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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

Faculty of Fashion and Textiles
Department of Fashion

"A Study of the Origin and Myths of the Aran Sweater"

by

Sorcha Mc Kee

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INTRODUCTION

While researching a variety of knitting techniques for my studio work, I came across the intricate stitches of the Aran sweater, which have been representing Ireland sartorially since their discovery in 1936. The Aran sweater has a fascinating history, one that we are told is shrouded in obscurity, and is as much a part of our cultural heritage as the *Book of Kells*, but may ironically be alien to the Irish culture. This thesis is an examination and an exploration of the Aran sweater and the myths that have arisen, finding out how a small home craft, fostered in a tiny insular community, gave its name to a knitting style that is now universal.

It is impossible to give an account of Aran knitting without describing the island's unique environment, and looking briefly at its history. The islands have been home to a variety of tribes from Vikings to Cromwellian soldiers, each leaving some mark on the islands. The harsh environment on the islands is often given as the main reason for the development of the Aran sweater, the fishermen needing warm clothing to protect themselves from the inhospitable Atlantic ocean climate, and perhaps even to identify their bodies in case of drowning. This latter is possibly the most common myth, and my research yielded information that may have been the basis for that view.

Traditional Aran dress has been well documented, both visually and in the written word, but very little is mention of a "bainin" sweater. Further analysis would seem to indicate that the Aran sweater may not have been part of the attire until the early twentieth century, placing many myths on shaky ground.

In my evaluation of handknitting in Ireland and the attendant mythology, I have only taken into account surviving knitting samples, which seem largely to have come from Egypt. Richard Rutt's theory of Aran knitting shatters a myth which has been the cornerstone for many other textile writers i.e. H. E. Kiewe's theory on the sweater heritage in relation to a figure in the *Book of Kells*. Rohana Darlington provides us with a totally new angle, as to when and how Aran knitting actually arrived on the islands.

This gives some credit to statements made by other textile writers such as Rae Compton and H. E. Kiewe.

The Aran sweater is one of Ireland's international images, a jumper traditionally made of undyed homespun "bainin" wool. From its discovery by H. E. Kiewe in Dublin in 1936, the Aran Sweater has been seen on the catwalks of London, Paris and Japan, and on many an American tourist. The myths surrounding it have enhanced its marketability. Today there is a wide gap between modern technology, quality luxury yarns, and the island knitters using the undyed bainin wool.

How well have past and present met ? The thesis concludes by showing how domestic and foreign designers and companies like Inis Meáin have used the Arans patterns and international image, to achieve considerable market success.

CHAPTER ONE

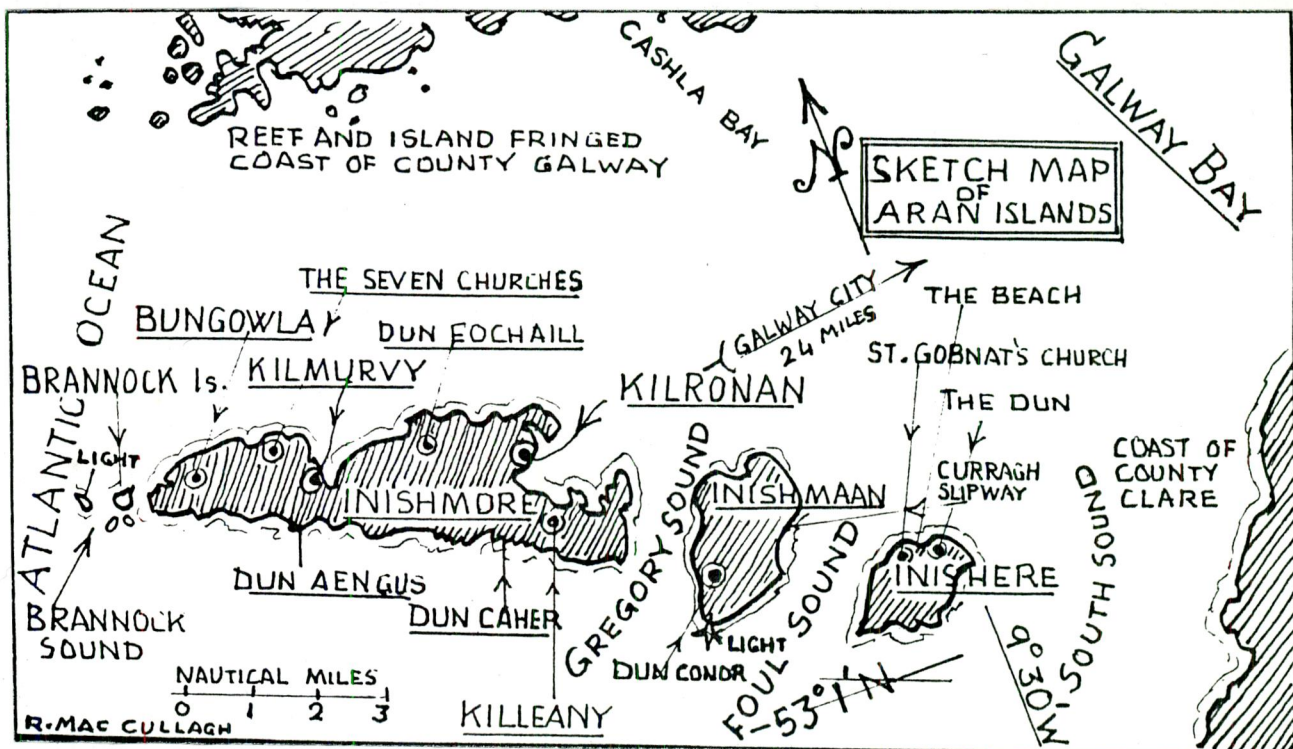


Plate 1
The Map of The Aran Islands



CHAPTER ONE

It is believed that the origin of the famous patterns of the Aran Islands is shrouded in obscurity. The advent of the Aran fishing 'shirt' or sweater as it is commonly referred to today, may better be understood after considering the geography and history of the Islands.

Aran Islands is the collective name for a group of islands, located in the Atlantic, off mainland Ireland's western seaboard, where Irish is the first language and local traditions are still strong. Inis Mór [the large island], Inis Meáin [the middle island], Inis Oírr [the eastern island], and the small Brannock Islands, at the northwest end, lie in a row some eighteen miles across the mouth of Galway Bay and not far from the cliffs of County Clare on the south (pl. 1).

Geologically the islands are a continuation of the sparse Burren district of north west Clare. With no high mountains, no trees and few sheltered places, the sense of dreary desolation is intensified by the slabs of terraced limestone stretching in every direction (pl. 2). In *Oileain Arann* Leo Daly records "the alliterate adjectives, bleak, barren and blustery probably describes the islands best".¹ Yet, colour is not totally lacking, in spring and summer many varieties of wild flowers bloom from rock crevices providing a display that rivals the Burren. The unpredictable and often inhospitable Atlantic sea has moulded the coast line of the islands with relentless buffeting causing "under cut cliffs, sea-scoured caves, desolate storm beaches, out lying reefs and lofty foam-grit stacks."² Dramatic scenery results.

In Connemara, they say, "if you can see the Aran Islands, it is going to rain and if you can't see them, then it is raining". The Arans share the same oceanic climate as the rest of Ireland, mild and without extremes. Unfortunately storms are of a greater consequence on the islands, often rendered defenceless by sudden violent turns of weather, cutting them off from the mainland for days, even months at a time, and leaving them short of perishable goods and fuel, particularly when the currach (pl. 3)

¹ Daly, 1975, p.6

² Mac Nally, 1978, p.9

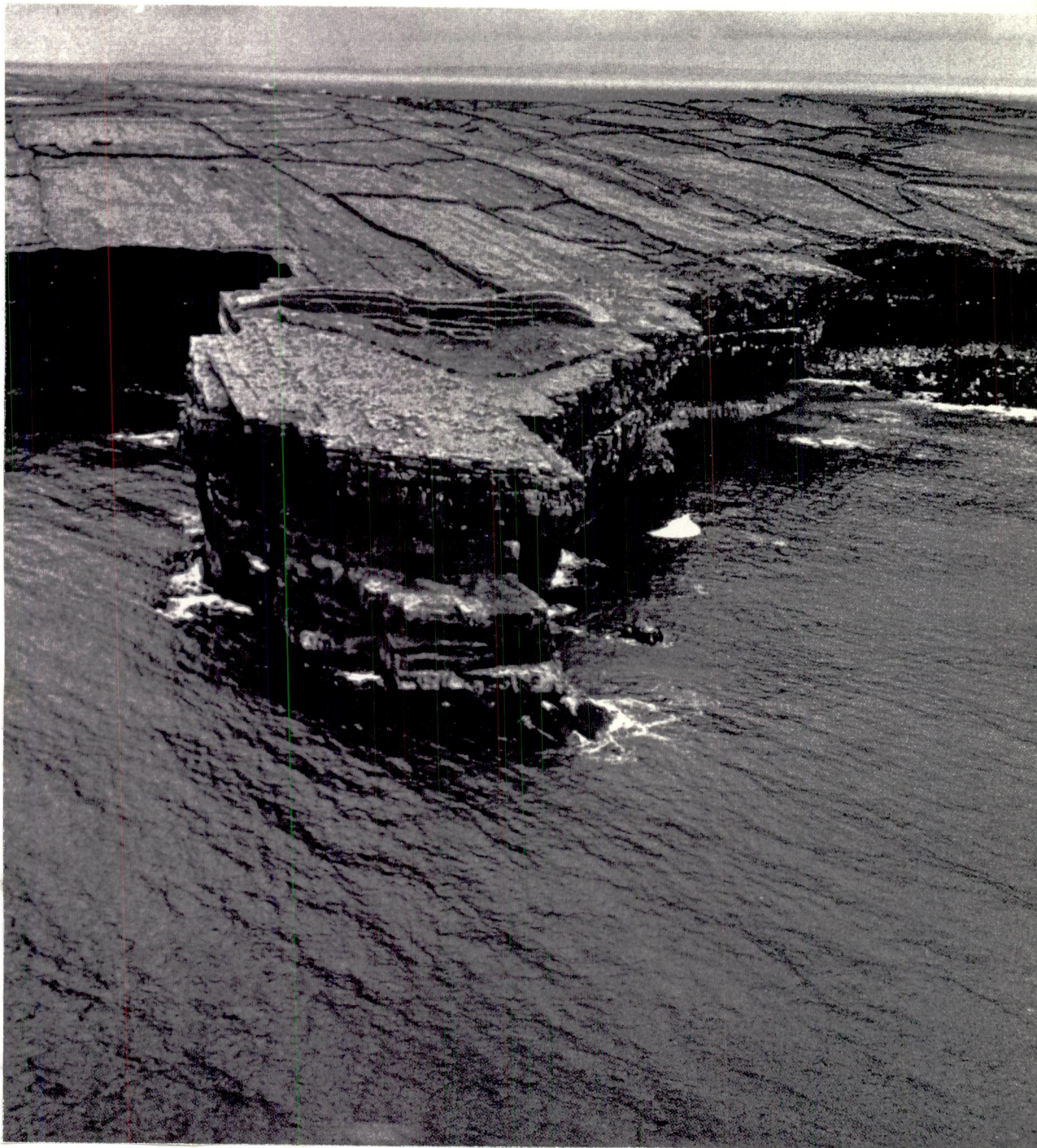


Plate 2

As there are stars in the sky there are silver - gray stones on Inishmore

Smith, 1980, p.60

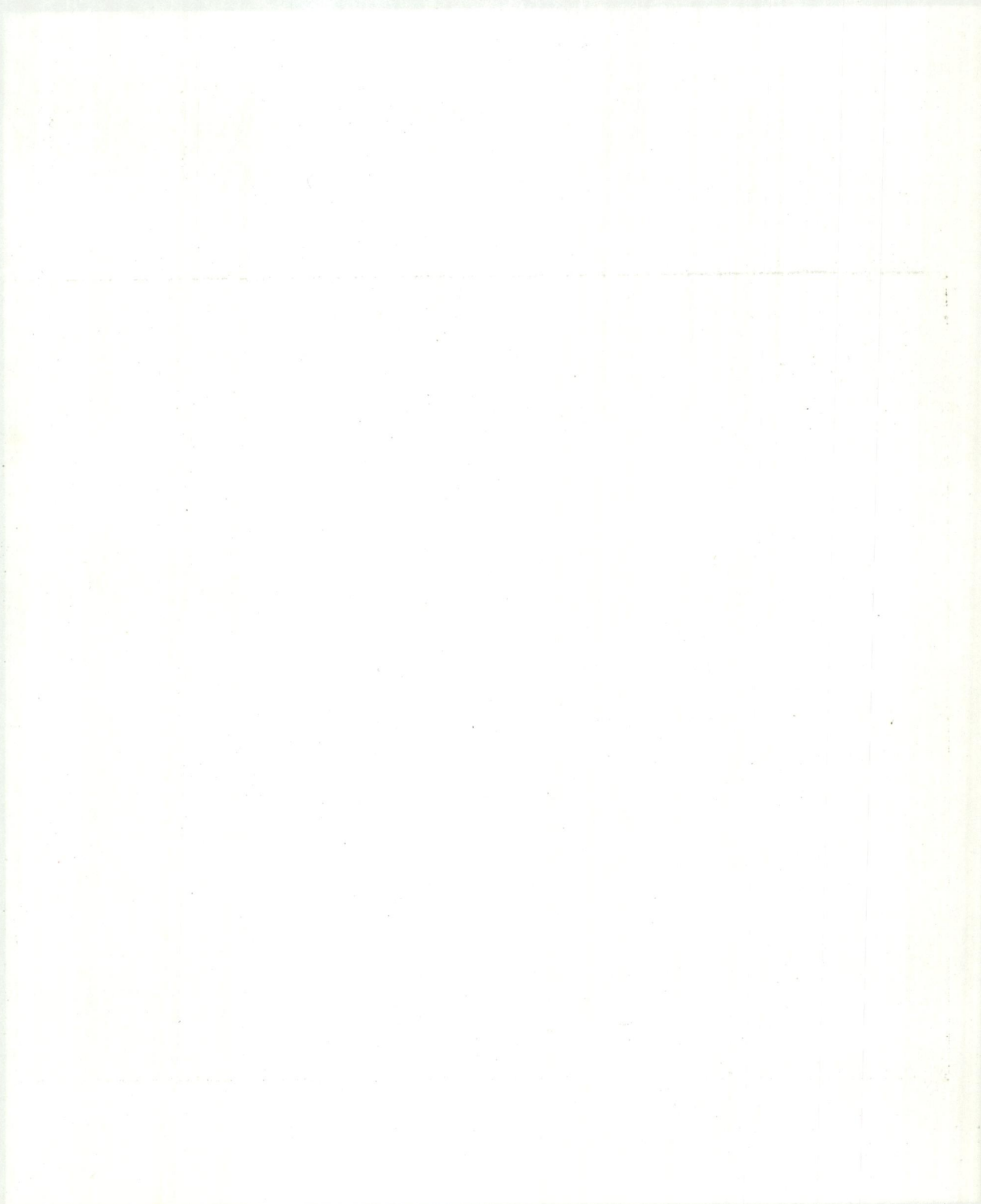




Plate 3
Canvas Currachs, Aran 1905



was the only form of transport. B.N. Hedderman, a district nurse appointed to the islands in 1903, recalls in emergencies having many a rough journey in the currachs.³

