

Dressing For Death

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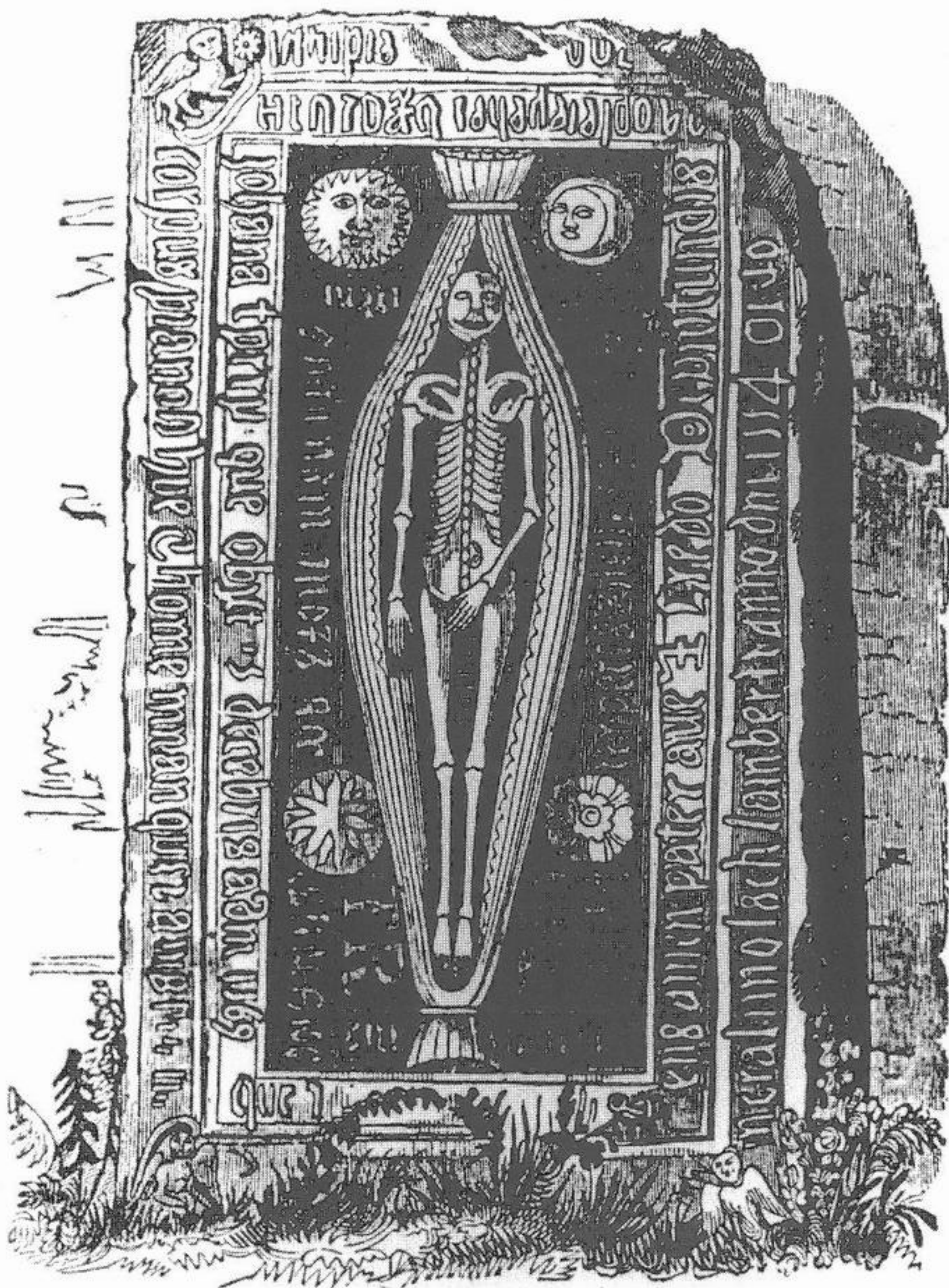
This paper considers the relationship between the mourning tradition associated with the Wake and that of prolonged mourning particularly popular in the nineteenth century. Both these approaches to death co-existed in Ireland, and evidence collected from North Munster reflects influences similar to those which prevailed throughout the country. Traditional practices concerned with coming to terms with the event of death form an important corpus of material, which gives a profound insight into a vital aspect of Irish social history, which is explored here.

