical money values.
- 3 *Guide to the Industrial Exhibition*, p. 128.
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- 5 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Paris: Shakespeare and Co, 1922), p. 593.
- 6 *Irish Times* 6 February 1950 and 6 April 1996.
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Considering Lace

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Limerick Museum Collection of Limerick Lace

by Brian Hodkinson,
Curator, Limerick
Museum

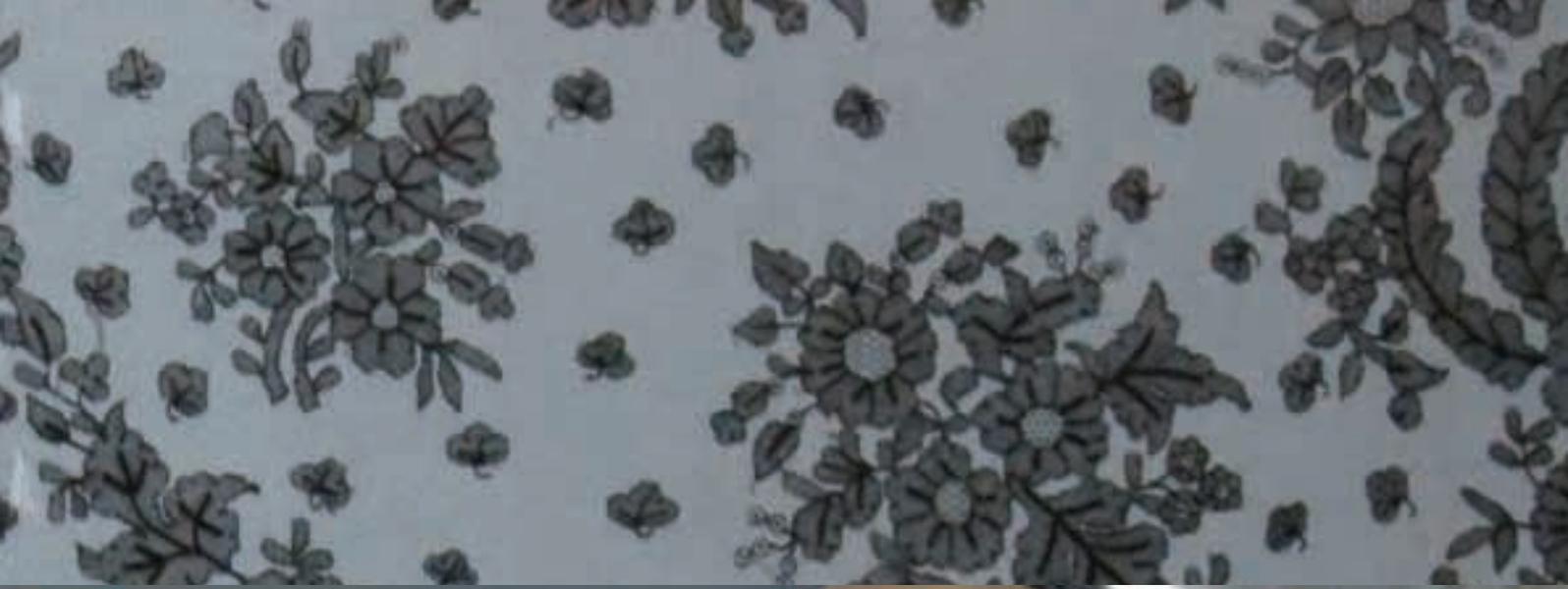
Limerick is synonymous with lace and many of the visitors to Limerick Museum come especially to see Limerick lace. We are therefore proud to have a good collection to show them and much of what is not physically on display can be viewed on the museum's online catalogue (<http://www.museum.limerick.ie>). It was not always so. For the first fifty or more years of its existence there was no lace in the collection despite it being a major provider of employment, especially to the women of the city. As with many other things it was probably a case of not appreciating its significance until it was gone. The first acquisition by the museum was a collection of six small pieces donated in 1972 by a daughter of Maude Kearney who ran the Thomond Lace Industry in the early part of the twentieth century. When the museum moved to St. John's Square in the mid 1970s, the new curator, Larry Walsh, recognised the importance of lace to Limerick's history and began to collect it in earnest. Most of the museum's collection of black, or mourning, lace was acquired by him in the late 1980s. At that time most pieces were acquired by purchase from various dealers around the country, but occasionally there were generous donations such as four mid-nineteenth century pieces given by a member of the Earle family.