There have been many disputes regarding public freight and passenger transport services to the Aran islands over the last number of decades. In 1989, Iarnrod Eireann decided to cancel its passenger service which meant that there was no state run passenger ferry to the three islands for the first time in 85 years. Since 1970, Aer Arann, an independent internal airline, sponsored by Gaeltarra Eireann, has operated daily return flights to the mainland. There are also regular ferries both public and private, so now such isolation is no longer a regular occurrence. Despite all that my recent attempt to reach the islands by ferry failed, due to adverse weather conditions, which lasted for several days.

The Aran Islands have offered continuing inspiration to scientist and works both cultural and artistic, by people such as J.M.Synge, Lady Gregory, Sean Keating, Charles Lamb, James Joyce, the American film maker Robert Flaherty. In 1962 Gilbert Becaud wrote an opera in french *The Opera of Aran*.

The people of Aran have had an active history, largely due to their geographical situation on the most westerly edge of Europe, a stepping stone for an invasion. Leo Daly points out that the well preserved antiquities of the islands bear witness to the continuous occupation from the late stone age, as witnessed by megalithic burial sites and ancient stone forts (pl. 4). Unfortunately, no scientific excavation has been carried out on any of the Island forts, so their age is still a matter for speculation.⁴

Settled by early Christians in the sixth century the Aran islands, are dotted with early Christian remains. The great saint of the islands is St. Eanna or St. Enda who founded a monastery on Inis Mór in 483 AD and had connections with monasteries all over Europe and beyond. According to Michael Finlan it has been said that there are more saints buried in the

³ Mac Cullagh, 1992, p.118

⁴ Daly, 1975, p.8



Plate 4
Dun Chonchuir, the largest stone fort on Inis Meáin



islands than there are stars in the sky, though how many of them would be recognised by the Church today is questionable.⁵ So celebrated did the islands become as a retreat and because of the number of recluses who lived there, they became famous as "Aran of the Saints". There is a legend that one of the Aran holy men, Pupaelus, actually ruled as Pope in Rome for a few days but abandoned the honour for reasons unknown and was brought to Aran by St. Enda. Unfortunately in 1653, Aran became a form of concentration camp for Catholic clergy awaiting transportation to the West Indies.⁶

Certain historic events have had dramatic effects on the population of the Aran Islands. In the mid-seventeenth century, a large English garrison was placed on the islands. According to Dr. Beddoes, *Races of Britain* (1885), it would seem that a good relationship existed between the garrison and the islanders, the soldiers intermarried with the locals and adopted the Catholic way of life. But to what extent the population was modified genetically by this event is a matter for speculation, but probably during these years the foundations of the present Aran people were laid.⁷

When the Great Hunger struck in the mid 1840's, poverty and disease were widespread in Ireland. It is interesting to note that the famine did not have the disastrous effects on the Aran population that it had on the mainland or other Islands. In the early 1820's, there had been a famine on the Aran islands, "but the potentially disastrous consequences of this were contained due to the scale of the relief operations".⁸ In fact, the population decline across the three islands between 1841 and 1851 was just five percent. Unfortunately, other islands around Ireland suffered to an even greater extent in comparison to the mainland, simply because of their separation and neglect. The Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends stated in a report in 1847.

The difficulty in communication with the main land makes most perilous the position of these islands .. and renders it especially

⁵ Finlan, 10 October 1994

⁶ Daly, 1975, p.14

⁷ Daly, 1975, p.14

⁸ Waddell, 1994, p.207

*needful that they should be kept under constant supervision.*⁹

In the 1851 Census, it was found that the population of Clare Island had fallen from 1,615 in 1841 to just 845 in 1851, a drop of almost fifty percent. But this was just one of a number of islands which suffered during the Great Famine.

Depopulation of the Aran islands didn't seem to start until the turn of the nineteenth century. According to Leo Daly, Inis Mór lost one third of its population around this time,¹⁰ leaving empty cheerless thatched cottages to the ravages of the wind and rain. The decline of the fishing industry after the first World War was a major factor in triggering off the great emigration from the Islands. Assisted passages enabled even the very poor to make the Atlantic crossing to the New World, the traditional destination of the islanders being south Boston. Remittance money from relatives abroad was a sustaining element at this time, when the islanders were solely dependent on indigenous resources of the islands for their livelihood.

"A landless man in Aran is a poor man indeed", as the saying goes, points out the importance of having land on Aran. The land was and is a jealously guarded treasure. The grey limestone that covers the islands was scoured by the Ice Age glaciers, leaving only a scanty covering of soil which is difficult to cultivate. Throughout the past 300 years, Aran farmers "manufactured" soil using a mixture of sand, decaying seaweed, grass seed and unending patience, transforming into land limestone pavements. This process of land making is vividly portrayed in Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* (1934). The cleared stones provided the material for the lattice work of walls found all over the islands, through which the wind eases without anger but with contentment. Animal life enjoys reasonable shelter.

After the Great Hunger, a lot of problems arose regarding land. In the first half of the eighteenth century the islanders were victims of absentee landlords, whose only concern with the islands was the extraction of

⁹ Mc Nally, 1978, p.10

¹⁰Daly, 1975, p.16

exorbitant rents. The Congested District Board was established in 1891 by the British Government to combat this problem and others. The Board assisted the western counties and a number of islands, where families had insufficient land to maintain a minimum standard of living. The islands were purchased from the absentee Anglo - Irish landlords for the sum of £13,721¹¹ and the fragmented holdings consolidated into manageable units, and then sold to the occupying tenants under terminable purchase annuities. The terms allowed cottage farmers to eventually become owners of the land they worked. Although the problem with the land made life difficult, the population increased and employment was to be had in the building of piers, lighthouses and other official buildings. The Congested District Board, did much to alleviate some of the hardship. Unfortunately the Congested District Board was wound up in 1923.

The Congested District Board also played a vital part in the renaissance of Irish crafts. Deirdre Mc Quillan states that they "founded 76 lacemaking, knitting and crochet schools".¹² On the 31 March 1893, Major Robert Rutledge Fair, reporting on the Aran Islands, noted that there was more weaving and knitting than formerly,¹³ but "nothing woven or spun is ever sold".¹⁴ In fact the Aran women were only knitting socks at this time or so it seemed, and nothing was mentioned about a white sweater with intricate relief stitches or anything similar.

In 1970 the islands belonged to another age - there was no electricity, no running water, a primitive telephone system and an erratic ferry service. It wasn't until 1973, that electricity became part of life for the islanders, piped water four years later and telephones in 1987. In fact, only two of the three islands decided to advance, Inis Meáin apparently wanted to continue in the old way. The provision of better social services and a higher standard of living resulting from state incentive grants, family remittance and pensions has inevitably influenced the outlook of the islanders, bringing an insular community from biblical primitiveness to the twentieth century.

¹¹ Smith, 1980, p.78

¹² Mc Quillan, 1993, p.15

¹³ Rutt, 1987, p.196

¹⁴ Mc Quillan, 1993, p.16

In conclusion, the elements have played their part in producing a close community spirit and a breed of hardy men, with families forever conscious that a quirk of nature could rob them of a loved one. Outdoor work in this oceanic climate created a need for warm, protective and practical clothing. This need was crucial to the development of the traditional Aran sweater.

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER TWO

To understand the history and development of the Aran sweater, it is important to have some picture of the traditional clothes worn by the islanders. The everyday garments throughout the nineteenth century had little to do with fashion, they were aids against the harsh environment, protective and practical, and "almost totally dependent on the availability of local resources and local produced fabrics."¹⁵ Mairead Dunlevy points out, in *Dress in Ireland* that although people were known to travel distances, the majority lived their lives within their own locality.¹⁶ This may have been a contributing factor to the survival of traditional dress, which still survives in part, on the islands.

We seem to know more about the traditional clothing on the Aran islands than anywhere else in the country, due to photographers and artists, such as, the Irish painters - Sean Keating (pl. 5), W. B. Yeats (pl. 6) and Charles Lamb (pl. 7). With the amount of visual records available, it seems quite astonishing that the Aran sweater of sculptured relief, is not featured.

John Millington Synge, the renowned Irish playwright, spent many months among the islanders between 1899 and 1902, and based his play *Riders to the Sea* on his experience of Aran. In his book *The Aran islands* published in 1907 also based on the islands, Synge provides us a description of the traditional island dress.

*The women wear red petticoats and jackets of island wool, stained with madder, to which they usually add a plaid shawl twisted round their chests and tied at the back. When it rains they throw another petticoat over their heads with the waistband around their faces or, if they are young, they use a heavy shawl like those worn in Galway..*¹⁷

The red (petticoat) skirt or *cotaí*, was the common costume, not only on Aran, but of the women throughout the west of Ireland. It probably would have been made of *fleanín*, a heavy woollen tweed or flannel, which was woven from the wool of the island sheep and dyed with the local plants

¹⁵ O' Dowd, 1990, p.7

¹⁶ Dunlevy, 1989, p.112

¹⁷ Waddell, 1994, p.264



Plate 5

An Aran Fisherman and his Wife

Sean Keating (1889 - 1977)

Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin



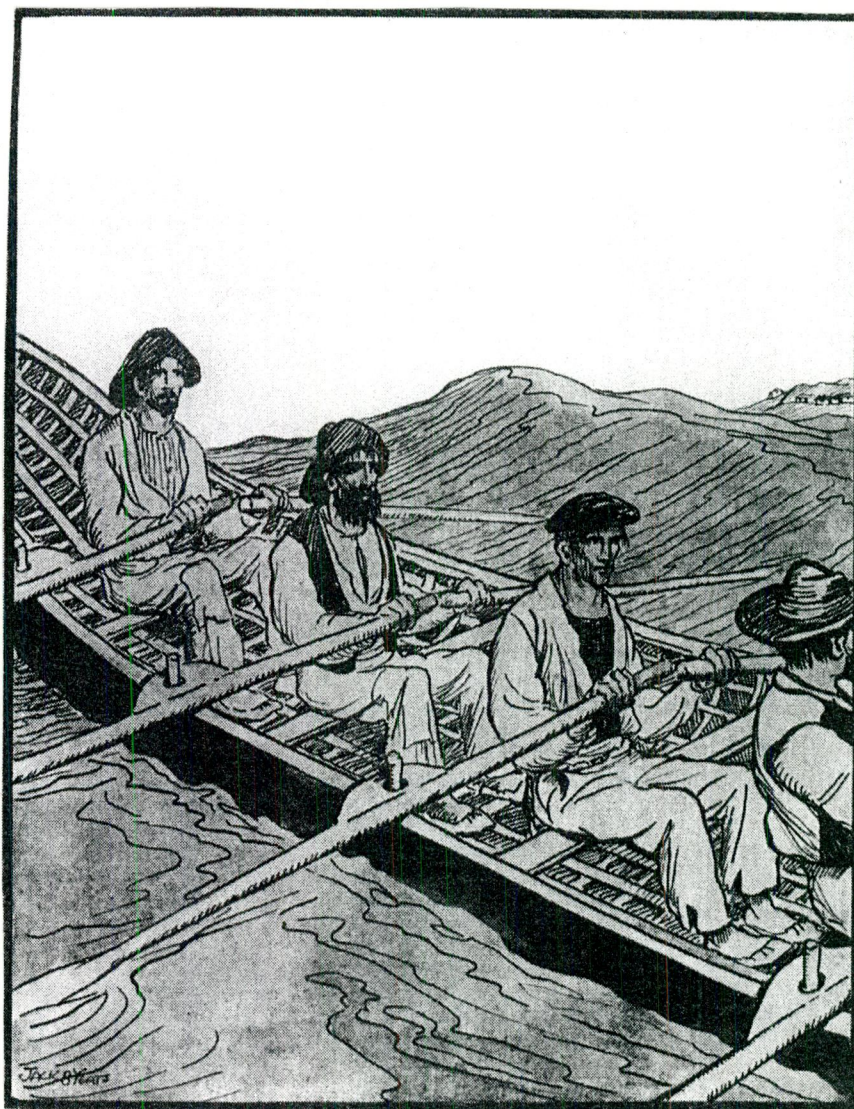


Plate 6
A Four-oared Currach
J. B. Yeats (1871 - 1957)
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