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As is the case with so many aspects of culture in Ireland, two distinctive traditions can be traced in the history of practices associated with death and mourning in this country since Medieval times. Raymond Gillespie, in his study of the impressive and heraldic funeral of Sir Hugh Montgomery in 1636, which epitomised the aristocratic funeral then in vogue in England considers this in the context of '.... the funeral in Gaelic Society which held its distinctive form: the ritualisation of grief in the keening women, the obits in the annals which continued to the 1630s, and the feasting which followed the funeral'.¹ Members of the old Gaelic ascendancy at this time still observed funerary customs appropriate to their own culture, but people with strong pretensions to social credibility quickly adopted the manners and behaviour of the new order, and funeral customs were a very clear means of expressing this.

It may be suggested that some of these new attitudes to funerary customs were already influential in Ireland at least by the sixteenth century. The tombstone of Thomas Ronan, already by 1815 in a poor state of repair (*Illus. 1*) suggests a degree of conformity with contemporary English manners². Ronan was Mayor of Cork in 1549, and died in 1554. The carving on his tombstone illustrates a corpse wrapped in a winding sheet, tied top and bottom in a style which would, to judge from similar evidence, be familiar both in Ireland and in England through the following century³. The form of funeral observance to be followed by the nobility in Ireland was established after the death of Elizabeth, Countess of Ormond, in 1601. A black tapestry covered structure, or hearse, was erected in the centre aisle of the church. Set against this were various banners including the Great Banner⁴. The Great Banner was an important feature of the heraldic funeral. It was devised by a herald to depict the lineage of the deceased, and was carried by a mourner at the head of the funeral procession, the horses also being draped in black. The Great Banner may have influenced the custom of the making of funeral hatchments, which were used as a means of announcing a death in a landed or titled family later in the seventeenth century. They continued in use in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These were of canvas in a wooden frame, emblazoned with appropriate heraldic devices. They hung on the house of the deceased for a period of about a year after a death. The hatchment was then removed to the parish church. The funeral hatchment of Bishop Jeremy Taylor, who died in 1667, still hangs on the south wall of the Middle Church in Ballinderry, Co Antrim⁵.

*Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Cultra, Holywood, Co. Down.



Illus. 1. Tombstone of Thomas Ronan of Cork as it appeared in 1815.

The phenomenon of the heraldic funeral in Ireland makes very plain the cultural importance of identification with the new order. This emerges clearly from Gillespie's study of the funeral of Sir Hugh Montgomery. Montgomery himself was originally a minor Scottish nobleman with lands in Ayrshire. At about the beginning of the seventeenth century he started to buy land in East Ulster from Con O'Neill, and in 1622 he was created Viscount Ards. When he died in May, 1636, his funeral preparations required more than three months, during which time his embalmed body wrapped in a searchcloth or cerecloth and enclosed in a coffin of lead was locked away until all was ready for it to lie in state. The bodies of some of the great could not be preserved for the length of time necessary to organize an appropriate funeral. Under such circumstances, the actual body would be quietly buried and a wax effigy would in due course undergo a ceremonial funeral, such was the importance of the event.

The treatment given to the body of Sir Hugh was in accordance with that generally shown to the remains of wealthy and powerful members of English society. Royal or noble bodies were frequently wrapped in searchcloths prior to being enclosed in lead. The searchcloth itself was a wrapper or winding sheet, usually of fine waxed linen (*cire* is the French word for wax), which closely enclosed the body. When Elizabeth of York died in 1503, she was wrapped in a searchcloth of 40 ells (*ell* is an old English measure equalling 45 inches) of 'lining holland cloth' and was placed in a lead coffin⁶.

If the treatment given to Sir Hugh's body prior to burial was itself an acknowledgement of the position he had held in life, this was stated even more clearly by his actual funeral. This took place in the parish church in Newtownards, Co. Down, the building being draped in black for the occasion, reminiscent of the black hearse constructed for Elizabeth of Ormond. By its heraldic nature, the funeral was a statement of cultural identity, of social status, and of 'the persistence of the line and the continuance of the estate as the heraldic symbols were passed from one generation to the next'⁷. As Gillespie points out, 'The passage of land from one generation to another was an important stage in the consolidation of any newly-acquired estate'⁸. The importance of the Great Banner, symbolising the lineage of the deceased further emphasises this point.