With the introduction of the internet Larry Walsh managed to buy a couple of pieces at bargain basement prices on ebay, before it became a more professional market-place. A marked trend after 2000 has been the increase of ecclesiastical lace donated to the collection. With the decline in vocations and the closure of religious congregations all over the country a lot of lace has become surplus to requirements. Fortunately its importance has been recognised by groups such as the Limerick Apostolic Centre, which has made several donations. Our fine collection of surplices and altar falls has all been donated to the museum. Two fine pieces made c.1910 by Eileen O'Donohue at the Limerick Lace School are on long term loan to the museum. One, a black lace square, contains every known Limerick lace stitch while the other is a stole in "blonde" lace. Lace is no longer a major industry in Limerick, but it is still made on a small scale. The skills to make lace are not lost and the existence of several classes means they will not be for the foreseeable future.

Besides the lace itself, the museum also holds a large collection of lace patterns from the Presentation Convent, drawings of lace designs and a frame on which the lace was made. The Museum also holds a bronze medal awarded to Messrs Lambert and Bury for their lace at the great Exhibition in 1851.

While the museum collection is a strong one, we are always looking to improve it. At present it lacks larger items such as dresses and some smaller items such as lace fans. We would also like to acquire other material relating to the lace industry, such as archival records, salesman's pattern books and lace making equipment so we can tell the full story of what was once one of Limerick's most important industries.







Making Lace

by Giordana Giache

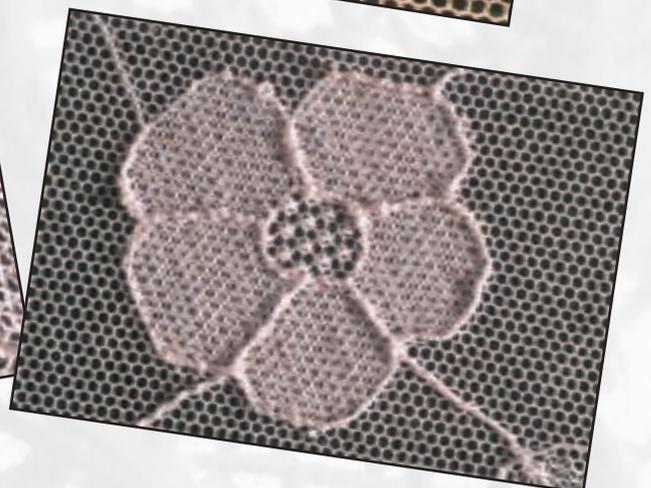
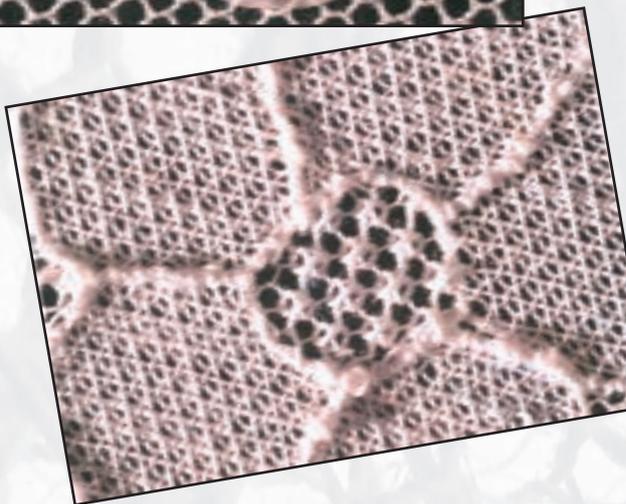
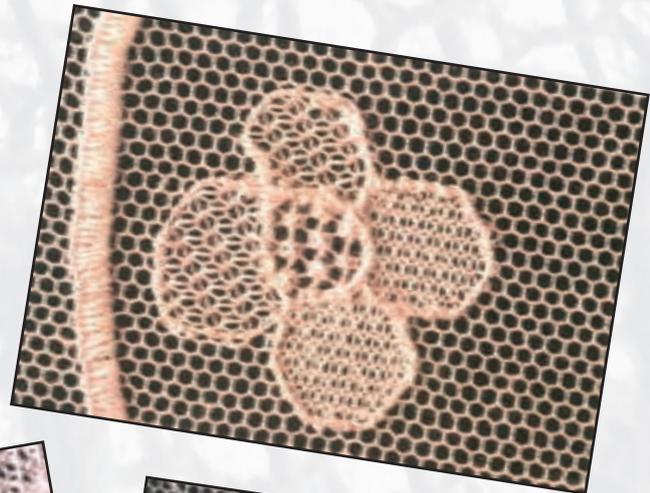
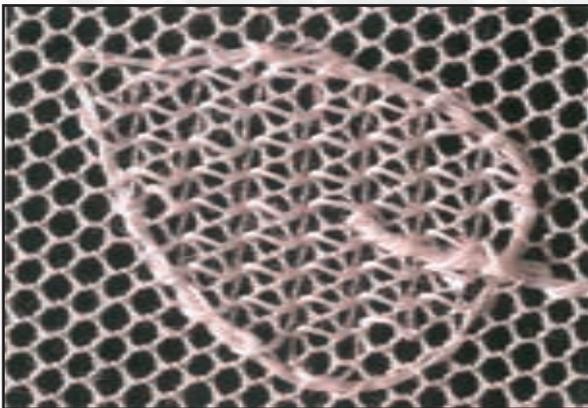
Making Limerick lace involves concentration and calculated repetition. Full attention is devoted to the high precision stitch making to create the interlocked structure. It's a very meticulous process but it gives me great satisfaction. My brain is so focused on the activity that I'm completely carefree dedicated to the process at hand. The repetition of the stitches is always interrupted by the edge of the design and it is very important how one decides to finish the embroidery in the tidiest manner.