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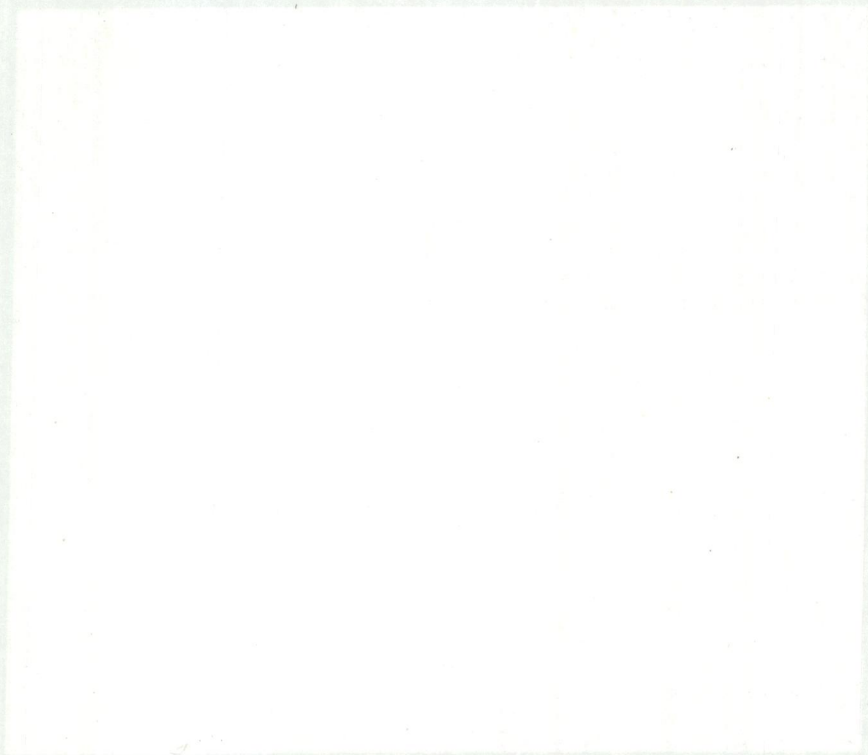


Plate 7

A Quaint Couple

Charles Lamb (1893 - 1964)

Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork



and lichens. The *cotaí*, was very wide often containing four to five metres of material. One or two white flannel underskirts were also worn depending on the weather. The island women sometimes wore an *naprún seicear* or checked apron, which they usually looped up along with the skirt and tucking the ends into the waistband, thus exposing the petticoat.

The bodice, known as a *poilcí* or a *corpán*, or jacket were worn either inside or outside the skirt and made of a variety of materials including flannel, *breidín* or *frieze*, a rougher woollen cloth than the *fleanín*. During the 1930's and 1940's, a jacket or *deaicéid* of *fleanín*, with a velvet collar and cuffs was a popular fashion among the women of Aran. As an undergarment the women wore some form of shift, or *léine* of flannel or fine linen.

During the nineteenth century, the majority of Irish women favoured the hooded cloak. But it seems, the women of Aran preferred to keep themselves warm with a red or plaid shoulder shawls, which Synge mentioned. Known as "hug me tights", or *seáilín pleaid*, the thick warm fringed shawl, knitted, crocheted or woven, was thrown over the shoulders and drawn crossways over the breast. An extra outer garment for warmth, was a heavy woollen shawl with a wide patterned border and cotton fringing called the Galway shawl - due to its popularity throughout that county. Originally made in Scotland they began to make an appearance in Ireland around the turn of the century. An example of this shawl is shown in Noreen Walsh's painting *Seálta 2* (pl. 8).

The Galway shawl replaced an older form of cloak, which the women of Aran invented themselves, according to Anne O'Dowd taking a spare *cotaí*, they would sew a *crios* for decoration to the waistband, then placing this on their head, let the skirt drape over the shoulders and body, giving the appearance of a cloak (pl. 9). Some of the older women continued this tradition for wakes and funerals until the 1940's.

One of the strongest features of the Aran dress was the *crios*, a brightly coloured hand-woven belt, common to both sexes. Although a man's



Plate 8
Seálta 2
Noreen Walsh





Plate 9

The Aran woman on the right is wearing the Galway shawl, while the rest of her companions are wearing the older traditional form of cloak - a skirt or *cotaí* decorated with a *crios*.



crios was typically three and a half yards long (3.2 metres) a woman's was just two yards long (1.8 metres).¹⁸ It was woven in homespun coloured wool in narrow strips without a loom, then plaited at each end leaving long fringes.

According to Rohana Darlington in *Irish Knitting*, 'similar belts were made by monks in monasteries' and 'were often accredited with healing properties'.¹⁹ They could have been made during the sixteenth century, in the monastery founded by St. Enda on Inis Mór.

As with the island women, the men wore a number of layers, starting with the *léine ghlais*, a tunic of light blue woollen cloth, with set in sleeves and a narrow neckband. Next was the *bástchóta* a white flannel sleeved waistcoat, with V-shaped neck, closing at the front with three or four buttons. A further woollen shirt, *léine ghorm*, could be worn for warmth (pl. 10 & 11).

The islanders rarely wore coats, but for warmth they wore a number of layers to trap heat. Coats would probably have been cumbersome while working. The dress that they wore perfectly suited outdoor work such as farming, fishing and the harvesting of kelp and seaweed in the harsh environment. Generally, the *bheist* or waistcoat was the only outer upper garment worn by the men. The front was made from undyed brown or grey *frieze* and lined with white flannel, while the back was of blue *frieze*.

According to Pam Dawson, the island men often wore a woollen sweater under a waistcoat, probably grey or blue in colour and not of the bainin wool we know today. This woollen sweater may be the fishermans gansey that many refer to.²⁰

At the beginning of the twentieth century, *treabhsar*, a type of trousers. Wide and lose, ending well above the ankles was worn. On each outer leg there was a slit of about 7 cms, so they could be rolled up. The *treabhsar* were made of blue *frieze* similar to the back of the *bheist*.

¹⁸ Dunlevy, 1989, p.166

¹⁹ Darlington, 1991, p.17

²⁰ Dawson, 1991, p.6

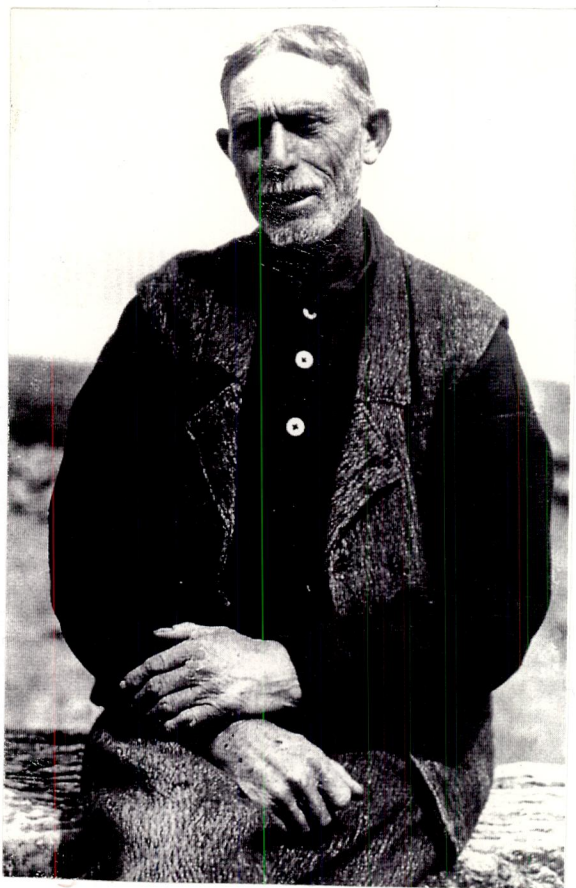


Plate 10

A man whose clothes show many of the elements of Aran clothing



Plate 11

The wide brimmed felt hat, an import from Dublin, was worn from Aran to the Great Blaskets.



But later on, the *bríste*, closer fitting trousers, made from brown or grey *frieze*, like the cloth in the front of the *bheist*, were worn. In the summer months the trousers were often discarded leaving the underpants, *drar bán*, which had full length legs. Both the trousers and the drawers were held up with a *crios*.

In Ireland, as in most countries, children's clothes were scaled down versions of their parents. Small boys and girls, dressed in female attire, were indistinguishable except for the way in which their hair was cut (pl. 12). An explanation offered, was that the *daoine maíthe* or fairies sometimes spirited infant boys away to the land of youth, and substitute an inferior being in the process, but dressed as a girl, they would take no interest. Probably, it was down to practicality and the "household economy".²¹

It is interesting to note that Deirdre McQuillan in *The Aran Sweater* mentions an old man remembering his first Holy Communion gansey. Also mentioned, is the film *Man of Aran* by the Catholic Film Society in 1932 on Inis Mór.²² One sequence shows a group of children dressed for their Holy Communion, a number of the boys are wearing patterned white sweaters with little collars and buttons along the shoulders. Could this "biblical white"²³ Aran sweater have formed part of the Holy Communion dress? Could the Aran sweater have been an item of clothing for the young boys on the islands, to signify their coming of age, or at least signify the time when they no longer had to wear their mothers or sisters hand me downs.

All the islanders wore pampootes (pl. 13), simple moccasin style shoes of untanned leather. They were also called *bróga úrléir* by the islanders, made of calfskin but formally of seal skin. The lifespan of these shoes was only 4 - 6 weeks, becoming hard and dry with use, they needed to be left soaking in water to restore flexibility. Being ideal on the islands for their suitability on rocky terrain and in the frail currachs, they were used until the 1950's. Generally, dark blue socks, knitted by the island women, with patterns of triangles in blue and undyed white wool at the toe, were worn

²¹ Waddell, 1994, p.202

²² Mc Quillan, 1993, p.16

²³ Kiewe, 1966, p.66



Plate 12

A group of children on Inis Mór. The boy, on the left, and the two girls are wearing a one piece dress, *an cóta cabhalach*.



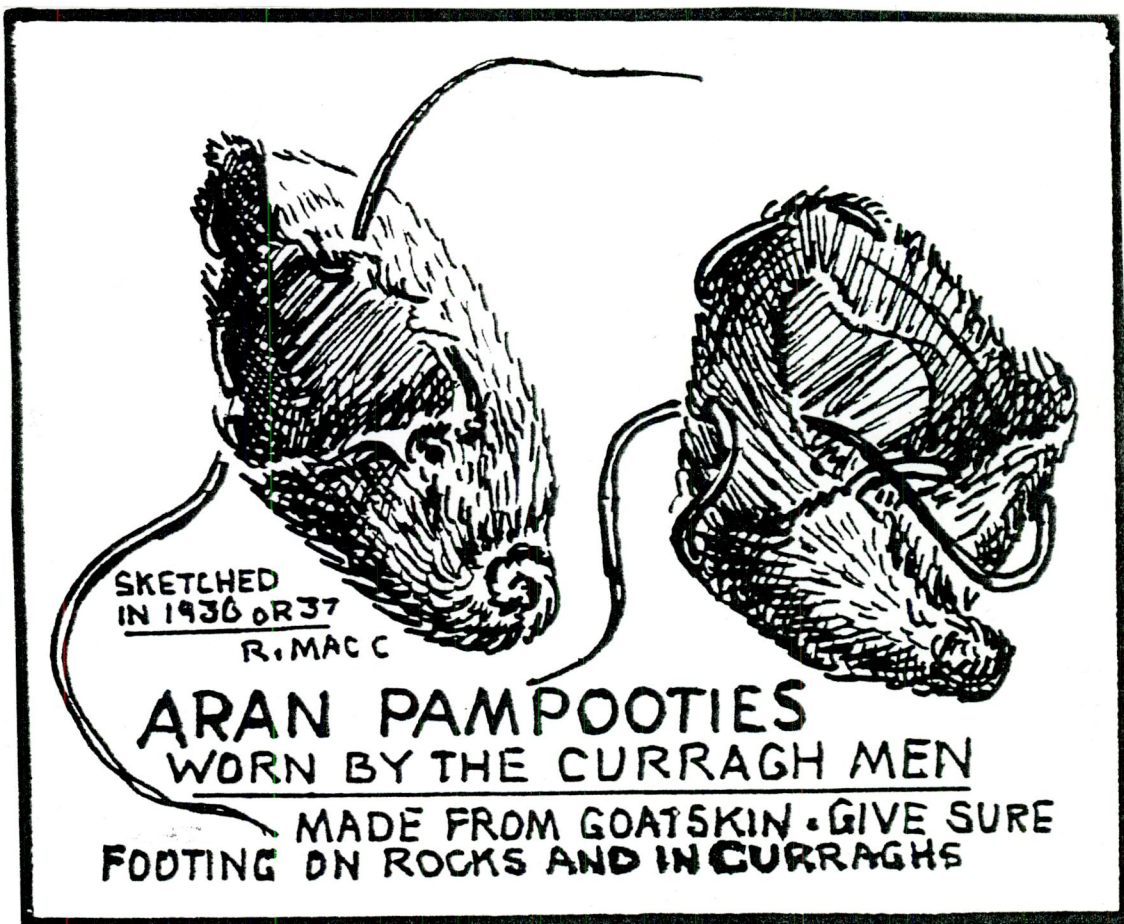


Plate 13

Simple moccasin style shoes of untanned leather.



under the pampootes. Knitted soleless stockings, *máirtíni*, reaching up as far as the knee, were also worn to protect the legs from the cold. The lower end divided into two unequal parts, the smaller flap to cover the heel and the larger flap covered the upper part of the foot with a loop to catch over the middle toe to keep the sock in place.