In early times, the regulations governing funeral ceremonial and the right to wear mourning were controlled, with Royal Sanction, by the Court of Heralds. Thus they were an officially recognised means of expressing status. Increasingly, social orders other than those of the aristocracy sought ways of emulating the funerary practices permitted to members of the court. Although the Court of Heralds attempted to resist the process, the etiquette of mourning began to spread throughout society, and Lou Taylor has shown how 'Britain during the eighteenth century saw the victory of the middle classes in their struggle to wear mourning dress based on aristocratic lines.'⁹. That this applied equally in Ireland has been illustrated by Dunlevy, who comments:

When the Duke of Norfolk died in November, 1767 Dublin mercers and drapers inserted numerous advertisements in newspapers listing their black, raven, grey and light grey silks, Norwick and Irish black crapes, light grey crapes bombazine, black, raven, grey and light-grey poplin¹⁰.

Although the wearing of mourning was technically intended to express dissociation with worldly concerns and interests, as it spread throughout society it became increasingly open to issues involving fashionable taste. By the eighteenth century, any remaining distinctive features in the style of mourning dress had disappeared, so it was to be recognised primarily by its colour, rather than by its form.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the wearing of mourning was quite a well-established custom in Ireland among all those with a degree of social pretension. At this time, Irish society also embraced many social groups who still observed an entirely different set of

conventions in relation to death. The wake, held for a period of three days between the death and the funeral, is still a feature of rural life in some areas, and in the nineteenth century it was much more familiar. For the period of the wake, all activity in a townland might cease in honour of the dead. This suspension of normal practices had the effect almost of suspending time itself, as if until the body was properly buried, a different condition of experience obtained for those of the living who had been associated with the deceased. This aspect of the wake was further emphasised as clocks became widely available, time (in the form of the clock) literally being stopped at the point of death, and restarted when the funeral procession took the corpse out of the house. The death-bed linens and associated drapes sometimes would also be removed before mourners returned from the funeral. The concentration of mourning during the period of the wake, with normal activities being resumed after the funeral, is in sharp contrast to the often prolonged periods of mourning which characterised the alternative set of conventions. The wake had a dual character, and while it allowed for the expression of grief at the death, it also permitted celebration of the past life, an aspect more readily repressed by conventionalised mourning.

Both these alternative forms of behaviour in relation to death coexisted in Ireland for centuries, generally among differing social groups. They might express various differences in outlook, including those of status and of religious denomination. As early as the mid seventeenth century, Presbyterians eschewed the superstition which they considered to be characteristic of many funeral practices, and they supported moves which might simplify these. However, they did not wish that any such simplification should be at the expense of 'any civic respects of the burial suitable to the rank and condition of the deceased'¹¹.

While at least some Irish Presbyterians were therefore aware and apparently in favour of the potential of mourning conventions for expressing social status, others apparently embraced alternative influences. In 1831, aware no doubt of contemporary movements promoting temperance, the committee and members of the Presbyterian congregation of Magherafelt, Co. Derry, expressed themselves thus:

being fully convinced that publick wakes are a great nuisance to those families which are visited by death; and from the manner in which they are usually conducted, from the exhibition of levity and even profanity, which they not infrequently present, are an outrage upon decency and religion, and highly unbecoming such solemn occasions: and ware that the evil is greatly increased, if not entirely promoted by the distribution of ardent spirits and tobacco and pipes at such places - in order as far as possible to abolish this evil, - Do hereby Resolve - That when it may please God in future to visit our families by death, we will refrain from all publick distribution of spirits and tobacco at both wake and funeral¹².

From this, it is quite clear that there was tremendous scope for differing sets of conventions to intermesh if required.