The skill of Limerick lace is not only in the execution, it is in the planning of the filling stitches: they create a harmonious composition and balance. In my opinion poor lace design with poor choice of filling stitches creates a poor product. Even high skill in the stitch making never reaches its full potential without good design.

The challenge and rewarding accomplishment in learning this highly skilled process are feelings that are shared with the other lace students and master lace makers alike. Not many people choose lace making because it demands good hand/eye co-ordination, good eyesight and perseverance. It is not a first choice as a hobby or as a career.

Lace is also an area of complete female authority. In my experience lace and similar areas of craft are sources of pride and admiration from the local female community. The sitting room is always clean and tidy, adorned by hand made lace, embroidery and crochet as show pieces. Hand made lace is also very expensive so it becomes a luxury item.

The result is extraordinarily beautiful, delicate and sophisticated. Lace is very attractive to the eye. The shapes created by the areas of fill and void make it a very desirable material. The transparent quality makes it delicate and seductive. For me, perhaps, making lace is an active response to nostalgia. At a personal level, female craft was always associated with the feeling of good manners, order, commitment, morality and achievement within the restriction of domestic life.



Lace Today

by Frances Nevin

The fascinating narrative that is our lace making history is generally unknown in the city that is still famous worldwide for its hand made lace. The work and skills of those largely anonymous women and girls, some as young as eight years, have not been adequately acknowledged. Their story remains largely untold until today. This year celebrating 'City of Culture' provides a platform from which to tell their story whilst affording us an opportunity to pay tribute to them. Not only did the lace making industry contribute considerably to the local economy, but its story chronicles the lives of Limerick women and children over a time-span of almost two centuries. Happily, Irish women's lives have changed beyond recognition and have improved immeasurably since that time and the art of lace making today is mainly a hobby and leisurely pursuit.

Outside of Limerick there are other geographical areas that have also contributed significantly to Ireland's history of lace making. These centres, established by philanthropists and religious congregations were not as large as that of Limerick nor did they employ as many workers.

Today there is little demand for hand made lace except perhaps by couturier houses that design for a wealthy clientele and who create prestigious unique commissions such as royal wedding dresses. The wedding dress worn by Princess Diana in 1981 placed Carrickmacross lace firmly in the public eye and the dress worn by Kate Middleton incorporating the Carrickmacross pattern in 2011 has since initiated a new trend for wearing lace.

In the course of my research on the history of Irish lace I discovered a fascinating industry that contributed significantly to Ireland's social and economic history. A recently completed audit of Irish lace which I undertook on behalf of the Crafts Council and the Heritage Council brings the account of Irish lace up to the present day. At a conservative estimate, research demonstrates that, at the time of writing, Limerick lace was being made, exhibited or available to purchase in approximately twenty-five areas outside of Limerick. Indeed, in terms of nationwide popularity, Limerick lace is second only to Irish crochet. Irish crochet is a form of three dimensional or 'layered' lace made with thicker thread, usually cotton, and a crochet hook.

Needlepoint laces such as those made in Youghal and Kenmare are made entirely from fine thread with a sewing needle. A background net is not used as is the case of Limerick and Carrickmacross. Limerick lace is hand embroidery on a machine made net. There are two types of Limerick lace, tambour and needlerun (run) or 'darned'. For tambour the net is stretched on a tambour frame, so called because of its similarity in shape to a tambourine, and executed using a tambour hook. Flax thread, cotton and untwisted shiny silk thread can be used. Unlike run lace which has the outlined design drawn on tracing paper and tacked on to the net, the design for tambour was drawn but not attached to the net.