From the information gathered, knitted garments were not a predominate feature in the traditional islanders dress. In fact, the *máirtíni* and the Galway shawl seem to have been the only knitted items worn by the islanders. Therefore it would suggest that the Aran sweater, according to a number of historians including Anne O'Dowd, was not part of the traditional clothing on the islands until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Oenone Somerville and Martin Ross, went to Aran in 1906 and published an account of their visit in *Some Irish Yesterdays*, they commented on the islanders dress, but never mentioned anything of a white relief knitted sweater.

Photographs from the early 1870's, in the Laurence collection, in the National Library in Dublin, show fishermen from the west coast of Ireland, wearing what appears to be fishermen's sweaters, in plain light colour with no distinctive decorations. These may be "the usual fisherman's jerseys"²⁴ that Synge describes as growing in popularity among young island men in 1907. The same fisherman gansies that are featured in Robert O'Flaherty documentary film *Man of Aran* of 1934, dark with no distinctive patterns (pl. 14). In Flaherty's publicity campaign, he brought some islanders to London and dressed cinema attendants in seamen's jerseys. Possibly, the fisherman's gansey was the forerunner of the Aran sweater.

The difference between Aran sweaters (pl. 15) and the fishermen's gansies from the British Isles (pl. 16) is the sheer exuberance of the Irish design. A typical Aran design consisted of a centre panel with two side panels bordered with cable, fronts were patterned differently from their backs but always related, in direction or in shape, in texturing or type of pattern. Unlike many other island methods, each section is worked separately and

²⁴ Waddell, 1994, p.264



Plate 14

Maggie Dirrane, Coley King (Tiger King) and Mikleen Dillane

"We select a group of the most attractive and appealing characters we can find, to represent a family and through them tell our story"

Waddell, 1994, p. 289.

WAT POST

ZETA

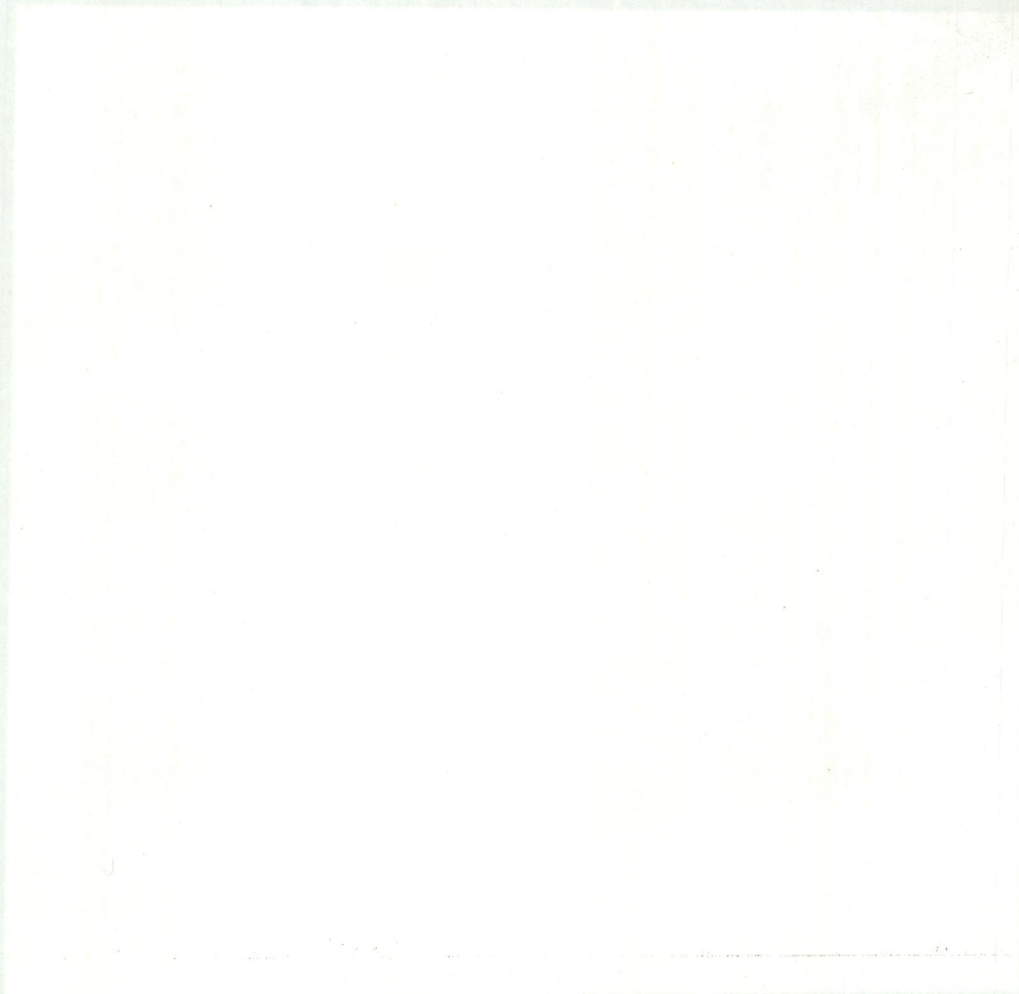


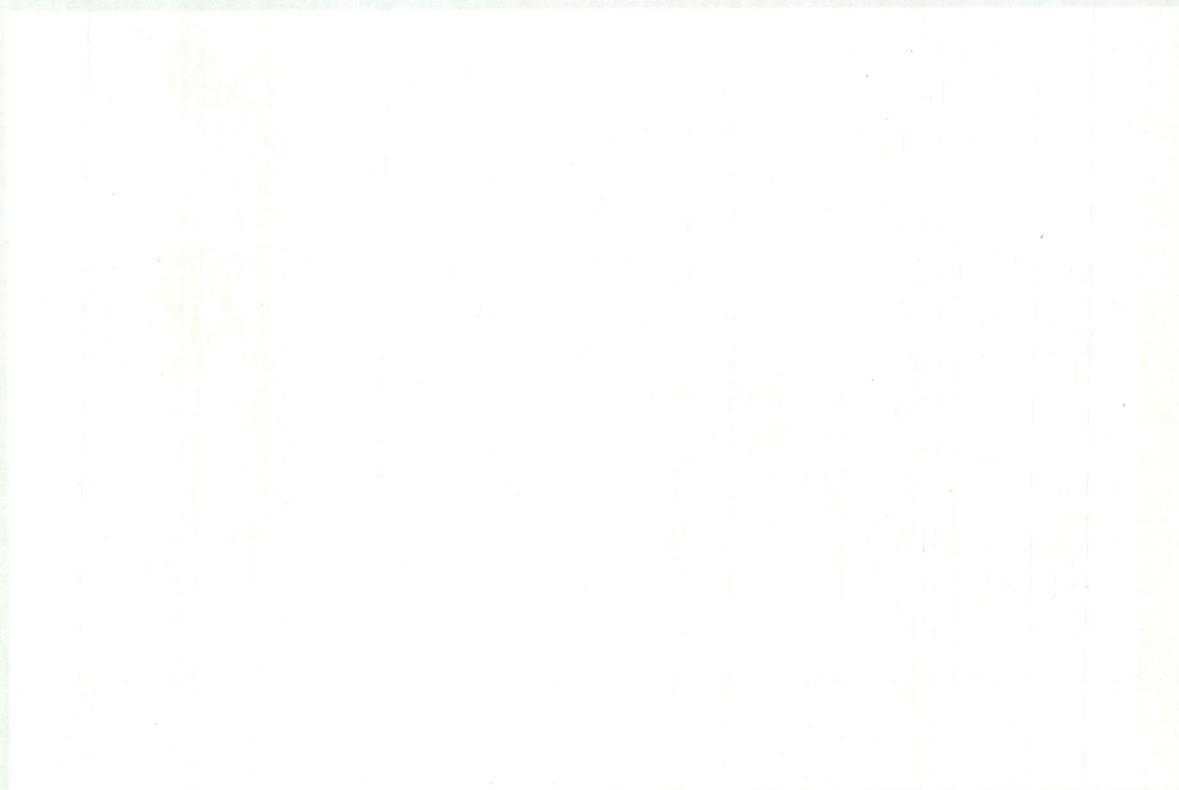


Plate 15
Early Aran sweater showing diamond and cable patterns





Plate 16
An early twentieth century English fishermans gansey



the garment is seamed on completion.

Aran knitting remained exclusive to the islanders until the 1930's, when it was discovered by the outside world. In 1936, only two years after the release of the *Man of Aran*, an Aran sweater was discovered by Heinz Edgar Kiewe, an English textile writer in a shop on Stephens Green, Dublin, called "Countryworkers Ltd." (pl. 17). Described as

*a peculiar whiskey - looking chunk of sweater in Biblical white..... which looked at that time too odd for words, being as hard as a board, shapeless as a Coptic priest's shirt and with an atmosphere of Stonehenge all around it.*²⁵

In the National Museum Dublin the earliest recorded Aran sweater are from the 1930's and 1940's. The earliest Aran sweater in the Kiltonan Folk Museum, on Inis Mór, dates back only to the 1930's. So it would seem that the Aran Sweater is only a twentieth century garment.

²⁵ Kiewe, 1967, p.66



Plate 17

A replica of the first Aran sweater.
The original was bought in Dublin in
1936 by H. E. Kiewe, an English
textile writer.



CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER THREE

Now that we have learnt a little of the history, geography and traditional dress of the islanders, it is easier to understand how the Aran sweater may have come about. Aran knitting has given rise to a vast amount of speculation, some of these myths are pure invention, some contain a grain of truth, some seem to be wishful thinking perpetuated in print, speculation drawn out far beyond the warranted conclusions. It is necessary to try and find out when knitting actually came to Ireland and to the Aran Islands, in order to understand or discount some of these myths.

Knitting is not put away for safe keeping. Since it is a working garment it has even less of a chance of survival than the rich embroideries and costly tapestries. It is used often, discarded when worn out and therefore difficult to find when it comes to tracing it's history. There are no records in existence that point to when the distinctive and intricate form of Aran knitting began. It is commonly believed to be centuries old, bathed in antiquity and as much a part of our cultural heritage as the Celtic High Crosses and the *Book of Kells*. Although as we have seen in Chapter Two, it didn't seem to feature as part of the Aran dress until the early twentieth century.

Fair Isle knitting has been romanticised in much the same way as Aran knitting. Recognised by it's coloured patterns, using two colours in each row and sometimes up to a dozen or more colours in a single garment (pl. 18). "Many of its design elements are attributed to Spanish influence, caused by a ship of the Armada, *El Gran Griffon*, which was wrecked on the shores of Fair Isle in 1588".²⁶ But it would seem that nothing is known, according to Richard Rutt, Bishop of Leicester, during the 300 years between the shipwreck and the beginning of the nineteenth century, of two colour knitting on Fair Isle. The first documented record of stranded colour knitting comes from the middle of the nineteenth century, and there are no knitted samples of this kind, before this date.²⁷

²⁶ Starmore & Matheson, 1983, p.40

²⁷ Rutt, 1987, p.179



Plate 18
A sweater from the historical collection
of Fairisles in the Shetland Museum.



One popular account regarding Aran knitting, is that in the Bronze Age, Phoenician sailors introduced the intricate Aran knitting techniques to the islanders. Theoretically, inhabited since Neolithic time, the islands could have been visited by mediterranean merchants, skilled in textile arts. The sea routes between Ireland, Britain and Scandinavia were well established. But it would seem unlikely that the people of Aran knew about knitting at this stage as according to Rohana Darlington, the earliest example of 'true knitting' cannot be traced until centuries later in Egypt, and so the Phoenician theory must be discounted.²⁸

Knitting seems likely to have originated from Egypt, as the majority of samples have been found there (pl.19 & 20). At Bahnasa, Egypt, several knitted garments, dated between the fourth and fifth centuries have been discovered.²⁹ They are believed to be knitted by a Christian sect called the Copts. A theory of Edgar Heinz Kiewe in his book *The Sacred History of Knitting*, is that the craft might have been spread through the Copts, who probably sent missionaries to convert the pagan lords of Europe to Christianity.³⁰ Unfortunately there seems to be a debate as to whether the garments found at Bahnasa are 'true knitting'.

Nalbinding, also known as knotless knitting, is made with a darning needle and looks remarkably like 'true hand-knitting' which is made with two knitting needles. Remains of knotless knitting have been found preserved in the ice bound peat bogs of Denmark dating from 1400 BC. There are a number of other textile structures similar to 'true knitting' that have also confused the issue, such as sprang,³¹ crochet,³² warp knitting and netting.