During the nineteenth century, as the convention of wearing mourning dress became more widespread, the associated regulations became both more complex and more apparently fixed. Among the middle classes, knowledge of the rules of mourning dress was *de rigueur* for any one hoping for the respectability which enhanced social credibility. There is evidence that steadily increasing numbers of people among the poorer classes felt impelled to wear or to illustrate their awareness of the need to wear mourning. Mr & Mrs Hall illustrate and describe a young widow they encountered, c. 1840, near Malahide. Although not actually in mourning dress, 'she was very decently clad, and her straw bonnet, trimmed with a broad band of crape, betokened widowhood'¹³. In some cases, the convention of mourning dress became quite tyrannical. Curl tells the story of a young English servant girl quickly widowed after her wedding to a house painter:

... his widow went into modest mourning which aroused the admiration of her former employer. This

gentleman was therefore shocked several days later to meet the girl, this time completely swathed in crape. When asked why she had gone to such extravagance, she tearfully replied that her neighbours and relations had made life unbearable for her, suggesting that if she did not wear a widow's bonnet complete with streamers, veil and crape, it would be a proof that she had been living in sin or at least that she had not been 'properly married'¹⁴.

In the minds of many, mourning is firmly associated with the Victorian era, and the primary reason for this, the death of Prince Albert in 1861, and Queen Victoria's subsequent mourning throughout her life, is quite clear. It is worth exploring why this made such a profound and lasting impression on society as a whole. Lou Taylor has pointed out that for the Victorian middle classes, the ultimate aim was to be presented at Court, an option well beyond the realistic expectations of most¹⁵. Unattainability made this aim no less desirable, and was a great stimulant to copy Court manners. The right to wear mourning had itself at one time been exclusive, defended by the Court of Heralds. To imitate court life in this respect offered an irresistible opportunity to mirror if not to join it.

Some writers have differentiated between the 'Romantic Period' of attitudes to mourning which obtained in the mid nineteenth century, during which very deep mourning was often worn, and the more frivolous attitudes more characteristic of the later part of the century. At the time of the death of Prince Albert, bombazine was still the main fabric considered appropriate for full mourning, although the decline in the production of bombazine has been traced to the 1820s. This material, a dully-finished mixture of wool and silk, had been in use for the purpose of mourning since the eighteenth century but in the nineteenth there were attempts to replace it with silk, which was cheaper. Bombazine was also replaced by Parmetta, a mixed fabric with a worsted weft and a cotton warp. To this heavy, unattractive fabric were added lengths of equally dull crape. In addition to being unattractive, crape was a very troublesome material. If wet, for example by rainwater, a white stain was left on fabric. The black colouring transferred itself very readily unto the skin and in warm weather readily made its mark on the body of the wearer.

Women in deep mourning, especially widows, wore black clothes and black bonnets draped with black which themselves were often of crape. Although doubtless uncomfortable and less than alluring, this style of dress could be used to create a nostalgically romantic, if rather sinister, image, in keeping with the atmosphere prevalent at the time. This image was created by women in Britain and across the Atlantic, although there were some regional as well as social distinctions observed. In 1808, Jane Austin wrote home from Southampton, where she was in mourning for her sister-in-law 'I shall be in bombazine and crepe, according to what we are told is universal here'¹⁶.

The etiquette of mourning with the associated cards, stationery, jewellery and samplers, remained very influential throughout the nineteenth century. Funerals and everything associated with them, became very expensive and not only the notorious Tontine system but also insurance companies sprung up to help defray the cost.

Important changes were to take place, especially in relation to the dress of women in mourning. This was an extension of a process already observable in the eighteenth century, when in many respects mourning was similar to everyday dress. In 1830, after the death of George IV, plates of mourning dress, printed by fashion magazines 'were simply the usual season's designs, coloured in black and grey by the colourists'¹⁷. Later in the nineteenth century, a subtle but important change in emphasis came about, and mourning became an increasing dominant fashion theme. By about 1890, it was considered rather chic to dress in mourning, and appropriate stylish wear was available for all kinds of social occasion (*Illus. 2*).

No doubt individuals in specific circumstances found mourning dress to be a valid way of expressing genuine grief. Some may have found a welcome distraction in ensuring that



PETER ROBINSON, BLACK GOODS

AND

GENERAL MOURNING WAREHOUSE

256 to 262, REGENT ST.

ESTIMATES AND PATTERNS FREE.

FUNERALS FURNISHED.

MOURNING ORDERS

On receipt of letter or telegram, experienced Assistants are always in readiness to take a full assortment of Mourning Goods to any address in TOWN or COUNTRY, at the same reasonable prices as if purchased in the Warehouse, and travelling expenses are not charged, whatever the distance.