The tambour workers were able to work faster than those making darned net but they had to be more skilled and to some extent their work was freehand. They also had to have the skill to hold the ball of thread under the net with one hand, bring up a loop on their hooked needle, bring up a second loop and then cast off the first loop over the second all the time keeping an eye on their drawing. Some of the trade workers became so expert that when they worked a design a few times. They could do small flowers or whole sprays correctly without looking at the design. The outlines of tambour were done with the courser thread and the fillings with the finer. Sometimes parallel rows of the thick stitch were used to give a heavy outline and to save the workers doing extra lines in finer thread.... In Limerick tambour many 'filling stitches were also used and these had to be darned in as in run-lace. The same fillings can be used for both types. The workers had names for each stitch like 'chapel window stitch', 'box seed', herringbone, 'diamond', 'web, or 'pheasant's eye stitch.... Most Limerick lace was finished with a pearl edging which was sewn on by hand when the main work was completed. Some purists thought the pearl edging should never be used and that the work should be finished with invisible button-holing, a more expensive process.¹



Sometimes 'appliqué' meaning 'applied' or net appliqué which is net on net are used. Limerick lace, like Carrickmacross lace, consists of fillings of embroidery stitches used to embellish the fabric. In Limerick run lace the pattern is outlined with close running stitches and filled in with a variety of stitches. The same filling stitches are used for both lace types.²

Where is Lace Today?

Information collated for the recent Lace Audit indicates that the two main repositories for lace in Ireland are museums and convents. Lace making guilds and private individuals have significant but smaller collections.

Museums

Limerick Museum has an extensive collection that consists of lace made for ecclesiastical use, domestic use and ladies and children's clothing. Fashionable items include fichus, berthes, flounces, stoles and dresses. A fichu was a small triangular scarf worn over the shoulders and tied to the front in a loose knot. Similar to the fichu but larger the berthe or berththa was a wide collar worn over the shoulders. A flounce was a deep border of lace worn on ladies apparel or for domestic use such as trim for a bed or dressing-table. The collection also includes First Communion dresses and wedding veils. On permanent display is a collection of lace made in the city's convents and factories. A black shawl of Limerick lace designed and made by Eileen O'Donohue and donated by the Kerin family incorporates in its design all forty- seven stitches used in the making of Limerick lace, stitches with names such as 'cobweb', 'starfish' and 'fern'. Also on display is a large shawl or 'stole' stitched in pale gold silk thread. Its paisley pattern is thought to have originated in India, then part of the British Empire, and copied for 'paisley' shawls made in the Scottish city of the same name.

The National Museum at Collins Barracks, Dublin holds a significant collection of exquisite Irish handmade lace including a nineteenth century Limerick lace black fan and a tabernacle veil of Kenmare lace made in the Poor Clare Convent in the town. It also holds a collar of Youghal needlepoint included in the recent publication *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects*. The textile department of London's Victoria & Albert Museum holds original designs for Limerick lace and crochet by Limerick man Michael Hayes, one of the most gifted Irish lace designers, whose work was commissioned by Queen Victoria.

Cork City Museum has a popular permanent exhibition of lace which includes a nineteenth century fan of Limerick lace. It also holds award winning, hand-drawn designs for crochet and needlepoint lace by Michael Hayes, dated 1885 and 1886, and made in the Presentation Convent Youghal.

An order for a state train for a dress to be worn by Queen Mary, consort to King George V was commissioned from the Presentation convent in Youghal as a coronation gift from the ladies of Belfast. The full-length train mounted on a cloth of gold should have taken the workers in Youghal a number of years to complete, but the dress was needed to wear at the 1911 Coronation Durbar in India. Designed by one of the Sisters it was very successfully executed in the space of seven months -thirty workers were employed at it continuously. The Presentation Sisters installed gas lighting to enable work to be carried out day and night.

To demonstrate the congregation's far-sightedness and progressiveness it should be added that the lace school was managed as a cooperative and the sisters organised a crèche and a pension plan for the women who made Youghal lace, which must surely have been a first! Today Veronica Stuart, lace expert, and founder of The Traditional Lacemakers of Ireland promotes Youghal needlepoint both at home and abroad.

The Clare Museum in Ennis, has long and close associations with Limerick's lace making history and in the past has exhibited Limerick lace and Clare embroidery made by the workers in Florence Vere O'Brien's lace schools in Limerick and Ballyalla in County Clare.

At the time of this research, Limerick lace was on display in the Museum in Cobh, County

Cork. Transatlantic liners including the 'Titanic' regularly berthed at the port and whilst there vendors came aboard the ships to sell lace to wealthy passengers, including Limerick lace made in the Sisters of Mercy school in the town at the time. There is a very poignant photograph taken by the celebrated Fr. Francis Browne of a lady selling her lace standing alongside the ship's captain on the ill-fated 'Titanic'. The image is dated to only a few days before the maritime tragedy.