The earliest actual surviving example of 'true knitting' on two needles rather than Nalbinding, comes from Fostat, Egypt, to which a number of historians have referred. Small fragments were found and are believed to

²⁸ Darlington, 1991, p.13

²⁹ Harlow, 1977, p.12

³⁰ Kiewe, 1967, ch.16

³¹ refer to Harlow, 1977, p.12

³² using an endless length of yarn and only one hooked needle, working one stitch at a time



Plate 19

Fragments of Egyptian blue and white knitted cotton.

Date uncertain, but not earlier than the twelfth century.



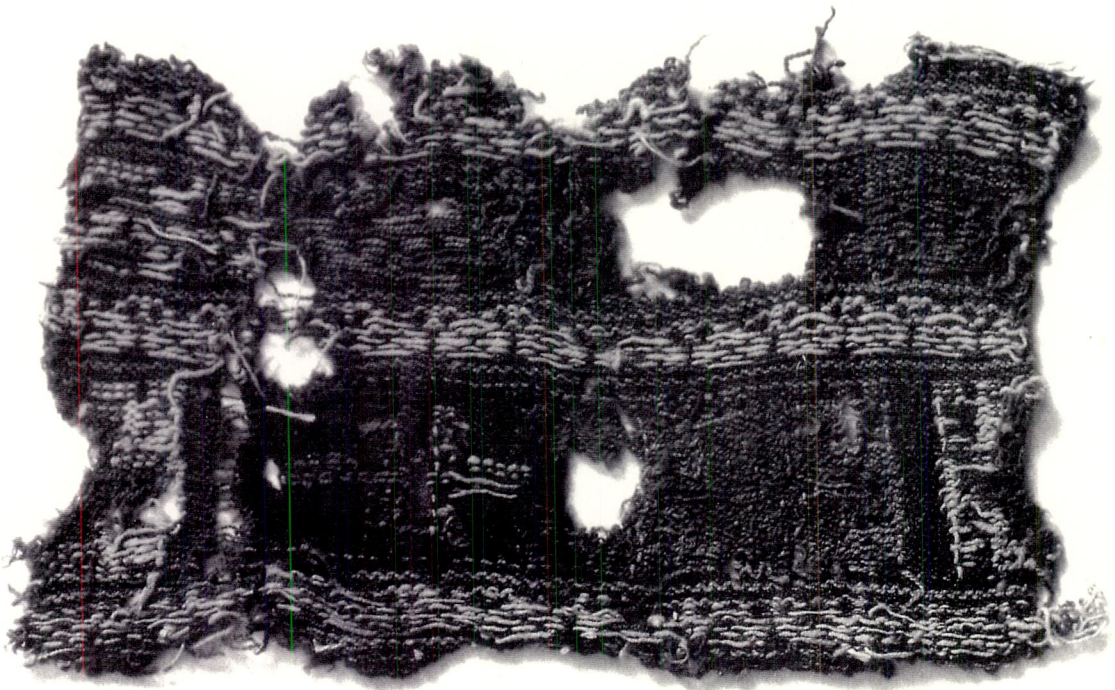
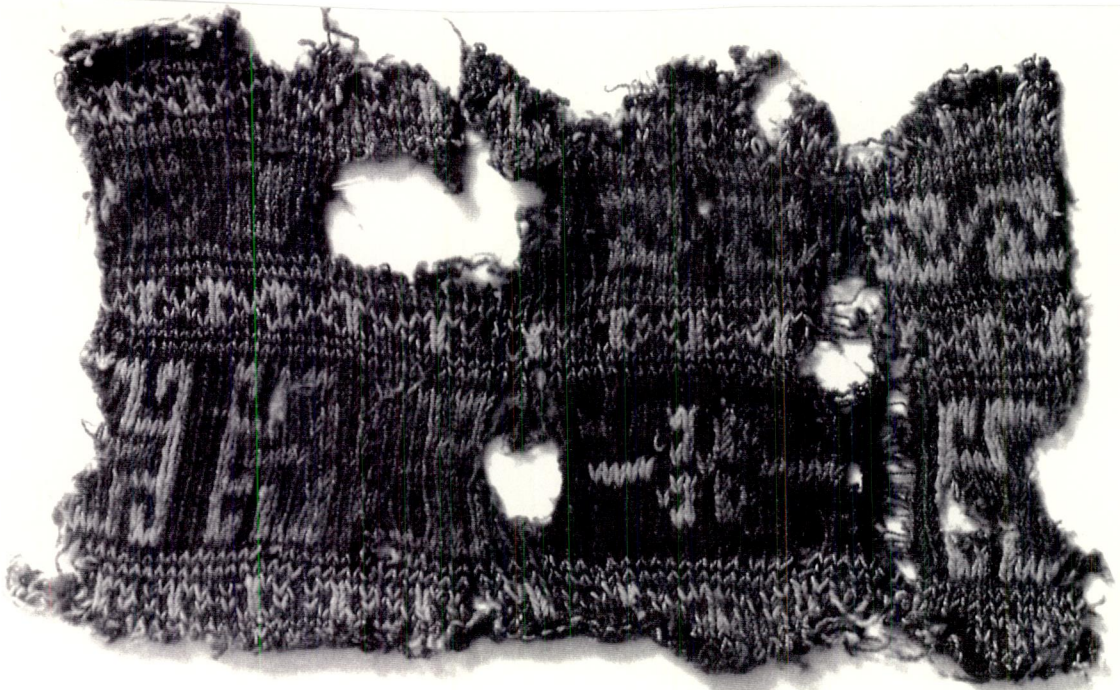


Plate 20

A fragment of knitting from Egypt,
believed to be between 1300 - 1400 AD



be part of a pair of socks dated around the tenth century and some more pieces dated as late as the twelfth century. So it would seem that 'true knitting' is not even a thousand years old.

The Vikings (795 AD - 1014 AD) have also been credited with the introduction of knitting to Ireland. Their settlements were frequently raided by the Irish, taking what ever they could. The following is an account of "booty" taken from Limerick, revealing the diversity of textiles available at that time.

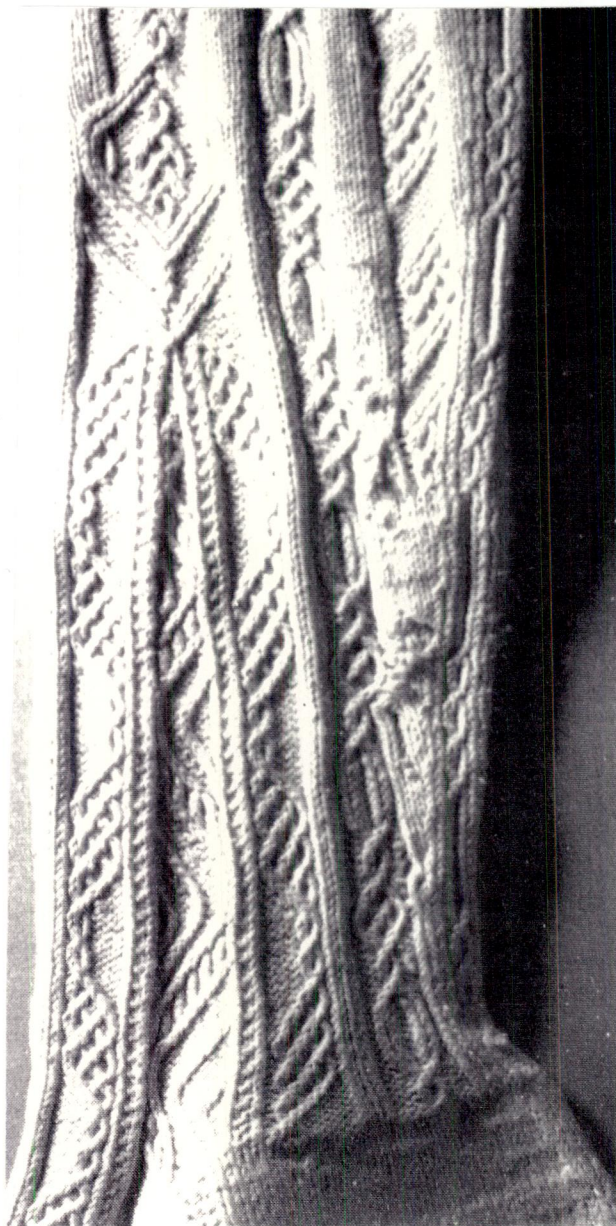
*their jewels, their saddles beautiful and foreign, their gold and silver, their beautiful woven cloth of all colours and kinds, their satins and silken cloths pleasing and variegated both scarlet and green.*³³

Towards the end of their reign in Ireland, knitted goods may have been imported from Egypt. But none of the surviving samples are similar to the raised relief Aran knitting we know today.

Theoretically, Aran knitting style could have been brought to the islands, through the ecclesiastical centres founded by St. Enda and St. Breacan on Inis Mor. Important centres of Christian learning, since the sixth century they had connections with monasteries all over Europe, such as, the monastery of St. Gallen, Switzerland, the Schotten Kloster in Vienna, Austria, including Iona off the west coast of Scotland, where the *Book of Kells* is thought to have been started around the eighth or ninth century. This is all speculation as, once again, there is no surviving textile example to support this theory.

In a romantic vein, Kiewe suggests that it was no coincidence when the stitches of Aran work began to appear on the white knitted stockings of Austria and Switzerland, where the Irish monks had founded monasteries from 500 AD (pl. 21). The missionary movement perhaps aided the transportation of fragments of Irish culture to the continent, but still based on what has been mentioned before it would seem that it is again too early for 'true knitting'. There does, however, seem to be strong similarities between Austrian and Bavarian knitting and that of Aran knitting, which

³³ Darlington, 1991, p.41



Plote 21
Tirolean sock
Innsbruck, Austria.



It is easy enough to point out the resemblance between the interlacing patterns on the Aran sweater and those found in the *Book of Kells*. By crossing and interweaving their stitches in the style of the Celtic patterns, the knitters maximised the thermal insulation properties of the wool, without losing any of its natural elasticity. Kiewe's perceived aesthetic links with early Celtic Art has led to a misleading and persistent belief that the sweaters were centuries old. Because of the strong visual similarities between Aran design and Celtic Irish art it is easy to appreciate that one might be tempted to connect the two as Kiewe did.

Edgar Heinz Kiewe, seems to be the one to blame for the myth surrounding a figure in the *Book of Kells* (pl. 22)

...in January 1966 we discovered..... a minute illumination of a saint whom we were able to decipher as Daniel...he wears a milk white Bainin sweater, with knee breeches and Aran knitted stockings.³⁴

Richard Rutt, in his book, *A History of Handknitting*, in relation to this claim says that similarities between the decorations in the *Book of Kells* and the figure of Daniel, and those of the Aran sweater are superficial. Rutt says, knitting is not a thousand years old, as already mentioned.

Those who thought the human figures in the illuminations were wearing knitted cat-suits had to admit that the animals in the same picture were similarly dressed.³⁵

The illustrations were most likely exercises in elaborate decoration and the notion of depicting reality in its true form was hardly deemed important by the craftsmen of this manuscript, when one looks at the rest of its ornamental pages with panels of fantastic intertwined beasts such as serpents and greyhounds, intertwined ribbons and spirals (pl. 23).

The *Book of Kells* with its wonderful illuminated manuscript of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, one of Ireland's greatest treasures, would only have been accessible to a very few privileged churchmen. Therefore it would seem unlikely that the inhabitants of the remote Aran islands

³⁴ Kiewe, 1967, p.68

³⁵ Rutt, 1987, p.196

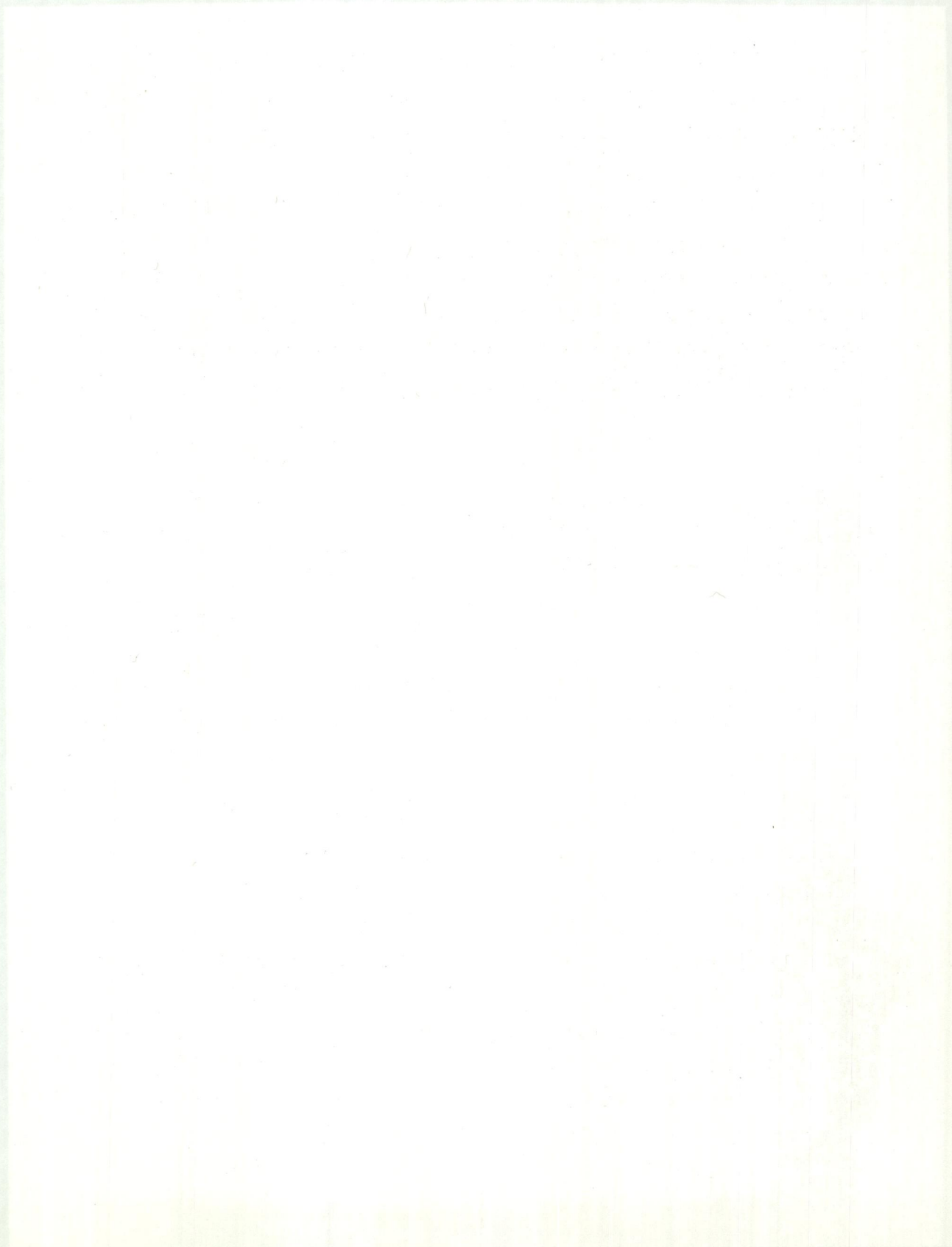


Plate 22
Saint Daniel - detail from the Book of Kells





Plate 23
The opening of Lukes' gospel - Book of Kells.