Ladies who wear, from choice, black or neutral colours will find at this Establishment a full Assortment of the

**Latest Continental Novelties in
MANTLES & GOWNS**

Telegraphic Address—

"PETER ROBINSON, LONDON."

Telephone No., 3557.

Illus. 2. As this advertisement from *The Graphic* (1892) for Peter Robinson suggests, by the late nineteenth century mourning had become an important and popular fashion "look".

convention was correctly observed, but by the 1880s a less sombre note can be observed in social attitudes to mourning. The apparently frivolous urge to appear fashionable while in mourning was occasionally satirised, but the fashionable appeal of mourning was understood and played upon in contemporary advertisements.

This appeal must have owed a great deal to the appearance of ladies at court. John Morley explains how, after the death of Queen Victoria;

a year of court mourning was declared; the ladies of the Court had to wear black whilst the Royal Family was in mourning. Some must have sighed at this last, departing penance inflicted by the Queen; because she had worn no colours, the ladies of the Court had been confined for forty years to black, white, grey or mauve¹⁸.

Ironically, because of the length of Queen Victoria's reign, it had been unnecessary for the British to mourn for a monarch for 64 years, so the correct etiquette had become somewhat

obscured. Eventually, an acceptable costume was chosen to be worn by the Princesses, and one of its devisors, Princess Marie Louise, a granddaughter of the Queen, remarked, 'quite honestly, this mourning uniform was most becoming.'¹⁹

The dress of court ladies in black, white, grey or mauve for so much of the second half of the nineteenth century could not fail to have an impact on general popular dress. One of the most obvious consequences of this is the enormous popularity of shades and tones of lilac for late nineteenth century dress. Other colours were also worn, but lilacs were a very frequent choice even for wedding gowns. As recently as 1952, one Donegal bride wore a mauve dress which she made for herself. Her brother had died shortly before her wedding, but as all was arranged she decided to go ahead with the ceremony, but dressed in mourning. During the nineteenth century, some brides actually in mourning choose to have purple wedding gowns, but many selected it without being under any such obligation. Immense varieties of lilac coloured cotton dress prints turn up in patchwork quilts made during the nineteenth century, further evidence of the great popularity of this elegiac shade. Furthermore, at this time many women not constrained to wear mourning choose to dress in black.

Mourning conventions helped to create demands which retailers readily supplied. In 1841, the first establishment entirely dedicated to supplying mourning dress and accessories opened in London. This foundation, Jay's, was quickly followed by others. Many general retailers also set up departments devoted to supplying articles of mourning dress. Representatives of these firms were dispatched to visit the housebound bereaved, especially women, to advise on measure for appropriate mourning wear. As mourning became increasingly fashionable and popular, the rules which governed it became correspondingly complex. Lou Taylor explains:

A second wife, on the death of her husband's first wife's parents, was expected to wear black ... for three months. Widowers, unlike widows, were able to remarry as soon as they pleased, even while in mourning for their first wife ... Such a man should leave off his mourning for the (wedding) ceremony, but should take it up the next day..... 'his new wife should....(wear) only black or shades of half mourning in memory of her predecessor'²⁰.

Given the nature of women's responsibilities in the home, it could be argued that a period of mourning gave them a respite before these had again fully to be shouldered. Many widows enjoyed a degree of freedom denied to married women, while retaining the advantages of the status of the married relative to that of the unwed.

Regulations governing mourning dress applied much more to women than to men. Death hits at the structure of the family, and in the nineteenth century, the role of the domestic linchpin was generally considered the feminine ideal. Dressed in mourning, a woman became a physical symbol of the condition of a bereaved family. Thus for those women who embraced and drew power from their domestic role, there was an additional purpose to be gained from wearing mourning dress.

In addition to governing principal garments, the rules of mourning covered suitable accessories (*Illus. 3*) and the convention might even be extended to underwear. Undergarments were often threaded with insertions of ribbon, and when worn with mourning dress, black instead of coloured ribbon was often used.

During the nineteenth century, it became increasingly common for children to be dressed in mourning following a family bereavement. Queen Victoria had expressed her approval of putting 'the nursery' into mourning in appropriate circumstances. Some children were dressed in black and might even have their everyday clothes dyed to accommodate convention. The mourning dress of children whose families were affluent enough to buy them special or extra garments was often white, decorated with black braid. Young girls might also wear white braided with black, instead of entirely black outfits.