Antique Limerick lace is exhibited and sold in privately owned and individually run museums, galleries and retail outlets include the Little Lace Museum, Bray, County Wicklow, the Sheelin Lace Gallery in Enniskillen and the Kenmare lace and Design Centre. Nora Finnegan, proprietor of the Kenmare Centre, regularly holds workshops and classes in Limerick lace making and recently she collaborated with fashion students from Limerick School of Art and Design in organising a lace making competition. Kenmare lace was an initiative of the Poor Clare nuns founded in 1864 in an effort to relieve the poverty and distress in the village of Kenmare, County Kerry. It is a very fine 'pure' lace, made completely by hand using a needle and thread.

Convents

Many religious orders established lace making industries in the 1840s as a direct response to the consequences of the Great Famine. The sisters had the necessary skills of discipline and business acumen to administer economically successful enterprises. Limerick lace was made in numerous convents throughout the island of Ireland. By the 1890s over 160,000 girls were being taught needlework by the nuns in Irish schools.

Entire sets of vestments were regularly commissioned by families whose sons had become priests and had travelled to America and Australia to spread the faith. The former Good Shepherd Convent is now home to Limerick's School of Art and Design and a centre of learning. The magnificent church is a dedicated gallery space in which work from all creative disciplines is exhibited and occasionally is the venue for the fashion students' final year degree show. The high walls that once surrounded the convent have been replaced by a glass exterior. The avenue of lime trees planted in the mid-nineteenth century by the convent's founder still thrives there today. The laundry that was once part of the Good Shepherd complex remains in operation, run by a private individual.

The Presentation School in Sexton Street was also heavily involved in lace making since the time of the Great Famine. In 1978, while researching a school project on Limerick lace, the girls from one of Sister Miriam Pollard's classes in the Presentation School visited the Good Shepherd Convent and interviewed ladies that had been making lace for most of their lives. Another centre that taught the art of Limerick lace making was the Dominican Convent School for the Deaf in Cabra, County Dublin which today houses a collection of Limerick lace.

Lace industries run by the Mercy Sisters contributed significantly to the country's economy in the twentieth century. Limerick lace is permanently exhibited in the Order's Southern Province's Heritage Centre in Charleville, County Cork under the care of a specially trained archivist. Ecclesiastical lace dominates the collection which includes vestments such as albs and surplices with collar, cuffs and skirts of handmade lace. Altar falls are decorated using gold and silver threads and embellished with copper and bronze coloured bugle beads and flat sequins that reflect the candlelight on the altar. These very beautiful and highly decorative pieces were created specifically for significant occasions in the religious calendar.

The Mercy Convent in Kinsale was closely associated with Florence Vere O'Brien, who provided designs for the workers there and regularly placed orders for ecclesiastical lace. St. Joseph's Industrial School attached to the convent won many national and international awards for excellence in lace design. In the late nineteenth century, two gifted pupils, Cecelia Hayes and Albina Collins won scholarships to study at the South Kensington School of Art to which the industrial school was affiliated. Both of these won prizes for their designs for Limerick lace. Their drawings now form part of the centre's archival collection. North of the border, the Mercy convent in Newry, County Down was just one of many convents where Limerick lace was made. This convent won a medal for its Limerick lace at the 1893 Chicago World Fair.







Lace Motifs

Ecclesiastical lace is the term used for all items made for the church: vestments worn by the clergy and church textiles such as altar cloths, altar falls, sometimes called 'fringes' and tabernacle veils. Vestments include albs, surplices, cassocks and rochets. Ecclesiastical lace was decorated with religious motifs such as the 'Sacred Heart', the crucifix, the chalice with host and sheaves of wheat. Liturgical monograms known as Christograms such as 'IHS' (a traditional abbreviation of the name of Jesus in Greek) or Latin text were incorporated into the design, along with bunches of grapes on swirling vines with floating tendrils on a fine net background. Chasubles, copes and stoles were richly embroidered in a myriad of jewel-like colours. Sacred images were raised, padded and embossed in heavy brocades and moire silks (moire fabrics have a wavy or watery appearance). Shiny beads were embedded to represent grapes. Religious emblems embroidered in bright metallic gold, silver and bronze threads highlighted with raised red cord produced a three-dimensional effect. Specific colours signified rank in the religious hierarchy. The higher the rank the more richly the robes were decorated. Very elaborate textiles were used for the more sacred and significant occasions in the church calendar.