would have had an opportunity of seeing the original manuscript. The ancient Celtic Crosses (pl. 24) with their intertwining patterns which are to be found all over the mainland and Aran, would have been far more accessible, and many historians feel that the Aran knitting style, resides more clearly in the elaborate carved High Crosses.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, hand-knitting began to develop widely around Europe, and eventually became established in Ireland. In many places the new skills were to become closely guarded secrets. Even though knitted goods were traded, their method of construction remained a mystery to all but those in the newly formed knitting guilds.

In 1699 The Woollen Export Act was passed by the British Government prohibiting the export of Irish woollen goods to anywhere other than England. Darlington believes this act possibly slowed down the development of Irish Knitting.³⁶ But the Act would not have had any true effect on Aran knitting as the Aran sweater was not produced for sale until the twentieth century. The Act was repealed in 1780, and hosiery knitting as a cottage industry became established in rural and coastal areas around the nineteenth century.³⁷

According to Eve Harlow and many other textile writers, a drowned fisherman could be identified by the patterns on his Aran sweater. The same tale has also been told of English seamen's gansies. No knitter has ever confirmed this, but all knitters would recognise their own handiwork under any circumstance. According to Sheila Mc Gregor "Regional variations certainly existed although most patterns were as wide spread as the fishermen themselves".³⁸ It is interesting to note, that in J. M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*, the identification of Michael's body was based, not on the unique design of his sweater, but by a mistake in his knitted stockings.³⁹ One piece of information may shed some light on this tale. In

³⁶ Darlington, 1991, p.53

³⁷ Darlington, 1991, p.53

³⁸ Mc Gregor, 1983, p.52

³⁹ Rutt, 1987, p.197

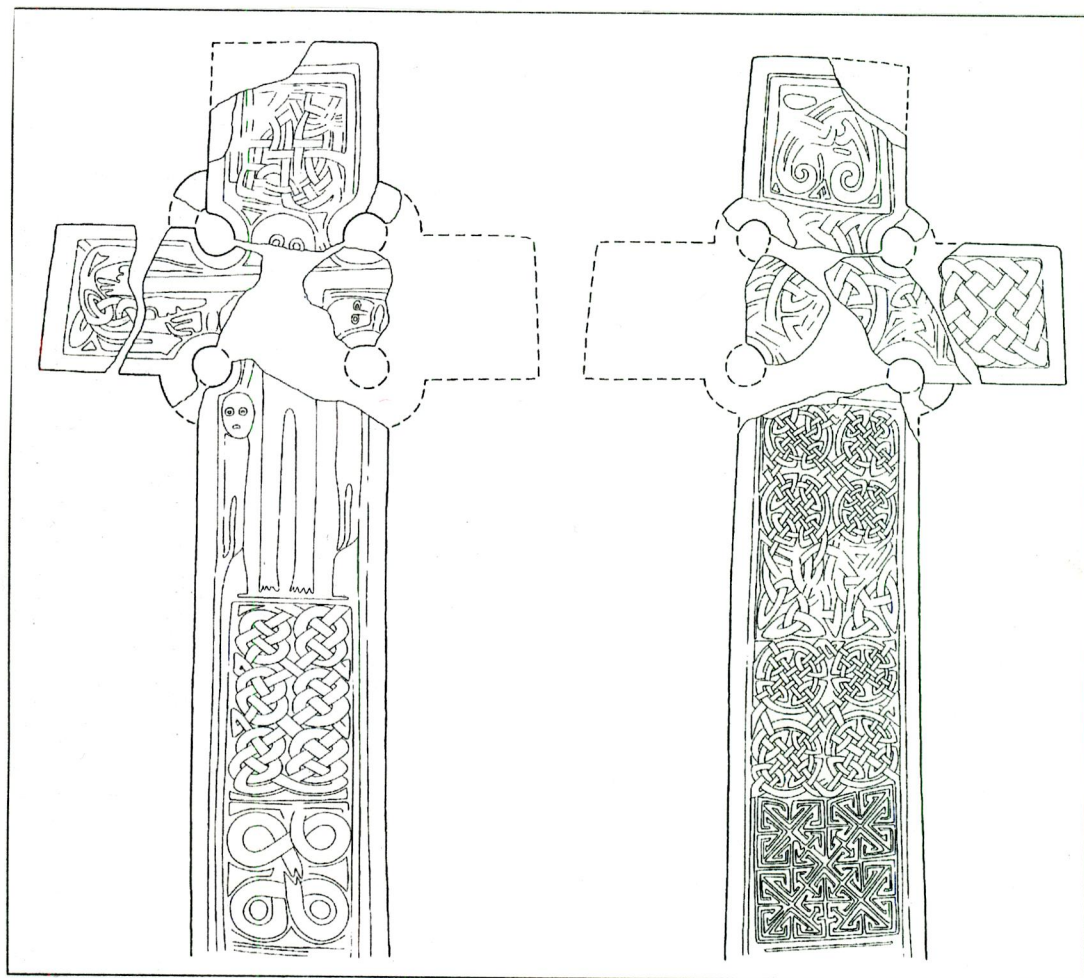


Plate 24
The fragments of a high cross found on Inis Mor.



some British ports, the weaver's initials or full name would be knitted in purl stitches on the plain portion of the gansey above the welt, to assist in the identification should the fisherman be drowned and his otherwise unrecognisable body be later washed ashore.⁴⁰

Rae Compton, in his book *The Complete Book of Traditional Knitting*, discusses traditional knitting from Austria and Bavaria. Knitted stockings with 'intricate ribbing, cabling and interlacing of ribs'⁴¹ (pl. 25). Compton believes goes back to the eighteenth century. One cannot help but notice the strong similarity of their technique to Aran knitting, especially if you compare stitches such as the Bavarian half diamond (pl. 26) and the Aran half diamond (pl. 27). While most of Europe was using coloured wool, Austrian and Bavarian knitters were using white wool as in the Aran sweater. White wool was seldom used in folk knitting, it was considered poor and shameful, except where it did not show.⁴² Kiewe claims that the islanders knew that the undyed "bainin" wool kept them warmer,⁴³ even when their currachs collapsed and plunged them into the icy Atlantic water.

Rohana Darlington in *Irish Knitting* tells of her encounter on Inis Mor during the summer of 1984 with Mary Dirrane, of whom it was said that she knew more about knitting than anyone else on the islands. In 1906, her mother Margaret, and her friend Maggie O'Toole travelled to Boston, Massachusetts with the intention of emigrating. During this time, immigrants from all over Europe were flooding into the Boston area. Staying on "some islands outside Boston",⁴⁴ they learnt to do a variety of intricate knitting stitches such as cable, moss stitch, and trellis or lattice patterns, from some "immigrant lady whose name and nationality unfortunately Mary couldn't remember".⁴⁵ Deciding not to settle in America they returned to Ireland in 1908, "Bringing their newly acquired

⁴⁰ Harvey, 1985, p.103

⁴¹ Compton, 1983, p.110

⁴² Mc Gregor, 1983, p.53

⁴³ Hollingworth, 1982, p.7

⁴⁴ Darlington, 1991, p.86

⁴⁵ Darlington, 1991, p.86

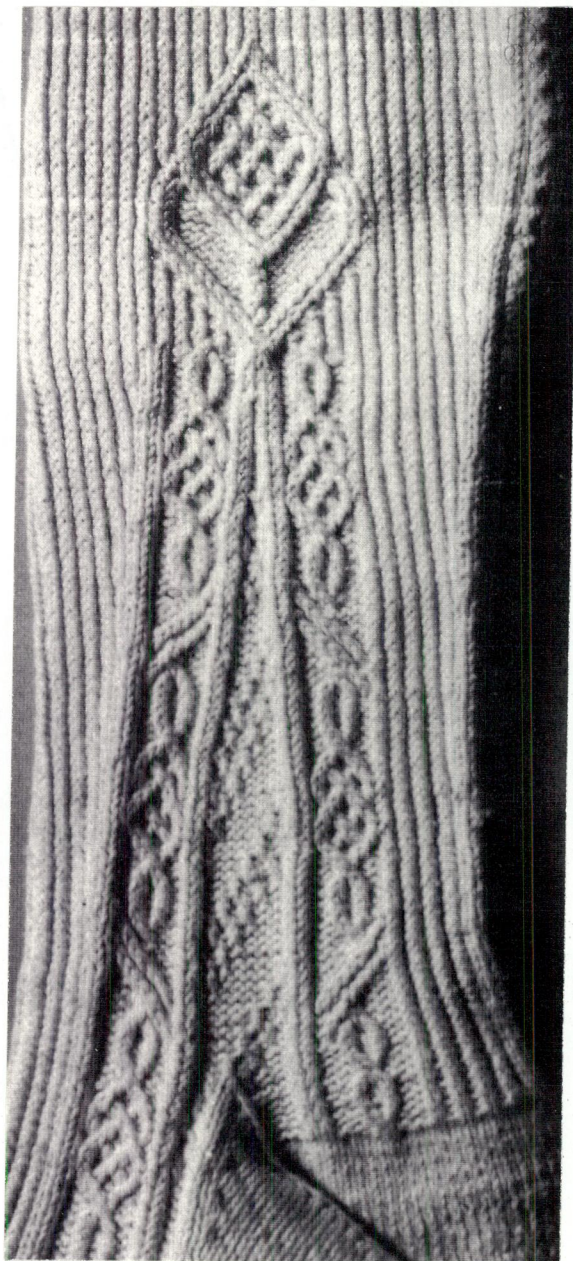


Plate 25
Sock Cuff,
Innsbruck, Austria.





Plate 26
Bavarian half
diamond

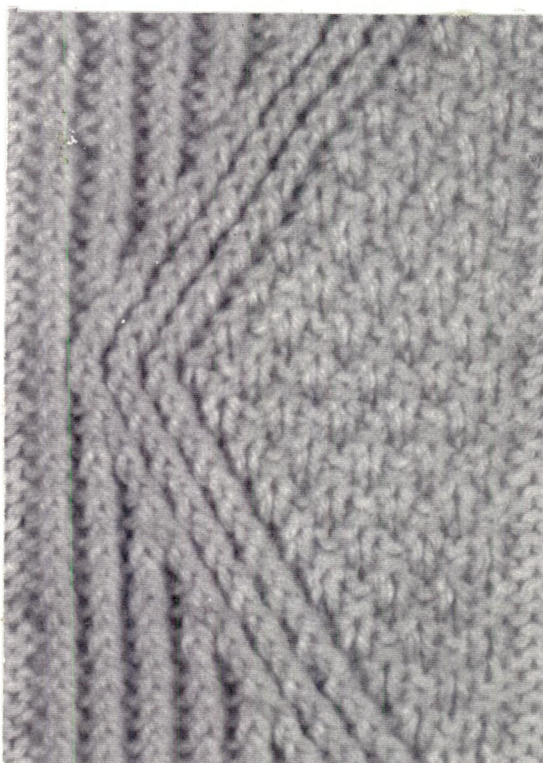


Plate 27
Aran half
diamond



knitting skills with them".⁴⁶

Richard Rutt believes that "Mary's story bears the mark of truth"⁴⁷ and reinforces the belief that the Aran sweater is a twentieth century invention.

Referring back to what Rae Compton said earlier about the similarities between Austrian and Bavarian design and Aran design, possibly this "immigrant lady" was from Austria or Bavarian. Kiewe may have been right in suggesting that the Irish monks through their art inspired the Austrians and Swiss, but then it is possible from this inspiration, they were the creators of the intricate knitting stitches and passed them on to the islanders through their immigrants in America.