FAMILY MOURNING.

BEST AND CHEAPEST HOUSE FOR BLACK GOODS,

OGILVY'S, 13, GRAFTON-STREET.

ALEXANDER OGILVY directs the Special attention of FAMILIES requiring Mourning, and LADIES WHO WEAR BLACK from choice, to the many advantages they will have in purchasing at this Establishment, where they will have one of the largest Stocks of Black Goods in the Kingdom to select from, in every variety of make and price, all of which are purchased direct from the Manufacturer for cash, warranted of the best materials, and at prices which cannot be equalled.

Millinery, Mantles, Capes, Costumes, Dresses.

Great attention is given to the Ready-made Departments. Owing to the many calls for sudden Mourning there is always a large Stock of the above ready for immediate wear, in correct taste and finish, thereby enabling Ladies to appear in full mourning in a few hours, all of which has been made by experienced workers of Black Goods on the Premises, and in the Latest Fashion.

Mourning Orders.

Where bereavement prevents Ladies leaving home, one of the experienced Saleswomen and Dressmakers (with a well-selected Stock of DRESSES, SKIRTS, BONNETS, MANTLES, JACKETS, GLOVES, STOCKINGS, TIES, JETS, &c.) will be sent to any part of Dublin or Ireland (on receipt of letter or telegram) free of any charge, except the regular price of the Goods in Warehouse. Patterns and estimates sent free by post.

Goods on Approbation sent Carriage Paid.

Ladies communicating the depth of Mourning required can have MANTLES, BONNETS, DRESSES, &c., sent to any Railway Station in Ireland, carriage paid, on giving a reference or by sending the money, which will be returned should the articles not be approved of. Any Lady sending a Pattern Bodice that Fits, and measurement of Skirt front and back, can have a perfect-fitting costume supplied. All purchases One Pound and upwards in value will be sent carriage paid to any Railway Station in Ireland.

Correct Duration of Mourning.

WIDOWS' MOURNING, First Dress, with Cape, twelve months.
Second Dress, twelve months.

PARENTS' MOURNING, First Dress, with Cape, twelve months.
Second Dress, six months.

BROTHERS' or SISTERS' MOURNING, First Dress, with Cape, twelve months. Second Dress, six months.

GRAND PARENTS' MOURNING, First Dress, with Cape, six months. Second Dress, six months.

The high character this Establishment has attained for the care, attention, and promptness with which Orders have been executed is a guarantee that future Orders will be executed with the same care and despatch. All Goods marked lowest cash price. NO DISCOUNT ALLOWED.

OGILVY'S MOURNING WAREHOUSE,

13, GRAFTON STREET, DUBLIN.

Illus. 3. Ladies who chose to wear black had a wide range from which to select their clothes, but the rules governing correct mourning wear could be confusing. Specialist shops were always ready to guide clients and advise on acceptable types and colours of dress.

Men too wore mourning. By the mid-eighteenth century, this seldom differed much in style from everyday dress, but would be of black fabric. As the regulations for women's mourning increased in complexity, those for men's lessened. By the end of the nineteenth century, when women might have to spend more than two years in mourning dress following the death of a close relative, men could get by with a black armband, although sashes were worn by some male mourners until the early twentieth century. Armbands seem originally to have appeared as mourning worn with military dress, in the eighteenth century.

The rules governing appropriate dress for a man attending a funeral were more complex than those concerned with general mourning dress. Until the mid eighteenth century, chief male mourners at a funeral were expected to appear in cloaks of black cloth like that depicted for the bearer of the Great Banner. By this date, white was also associated with funeral dress for those mourning the death of a young or unmarried person. Hat bands and falls, like funeral scarves or sashes might either be black or white, as appropriate. these scarves or sashes were worn diagonally across the bodies of male mourners. Sometimes a black sash was worn irrespective of the marital status or age of the deceased, which was indicated on a rosette worn on the sash.



Illus. 4. The officiating clergyman at this funeral on the Copeland Islands off the coast of Co. Down in the 1920s was supplied, as proper, with a mourning scarf.