Lace made in the mid nineteenth century, before the 1880s revival of Irish lace created a demand for new and better designs, frequently used clichéd Irish symbols associated with a colonised country. These designs were basic and hackneyed, with traditional symbols such as the shamrock and harp repeatedly used. They were often ridiculed by art and textile experts, one of whom even stated that depictions of an Irish wolfhound beside a Celtic round tower often made the tower look as if it were his kennel!³ Limerick lace made in the Presentation and Good Shepherd convents were decorated with traditional emblems which were very much in demand.

The Arts and Crafts Movement between 1880 and 1920 greatly influenced all areas of design in Ireland, from fine art to needlework. This trend can be seen in the Limerick Museum's extensive collection of hand drawn patterns including late nineteenth century designs with borders of sea waves by Helen Pike, a member of the city's Quaker community and a student of the National Art Training School, South Kensington, London. All schools of art in the country came under the auspices of the South Kensington system at that time. In the course of my research I have seen exquisite patterns dating from the late nineteenth century, consisting of elegant and fanciful creatures such as preening peacocks, exotic birds and butterflies in flight. Between 1900 and 1910 sea-horses, sea-shells, scallops and seaweed were added to the repertoire of designs. Patterns used for 'modern' secular lace from the 1880s onwards were made up of trailing arrangements of flower sprays, pendant blossoms, foliage tied with bows of ribbon and strings of pearls to impart grace and lightness of design all contained within scalloped borders with picot trim.

Between 1880 and 1920, themes inspired by the Gaelic revival also infiltrated design and emblems such as Celtic crosses and Celtic scrolls can be seen. Elaborate work was carried out by gifted pupils in the convents, industrial schools, art schools and workshops. The work by talented pupils was encouraged by the nuns in the convents where lace was made. These girls were awarded scholarships to attend the art colleges where they used their creativity and drawing skills to design not only lace but also iron trelliswork, leather book covers and silverware. Lace workers from Todd's and Cannock's also attended drawing classes in Limerick School of Art, which had been founded in 1852.

In 1954 an alb of Limerick lace was presented to Pope Pius XII by Dr Patrick O'Neill, Bishop of Limerick. Limerick Chamber of Commerce commissioned a lace corporal (a type of altar cloth) from the Good Shepherd Convent in 1979 to be worn at the Papal mass in Greenpark. The gift of Limerick lace presented by the then Mayor Frances Condell to the American president J.F Kennedy in 1963 very firmly placed Limerick lace on a world stage. Another example of a christening robe been sent to America is mentioned in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. During the same Irish visit President Kennedy received a gift of New Ross lace made at the Carmelite convent there. This was an enclosed order with a tradition of lace making going back to the time of the Great Famine.

In the course of my research a unique collection of lace made entirely from plant fibres, was brought to my attention by Ariane Factor, a curator in the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin. It was originally housed in the Royal College of Science in Dublin. Part of this collection consists of a very fine almost web like parasol lace cover constructed of fibre threads from the marshmallow and nettle plants. Fibres from a range of plants can be woven and stitched including honeysuckle, nasturtium and sweet pea. Also on display in the National Botanic Gardens is a selection of lace doilies constructed using Jamaican tree bark and ferns.

Irish Laces

Carrickmacross lace was founded as a philanthropic endeavour a few years before Limerick lace was established as a commercial industry. It is similar to Limerick in that it is also embroidery on a net background but it also uses a fine organdie or cambric in its design and execution. This type of lace is known as 'applique' as one fabric is 'applied' to another. 'Carrickmacross guipure' is made without net when areas of pattern are linked together using 'bars' or 'brides', creating an intricate design of openwork. Clones lace was introduced to the region of West Monaghan and South Fermanagh in 1847 as a famine relief scheme. According to the website of Clones Lace the makers of this style of lace have retained the grape and vine motifs in gratitude to the Italians who had given them the lace from which their own evolved.⁴

The makers of Clones crochet used designs which reflected their own surroundings, including motifs of shamrocks, harps, ferns, thistles, wild roses, marigolds and cartwheels. These were all joined by the distinctive Clones knot-ball, which was made by turning the hook ten or twelve times around the thread.

In the 1850s, tatting was introduced to Ardee, County Louth. At the time of writing, the Ardee Needlework Group, in collaboration with the local Active Retirement Group, are working on a series of wall hangings which incorporate tatting, to commemorate the hundred women from the locality who in the census of 1901, listed 'lace making' as their occupation.