Through experimenting with their new skills, the islanders discovered many variations of stitches. "Mary said, at first cable, diamonds and tree of life patterns were used, with honey comb and trellis following later".⁴⁸

Deirdre Mc Quillan provides us with another story regarding Mary Dirrane's mother. In the 1950's, in a letter to Kitty Joyce from Cleo's, Nassau street, Dublin, Mary claims, while in America, her mother was "inspired by the fishermen's navy blue shop" sweaters and knitted one in basket stitch and one in diamonds for her brother upon her return to the islands, and "from then on she copied branches and plants growing around the island."⁴⁹ Who is to say, that she was not also, inspired by the ancient ruins and high crosses found on the islands,

Mary Dirrane's suggestion for choosing the homespun undyed "bainin" wool, was that the more intricate the designs got, the more difficult it was to see in the dark blue gansies. In fact the "bainin" wool has many attributes, which have already been mentioned.

It is not just the actual sweater that is given to speculation but also the individual stitches have become apart of the Aran mythology. A number

⁴⁶ Darlington, 1991, p.86

⁴⁷ Rutt, 1987, p.199

⁴⁸ Darlington, 1991, p.86

⁴⁹ Mc Quillan, 1993, p.20

of tales arose regarding the patterns - such as the identification method for drowned fishermen, already mentioned, and that certain families guarded their own patterns, and refused to share them with other families and only passed on the designs to the daughters of the same family.

Aran designs use many patterns featured in fishermen's gansies, but they have taken on local meanings. The most generally accepted theory of the symbols in various patterns is that they are based on religious themes, such as the Trinity stitch - also known as the Blackberry stitch in England and the Bramble in Scotland. "Three from one and one from three".⁵⁰ Many of the stitches have been given names demonstrating a visual connection with the sea and fishermen such as cables which reflect the fishermen's ropes to many. But before the sudden popularity of Aran knitting in the 1940's, the cable pattern was frequently seen on the cricket sweater. We are fortunate that only the meanings of the symbols have faded and not the patterns themselves.

Various reasons have been given for the oral translation of the patterns. English knitting books showing written notation methods were available from the mainland, during the period of 1910-1930 and many islanders were bilingual and literate. We are constantly told that these patterns were preserved simply by being passed down in families from mother to daughter, who recorded them mentally, which in itself was a daunting task, illustrating the skill and resources of these islanders. Kiewe believes that "Oral traditions, love of reading of the Bible and psychic Celtic image may have continued what has not been written down".⁵¹

Theories regarding the cultural origins of Aran knitting must remain just that, theories, and, as such, a matter for personal interpretation.

Although, according to Debby Robinson and many others mentioned here, the visual debt to ancient Celtic art is undeniable, yet, it will always remain subject to speculation. As for the *Book of Kells*, interlocking serpentine designs are echoed in the crisscrossing of cable designs but

⁵⁰ Mc Quillan, 1993, p.20

⁵¹ Kiewe, 1967, p.72

any concrete link, going back over a thousand years is supposition. So too is the religious significance attributed to stitches such as "Trinity stitch" and the "Tree of Life". The folk art of a community does not lack authenticity simply because it has a short history.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FOUR

What does the future hold for the Aran sweater and the Aran people. Can this early twentieth century garment move with the times i.e. fashion trends and technology, as it is, or are big changes necessary.

The popularity of folk crafts since the age of technology, created a market for nostalgia and increased the romanticism that surrounds traditional skills. As professional designers became involved, garments began to turn into fashion products, shapes became more sophisticated less like the basic square of the fishermans shirt, fashioned with raglan shoulder styling. Where originally the emphasis was on the function of the garment, now to a large extent the decorative elements are given priority.

Aran knitwear is being provided with it's own mythology, the assumption that the tradition goes back into the mists of time, and the garment makers and wool spinners are making the most of this romantic appeal, especially with the use of labels (pl. 28 & 29).

One company that has certainly gained from the association with the Aran sweaters is Inis Meáin founded by Tarlach de Blacam in 1976 on the island of the same name. Their trademark is an upturned currach being carried by three fishermen. They produce high quality knitwear from a variety of imported yarns such as alpaca from Peru and from Belfast, Irish linen (pl. 30). According to Rory Rapple Inis Meáin have "stopped using wool altogether in place of quality luxury fibres".⁵²

In the 1980's Inis Meáin became well known for transforming the unique and beautiful traditional Aran knitting patterns into colour. Designing "styles that were original but still retained the spirit of the Aran."⁵³ Since then their collection has developed into a unique mixture of traditional and international design, developed on the most modern of electronic equipment. "We are using traditional skills and traditional designs in a new way" says Tarlach de Blacam, which would appear to come

⁵² Rapple, 9 October 1994

⁵³ Finlan, 10 October 1994



This garment has been
handknitted by me, in my
own home, with care and
thoughtful attention to
detail, to last you a lifetime.

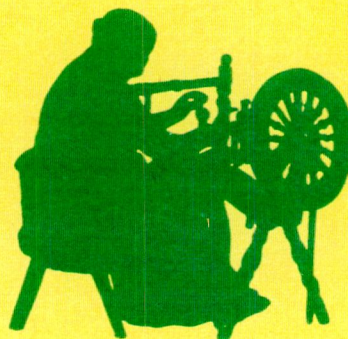
Signed Anne Kelly

Size 38 Style _____

Please Handwash With Care

Blarney Co. Cork, Ireland. Tel. 021-385280

Aran Hand Knitting
Every stitch tells a story.



B L A R N E Y



Blarney Dublin Cambridge Windsor

Plate 28
Blarney Woollen Mills label



Aran knitwear is as precious to-day as it was in medieval times – it is said that in the Book of Kells, Daniel was depicted wearing an Aran jersey with socks to match!
Originally, whilst their womenfolk spun the wool from natural fleece the fishermen knitted the garments, using goose quills for needles. They evolved patterns of great beauty, simple, as befitted those who lived so close to nature, but symbolic and dignified. Study the stitches in your Aran garment, they are an allegory of a way of life: they are an Irish heritage.

THE LINK
The eternal link with those who left the homestead "to sail away to lands afar".



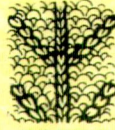
TRINITY or BLACKBERRY STITCH
The emblem of God given life and being. A way of life and a fruitful one.



ZIZ-ZAG
"The twisted cliffs along the shore" or "The cliffs to which we return".



BASKET STITCH
The fisherman's basket for catches abundant.



THE TREE OF LIFE
The limbs-offshoots of the long-lived parent trunk symbolises strong sons and family unity.



TRELIS
Symbolic of the small, stone-walled fields of the West.



DIAMOND
Success, wealth and treasure.



IRISH MOSS
A grateful symbol of the gift of the sea - Carrageen Moss, which is harvested at low tide.



DOUBLE ZIZ-ZAG
The marriage lines, the ups and downs that make life worthwhile.



CABLE
The fisherman's rope - safety and good luck when fishing.



HONEYCOMB
"Work as the bee - for a just reward".

Plate 29
Carraig Donn label

WALDO

ATIS



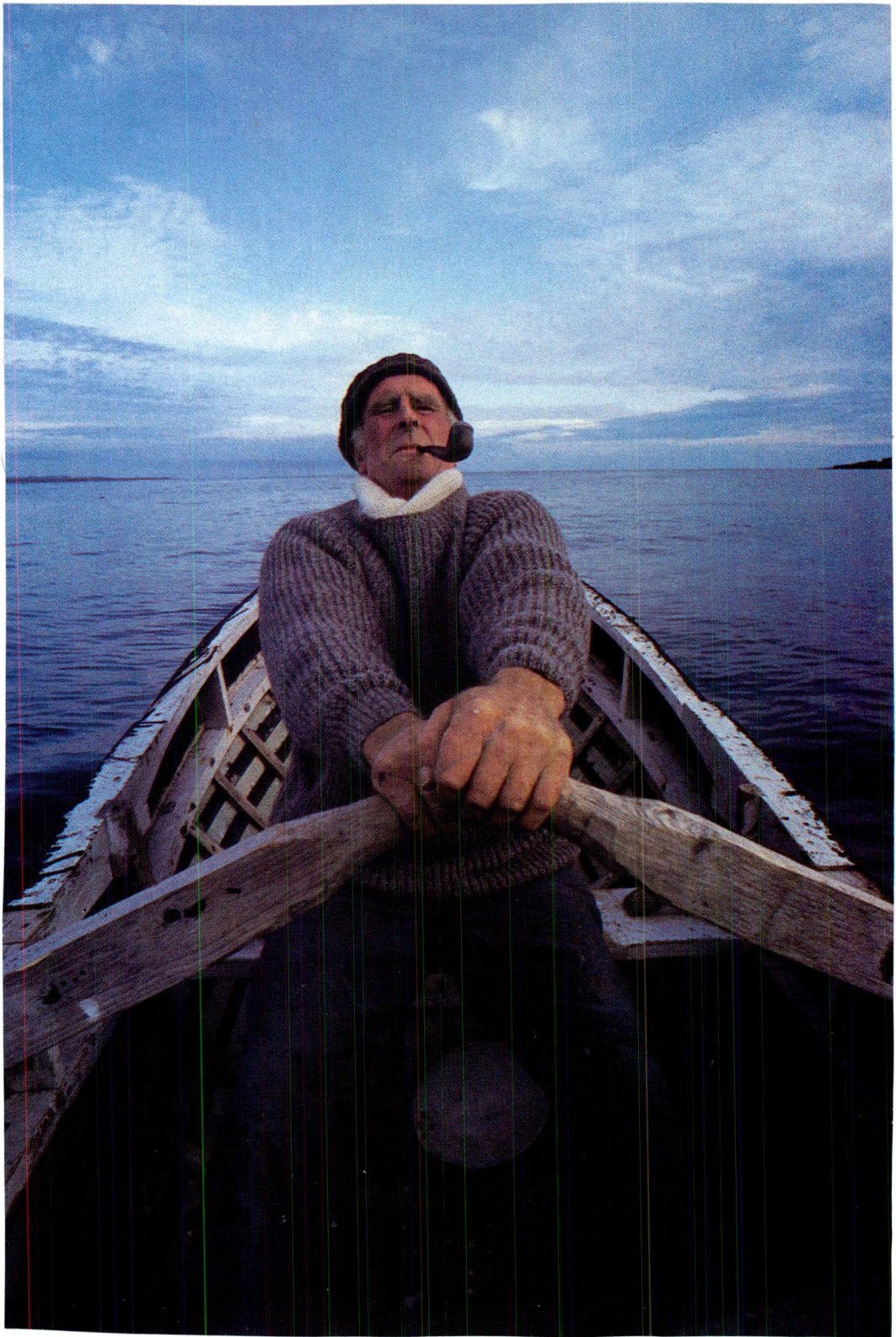


Plate 30

An Aran fisherman wearing a ribbed
alpaca hand shaped raglan sweater

Inis Meain 1992

commercially closest to the idea of working the past and the present. There seems to be diminishing room for the home knitters in this machine orientated society. Handknitting has now become firmly established as a leisure pursuit.

Alice Starmore & Anne Matheson said that "Although the Aran has gained lasting popularity, it has never developed into a major cottage industry on the Island", ⁵⁴ but have they not heard of Inis Méain, or do they consider their factory with all it's modern technology far beyond the realms of the heading "cottage industry".

Garments from Europe, declaring their Aran qualities, are entering the market both home and abroad. Kitty Joyce from Cleo's, on a visit to the Far East, came across a Chinese workshop, where they were expertly producing virtual replicas of the original Aran sweater. Tarlach de Blacam blames the Irish for the world wide ripping off of the Aran sweater. The "Irish are notoriously liberal in relation to branding in comparison to the French," de Blacam said. "I mean, even the Chinese can use the term Aran jumper for knitwear". ⁵⁵

So what is it, that makes an Aran sweater, the intricate stitches or the traditional undyed homespun "bainin" wool. During the Second World War, H. E. Kiewe started producing Aran sweaters, using "congenial wool of the whiskey type " similar to the "bainin", from the Scottish Outer Hebrides. Believing that these "people have a closer bond with the folk on Aran than those in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Liverpool.". ⁵⁶ Then sold these, so called "Aran sweaters" in his craft shop in Oxford, Art Needlework Industries. And what about Inis Méain, producing knitwear in all the latest wools, are they trying to imitate the Aran sweater or just take advantage of its' international reputation. In an interview on the Late Late Show, Tarlach de Blacam said that he learned early on the value of selling the beguiling image of the islands as much as the intrinsic qualities of the knitwear. He is certainly using the tradition of the island to its fullest potential.

⁵⁴ Starmore & Matheson, 1983, p. 78

⁵⁵ Rapple, 9 October 1994

⁵⁶ Kiewe, 1967, p. 67

In a promotional video aimed at the Japanese market, Inis Meain feature a currach being used in the transfer of cargo to the ferry, apparently an entire consignment was sold out in less than an hour after the video appeared on Japanese television.⁵⁷ By now, many of the islanders have appeared in promotional material all over the world. The image undoubtedly sells more sweaters, but like many twentieth century marketing campaigns, its tracks lie covered in a system that exalts money and power at the cost of true value and integrity. At the cost of what, in this case, a group of Islanders who now have jobs in the factory in Inis Meain, producing quality garments under the heading of Aran sweater.