It often fell to bereaved families to supply mourning accessories for those attending the funeral. Accessories had also to be provided for the officiating clergyman, normally a black (*Illus. 4*) or a white sash. An account from Kilfinane in Co. Limerick explains:

At a burial priest wore a sash of white linen tied with a black ribbon at the right shoulder in a form of rosette and also tied at the left side of the waist. The men driving the hearse were likewise attired, but in white calico and with a white calico band around their top hats. The material for such attire was supplied by the relatives of the deceased²¹.

This differs very slightly from the following description from Waringstown, Co. Down:

A shoulder scarf was provided by the deceased's family for the minister. It was white linen, and enough to make a shirt. He wore it from (the) right shoulder and tied (it) below the left hip. (It was trimmed) with black ribbon for the old, white for young or unmarried²².

Conventions such as the wearing of a funeral scarf which in the eighteenth century had been characteristic of the wealthier echelons of society increasingly dominated the Irish attitude to death in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An account from Rashee, Co. Antrim, tells that the scarfs were of white cloth or linen, according to means and that it 'was hung over the pulpit the Sunday following the funeral.' Another Co. Down account relates to the wearing of special hat bands at a funeral:

A black hat scarf was worn by (the) coachman for an old person's or married person's funeral. White (was worn) for (the) young or unmarried²³.

The 'hat scarf' was tied in (a) bow at the back of (a) castor hat, and fell down below the shoulder blades.' There were those who found it 'very comical looking'.

A degree of piquancy is added to accounts of the way in which these conventions were observed by a description of the funeral of a young Co. Antrim woman. She rejoiced in a 'certain reputation' and when she died, unmarried, it was considered inappropriate to present the minister with the usual white scarf, while black would imply a status to which she was not entitled. Eventually, it was decided that he should be supplied with a purple sash.

In the late nineteenth century, changes took place in other practices associated with death. In most communities throughout Ireland, the washing and laying out of the dead body was usually the responsibility of the handywoman. She usually also officiated as a midwife, and was highly regarded as a result of her skills. In some areas, careful attention was paid to the water used to wash the deceased. In parts of Co. Monaghan it was necessary to bury in the garden the soap and towel used for this purpose²⁴. This is reminiscent of the widespread belief that a warning should be given to the fairies if dirty water was thrown out of the house after dark, particularly if this had been used to wash the (live) person. The world of the dead and that of the fairies are closely interrelated in Irish tradition²⁵. In the Kilfinane area of Co. Limerick the water used to wash the dead body was treated in the following manner:

After the corpse is washed, the water used is placed under the bed on which the corpse is laid. It is later removed by the person who washed the corpse, who carries it in a dignified manner behind the corpse as it leaves the house, after which the water is spilled into an open gutter outside the house²⁶.

The body was usually dressed in a white shroud and most people saw to it that they were provided with such a garment, to be prepared in the event of death. Many made their own shrouds themselves; a woman from Ballyclare, Co. Antrim, explained that this was characteristic of 'very particular women'. Members of some lay religious orders might be dressed for burial in a brown shroud.

The body was generally laid out in bed, in a room specially prepared and draped in white (*Illus. 5*). Special sets of linen were kept for dressing a death bed and the room in which it was situated. Many households had a set of these, and those who did not own their own could expect to borrow them without difficulty. It was expected that the borrower would launder and return the linens in due course. These linens usually included a cloth for covering the mirror to prevent the living catching sight of the departing spirit. An account from the north of Co. Antrim describes how the face of the corpse was covered with a veil which 'was fixed



Illus. 5. Bedroom in a Co. Derry farmhouse, prepared as if for a laying out.

in position, corner ways, the top corner pinned to the bed end, high up so that it lay in a gentle slope and could be lifted at the bottom end, to look at the face of the dead person.' The point where the veil was fixed was covered by a bow, either black or white as appropriate. The bows were removed when the body was coffined, and kept, often for years. Gradually, it became the practice to dress the bed in white, but to coffin the body and lay it on the bed. Then a trestle table was set up in the room beside the bed, still dressed as before. Gradually, the parlour became the appropriate room in which to install the body, and today many funerals take place from the funeral parlour rather than from the home of the deceased who is today increasingly unlikely to have died at home. The tradition of laying out the corpse 'underboard', or under the wake table persisted until early in the twentieth century in Co. Armagh, where the term 'underboard' is still used to refer to the recently dead. In seventeenth

century Ireland this practice was much more widespread, and John Brennan, Archbishop of Cashel, ordered by synodal statute, 'that none should presume to celebrate Mass at the table when the corpse was laid out'²⁷.