Guilds

The Guild of Irish Lacemakers, based in Dublin, has approximately one hundred members, many from outside of Dublin. The Traditional Lacemakers of Ireland, a group based in Cork, was founded in 2005 to commemorate Cork's year as European Capital of Culture. Other guilds in Carrickmacross and Clones have won many awards for their craft, while individual members have published lace articles, books and manuals. These organisations continuously strive to support and encourage Irish lace both at home and abroad.

Private Collections

Veronica Rowe holds a wonderful collection relating to the Limerick Lace School, founded by her grandmother Florence Vere O'Brien. Held at her residence in Sandyford, Dublin, the collection includes beautiful pieces of lace work, patterns designed by Florence Vere O'Brien herself and other designers, medals and awards won by the students of the school and archival records. Grania McElligott also holds a major collection that she inherited from her grandmother Maude Hodgkinson Kearney. Held at her residence in Naas, County Kildare, the collection includes a large number of patterns designed by Maude Kearney, which are individually titled. It also includes Limerick lace, both tambour and run, and Carrickmacross lace which Maude Kearney also made. Important collections are also held in the Little Lace Museum, Bray, the Sheelin Gallery, Enniskillen and Kenmare Lace and Design Centre.

Lace Classes

A weekly lace making class is currently conducted in Pennywell, Limerick, by Marian O'Callaghan, an experienced and qualified teacher who learned her needlework skills as a member of the Irish Countrywomen's Association. In 2014, Marian O'Callaghan completed a specially commissioned piece of Limerick lace which was presented to the



Paraguayan Ambassador for Ireland and the United Kingdom when he visited Charleville, County Cork. An afternoon and evening lace making class is held weekly in the Millennium Centre in Raheen, organised by Ann Gabbett a member of the Limerick Federation of the ICA. Since its inception, the ICA has encouraged and supported Irish traditional craft skills and Limerick lace is exhibited in its museum at An Grianan in County Louth. The Moyross Needlecraft Group also works to preserve the art of Limerick lace making. In 2014, they held 'Threads', an exhibition of lace, crochet and knitting in the Watchhouse Cross Community Library. This was a City of Culture initiative exploring the craft and history of Limerick lace in collaboration with the Hunt Museum and the Limerick Regeneration Programme.

Celebrating Lace

The textile collection of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney Australia has some samples of lace made by Maude Kearney of Limerick. In 2011- 2013, the museum hosted a major exhibition entitled 'Love Lace'. It was described as being

Playful and inventive, the works on display present a provocative challenge to traditional concepts of lace. The artists push lace techniques in surprising new directions-knotting human hair into sculptures of human organs, crocheting steel wire into a ghostly motor engine, carving lace patterns from the body of a rusty old truck...The exhibition ranges from bold large scale installations and sculptures to intricate textiles and jewellery.⁵

From September 2012 to February 2013, a season of events entitled 'Lace: Here: Now' were held in Nottingham, the home of machine made lace. Recognising the significance of lace to the identity of Nottingham, 'Lace: Here: Now' aimed to 'celebrate the heritage of Nottingham lace and demonstrates that lace still inspires, fascinates and excites.'⁶ In March 2014, the National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny hosted an exhibition called 'Interlace', which focused on contemporary interpretations of lace, and the exploration of how traditional material culture might create a resonant source for contemporary practice.⁷

As part of her MA research in the University of Limerick, Suzanna Melinn, a native of County Clare and graduate of the National College of Art and Design, has developed 'Enlaced', an interactive installation which seeks to re-interpret Limerick lace through technological means giving this specific traditional craft form a digital 'edge'. Suzanna's work draws on the 'rich historical narrative of Limerick lace' as inspiration for her project.

Roisin de Butleir, is an Irish artist who has engraved patterns for Limerick lace onto glass. She uses her art to 'pay homage to traditional skills such as needlework and lace making- transforming what is perceived as 'ordinary' into the realm of extraordinary'. Fiona Harrington, an artist based in the Beara Peninsula, West Cork, has recently been awarded a major award at the RDS National Craft Awards. Fiona worked as an intern in the Kenmare Lace and Design Centre, and inspired by the local landscape she used a combination of Carrickmacross and Kenmare lace styles that married both the traditional and original approaches to lace design.

Theresa Kelly is an expert lace maker and Carrickmacross textile artist who provides lace making classes and workshops in Ireland and overseas. Maire Treanor is a highly-skilled Clones crochet expert and author who regularly teaches crochet skills in America and contributes articles to American publications. She has also written a number of books and has been awarded prestigious prizes for her work. Jane Galbraith is an artist working with metal and has recently produced a collection inspired by the drawings and diaries of Florence Vere O'Brien. Her work has recently been shown as part of the 2014 RDS National Craft Awards.