Gaeltarra in Tourmakeady, Co. Mayo has been synonymous since the early 1970's with the Irish ethnic theme. Ironically in succeeding to do this they have relied on the services of both American and English designers. Gaeltarras autumn- winter catalogue of 1991 describes Aran knitting as "the century - old craft of a tiny island community living on the rocky Aran Islands, off the west coast of Ireland". In 1992 the American market was buying Navaho Indian motifs mixed with Aran cables and diamonds all under the heading of "Tradition Irish Knitwear".

Folk custom has often become a force for attention by designers. Foreign and domestic designers have certainly seen the opportunities in the internationally recognisable Aran knitting. One look at Jean Paul Gaultier suit of Aran from his 1985 collection (pl. 31), would nearly remind you of the illuminated figure in the *Book of Kells*, which we have already discussed. John Rocha has also stepped on the band wagon with his cropped Aran style jumpers (pl. 32). Other modern interpretations have included calf - length chenille dresses and even lurex versions

Womens magazines were well established by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Generally the basic contents of these magazines, such as *Womens Weekly* (1911) was fiction and knitting,⁵⁸ thus starting the interest in home knitting. High fashion magazines such as *Vogue*⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Murphy, 25 April 1989

⁵⁸ Harvey, 1985, p. 119

⁵⁹ British Vogue



Plate 31
An Aran knitwear suit
Jean Paul Gaultier 1985





Plate 32
Cropped Aran sweater
John Rocha 1993

(1916) were also available. And from 1900, English knitting was largely directed in style by the womens magazines.⁶⁰ The Aran sweater was featured in many of these magazine, and also in *American Vogue* (pl. 33) and *Vogue Knitting* in 1956. By 1957 the Aran sweater was available in the States. Now, with the advent of the mass media and personality cults, famous people have frequently had an influence on the public's response to design. Queen Elizabeth has been photographed wearing a handknit Aran cardigan and Prince Charles, appeared on the BBC television programme, *Jackanory* in 1984 wearing a knitted Fair Isle sweater.⁶¹

Nowadays, the Aran sweater can fetch up to £250 but this would be for the softer, more svelte garment, not the "hairy, scratchy, tough and heavy sweater" that's been sold to the tourists.

⁶⁰ Harvey, 1985, p. 119

⁶¹ Harvey, 1985, p. 118

The Skyline of Fashion

Destination

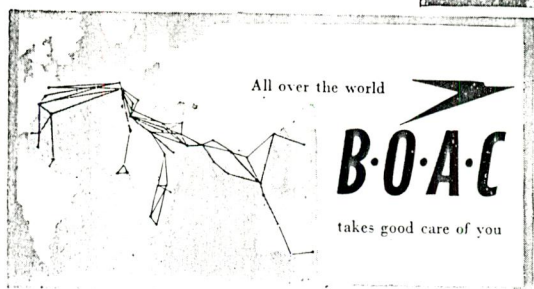
World-wide

However far you plan to go, you'll be far happier going B.O.A.C. . . . such blissful ease—such care! By B.O.A.C. you *luxuriate*. If you were looked after like that always, you'd have Hall after Hall of Old Retainers. For the kind of luxury women were made for, fly First Class by "Majestic"; to cut the cost and keep the comfort, fly by "Coronet" Tourist.

• FOR ELEGANT TAKE-OFF, uncrumpled ease aboard and confident landings, slim but sag-proof skirt by Digby Morton in creamy Irish tweed. Matching jacket in Isle of Aran hand-knitting, tailored casually but with flair. Liberty's pure silk paisley in glowing reds and yellows for the shirt and jacket lining. Soft draped jersey cap by Rudolph. Hold-everything-but-everything hazel pigskin travel bag by Florsheim.

• FOOTNOTE ON FINANCE. B.O.A.C. have a ticket instalment plan which means you pay 10% down and the rest in monthly instalments.

See your local B.O.A.C. Appointed Agent or any B.O.A.C. office for details.

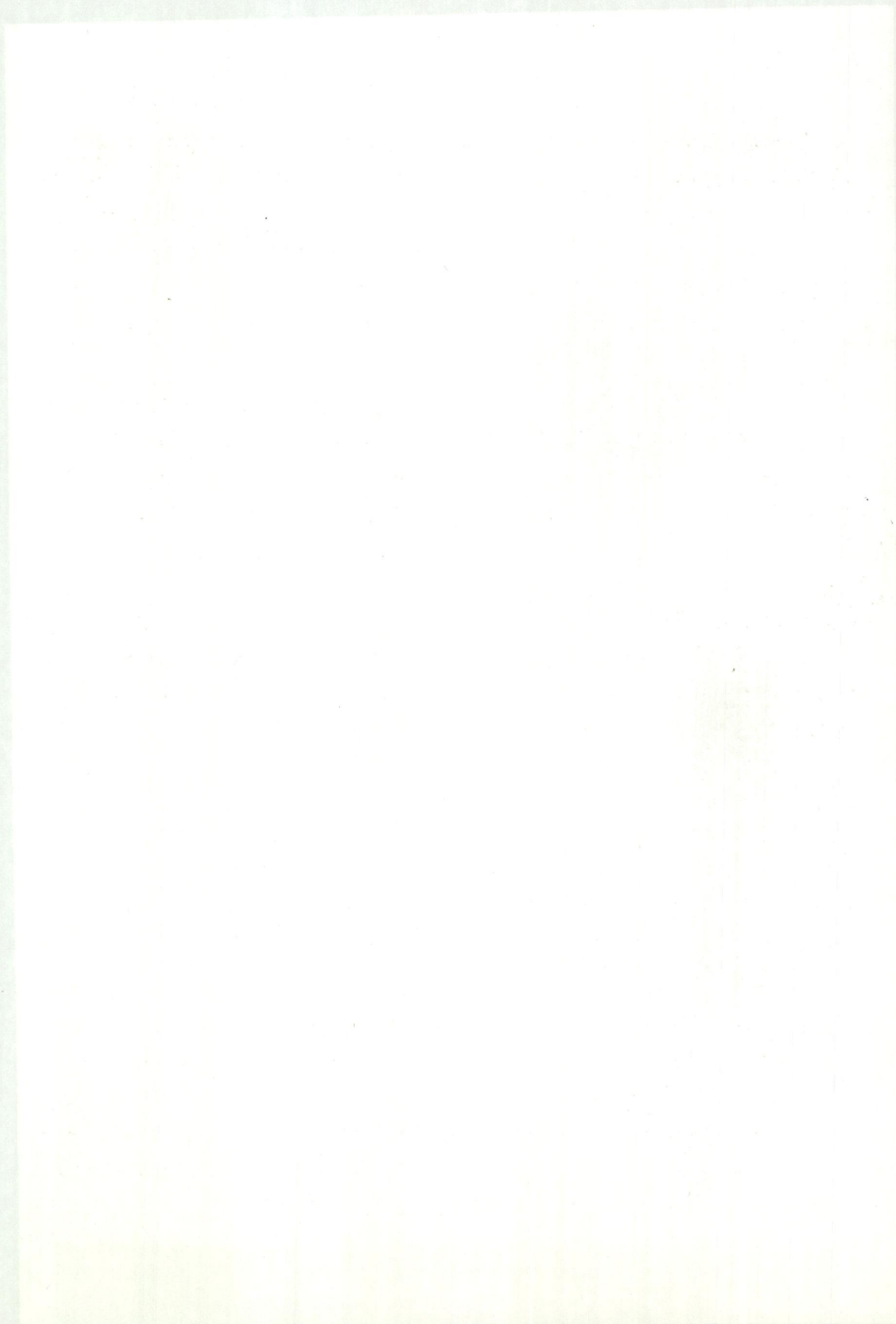


BRITISH OVERSEAS AIRWAYS CORPORATION

APRIL, 1956

171

Plate 33
Vogue 1956



Conclusion

From the research and analysis, the Aran Sweater can no longer be consider centuries old, its history no longer bathed in antiquity, or shrouded in obscurity. It is a twentieth century garment that is still developing with modern technology and with better quality yarns replacing the undyed homespun "bainin" wool. There has been a change over, from its need to provide protection to the Aran fishermen, to its requirement for a fashion garment that is associated, in some way to the Aran knitting style. One of the Aran knittings strongest assets are the myths that have been told, enhancing its marketability.

Many of the Myths discussed, are pure invention. Some seem to contain a grain of truth, while others are wishful thinking perpetuated in print, speculations drawn out far beyond the warranted conclusions. The story of the Aran immigrants returning from America with their new knowledge of intricate stitches, is far more credible than H.E. Kiewe's theory of the figure in the *Book of Kells*, which has been the one of the main foundation for the Aran sweater being centuries old.

As I have said, theories regarding the culture origins of Aran knitting must remain just that, theories, and as such, a matter for personal opinion. Even though it would seem to have strong visual connection with Celtic Irish art, this will always remain a subject for speculation.

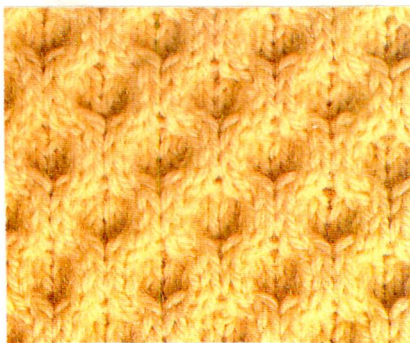
Whether or not Aran knitting has its true origins in an ancient celtic culture or in recently constructed mythology, it does not take away from the fact that these "bainin" sweaters with their combination of intricate stitches of cable, diamonds, blackberries etc., are credible and admirable pieces of work, worthy of recognition. The craft does not lack authenticity simply because it has a shorter history than distinctive Irish Art, such as the *Book of Kells*.

GLOSSARY OF STITCHES



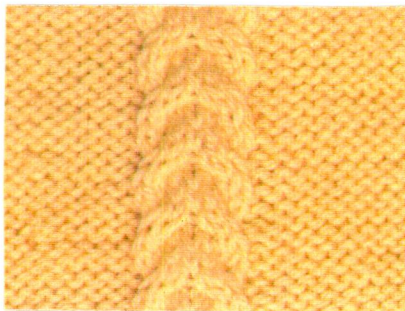
CABLES

There are many variations of the popular cable stitch and all are said to represent fishermans ropes. Popularly said to be able to bring good luck and safety when fishing.



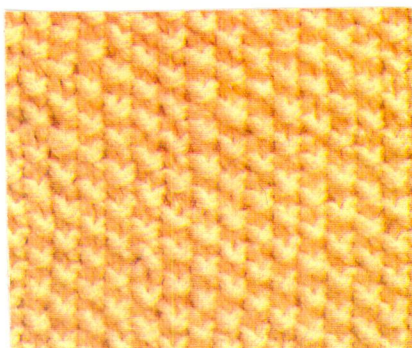
HONEYCOMB

"Work as the bee - for a just reward". The stitch is made by twisting stitches forward and back across the panel.



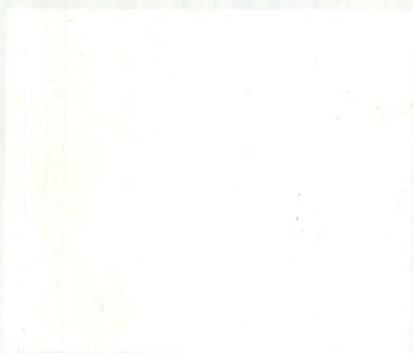
THE LINK

The eternal link between the Irish who emigrated and those who remained at home. The intertwining stitch relates to cable designs.

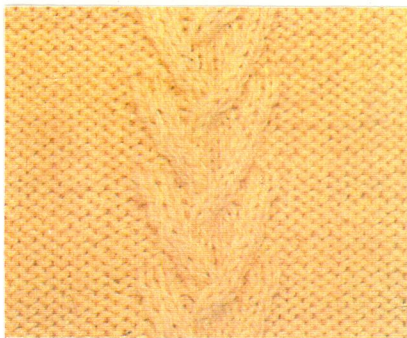


MOSS

A grateful symbol of the gift of the sea, Carrageen Moss, this seaweed was collected by the islanders and used as fertilisers on the land.



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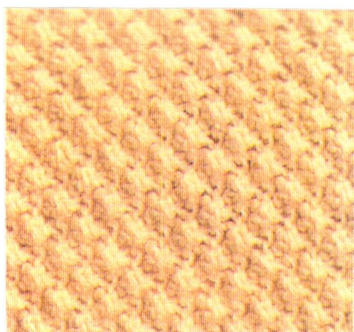
TREE of LIFE

Worked by knit or twist stitches forming a 'trunk' and 'branches' against a purl background, this stitch signifies a long life and strong sons to carry on a fisherman's life and work.



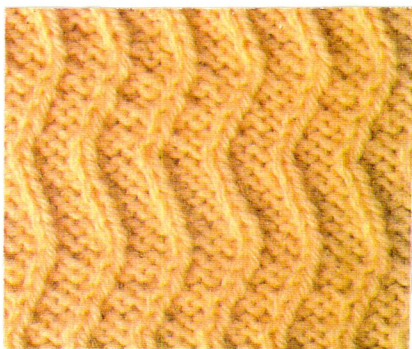
TRELLIS

An intricate pattern of knit stitches forming a trellis, said to represent the small fields enclosed by dry stone walls that are such a familiar part of the Aran islands



TRINITY STITCH

Also known as the Blackberry stitch, is made by making three from one and one from three across the panel, hence the name.



ZIG - ZAG

The stitches are said to represent the twisting cliff paths along the shore. A variant of the zig - zag is known as the Marriage Lines and is usually considered symbolic of the ups and downs of married life.



TA
POST

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