Among the leading lace makers in Limerick at the time of writing are Eileen Browne and Eileen McCaffrey. Eileen Browne of Ballincurra Gardens has been making Limerick lace for nearly a quarter of a century. Some of her pieces have been presented to dignitaries visiting Limerick.

High quality machine made lace is readily available in locations where textiles have always been mass produced. But, that which is produced by machine will never replace that which is made using the heart with the hand. Machine made cannot recount stories told in thread, sewn by gifted women who created something of superlative quality and timeless beauty often in the most difficult of circumstances, women who were the great-grandmothers of today's independent and talented Irish craftswomen.



ENDNOTES

Considering Lace

- 1 Ó Cléirigh and Rowe, *Limerick Lace*, p.84
- 2 For further definitions and instructions see Ó Cléirigh and Rowe, *Limerick Lace*, pp 67-88.
- 3 Keane, 'Lace Making in Ireland', p. 196.
- 4 [http:// www.cloneslace.com](http://www.cloneslace.com)
- 5 [http:// www.powerhousemuseum.com/lovelace](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/lovelace)
- 6 [http:// www.ntu.ac.uk/art/news/lace_here_now](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/art/news/lace_here_now)
- 7 [http:// www.nationalcraftgallery.ie/exhibitions/interlace](http://www.nationalcraftgallery.ie/exhibitions/interlace)



A beginners guide to the basic stitches of Limerick Lace

by Eileen McCaffrey

Eileen McCaffrey began making Limerick lace three years ago when she set up a lace group in the Good Shepherd Convent with Marion O'Callaghan as teacher. Eileen has become fascinated by lace and has worked with Limerick Museum and Archives to promote Limerick lace.

Materials required:

- Hoop (For a small piece-8 inch or smaller. Large rectangular frames were usually used by lace makers).
- Thread (50 cotton)
- Needle
- Net (100% cotton) Big enough to cover hoop and keep taut: design on greaseproof paper.

Set-Up for a Heavy and Light Darn:

Place net on inner loop with the single bar in a straight line.

Lay the 2nd hoop on top, tighten hoop and pull net taut gently.

Thread needle; Cut good length of thread and double. Then thread the needle with cut ends through eye.

Make loop with the thread round index finger (left hand). Pull needle through loop making knot close to eye of needle.

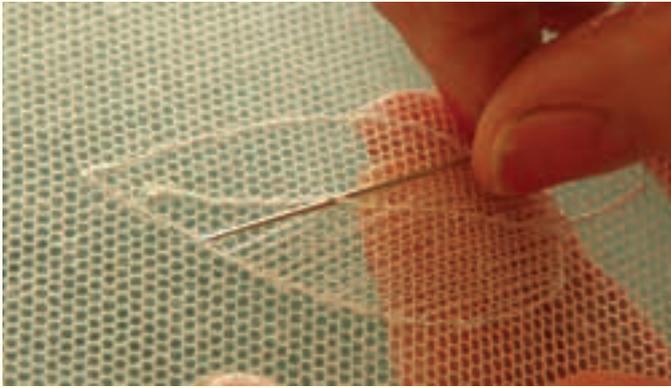
Pin pattern on the back of the net. Start outline with double thread, pick up one bar of net and pull needle through end of double thread making a knot to secure.

Follow outline of pattern (lifting 2 bars of net and passing over the next 2 bars).

Continue as so until back to start. Remove pattern from net.

To finish bring needle through to back making 2 small button hole-stitches on outline to fasten off.

Heavy Darn



Step 1

Laying the threads is the first part of the Heavy Darn.

Use single thread (length tip of middle finger to elbow).

Start by lifting a bar on the net plus outline thread and secure.

Lay this thread along the diagonal line of the net. Fasten with two hitches at the top of the same line.

Continue same until leaf full.



Step 2

Second step of the Heavy Darn.

Lift single bar and outline thread and secure.

Work in opposite diagonals.

With needle and thread lift the singles bars of net in between the laid threads (should form X).

Continue until leaf is completed.

Light Darn



Step 1

Light Darn is worked differently to Heavy Darn, but it is also done in two steps.

Lift a bar of the net plus outline thread and secure.

With the needle facing you (working right to left) pass the needle under the full box of the net on the diagonal.

Skip next box. Work the next box the same, continue until line complete.



Step 2

Keep the hoop in the same position (work the opposite left to right). Secure thread as step 1.

Needle facing away, go under full mesh diagonally, into the bottom of the row above.

Continue same as Step 1 in reverse until the row is complete. If the stitch is done properly the stitch above should correspond with the stitch underneath and the threads will lay in rows.





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Grania McElligott, granddaughter of Maude Kearney



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