By the late nineteenth century, the undertaker was becoming an increasingly familiar figure in Irish provincial towns. He organised the funeral, and he might often employ the local handywoman to act on his behalf to lay out the dead. Bows of black ribbon began to be fixed to the white laying out drapes. As a signal that a death had occurred, fabric was now draped from the door knocker, black or white as appropriate.

In some areas, prior to the establishment of an undertaking business, a local cabinet maker or joiner might make a coffin on request. One man with origins in Co. Antrim describes how his grandfather and grandmother made and prepared coffins in the mid to late nineteenth century:

Before the days of Undertakers each community found a way to prepare the corpse for burial. In the Cullybackey district my maternal grandfather Wm. Montgomery, lived and worked as a cabinet maker. When a death occurred in the neighbourhood he would receive an order to make a coffin, the usual style in vogue a hundred years ago. Black broad cloth was then stretched securely over the surface and the silver plated breast plate and handles were put in place. He also engraved the name, date of birth, and death on the plate. Grandmother was then called upon to make pillows etc. for the inside of the coffin²⁸.

Laying out linens and other accoutrements were often given as wedding presents, and if she did not receive a set, a young woman might begin to prepare some soon after marriage. High rates of maternal mortality meant that many young women must have considered it likely that they would meet with an early demise, but the general preoccupation with death was also influential. Many trousseaux included mourning wear, and a winding sheet was often an essential component of the bottom drawer.

In some instances, the system of waking became adapted to more formal mourning conventions. Some of the livelier elements of the wake were abandoned in favour of a quieter paying of respects, and special food, including dishes like custard, might be offered in place of pipes and tobacco²⁹. At least one system of laying out had been abandoned by the early twentieth century. This was known as 'underboard' and had previously been familiar in south Co. Armagh, and perhaps elsewhere. The door was unhinged and placed on the rungs of the white draped wake table to make a bier for the corpse. The food and drink for the wake would then be placed on the white tablecloth on the table over the body.

Further changes meant that motorised hearses had appeared in some Irish towns by about 1912, but for many, the hearse drawn by the black plumed horses was the appropriate vehicle to take the body on its last journey. These remained quite familiar until the mid twentieth century, especially during the war years when petrol was scarce, and have recently been re-introduced by some undertakers. Although they were not available to all, they were an imposing symbol of the formal funeral and of conventionalised mourning. The 'dead coach' became in folklore a portent of impending doom.

There are still some today who may be honoured with a 'traditional' wake, but changes in attitudes to death have meant that many of the formalised associated conventions have disappeared. Death has become increasingly institutionalised, to the extent that the dress of the dead has drawn comment from European Union regulators concerned with the possibility of environmental pollution from items which may be cremated.

Acknowledgements

All the illustrations for this article are published courtesy of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gillespie, R. 'Funerals and Society in Early Seventeenth Century Ireland', *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland*, 115 (1985), 90.
2. 'Monumental Stone found in Christ Church, Cork', *Dublin Penny J.*, Part 55, vol. II, p. 21.
3. See Roe, H.M. 'Cadaver Effigial Monuments in Ireland' *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland*, vol. 99, 1969, in which the Ronan stone is also illustrated; also P. Cunningham and C. Lucas, *Costume for Births, Marriages and Deaths*, London, 1972, p. 159. Although the terms are interchangeable, I here use the word 'shroud' to refer to a garment made specifically to dress a dead body, while I use 'winding sheet' to refer to a wrapper in which the body might be enclosed.
4. Plan for the Funeral of Elizabeth, Countess of Ormond, illustration to R.F. Foster's 'Ascendancy and Union,' *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, ed. R.F. Foster, O.U.P. 1989, facing p. 176.
5. Neill, T. 'Bishop Jeremy Taylor's Funeral Hatchment in the Middle Church, Ballinderry,' *Lisburn Hist. Soc. J.*, 7 (1989), 41.
6. Cunningham and Lucas, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
7. Gillespie, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
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10. Dunlevy, M. *Dress in Ireland*, London 1989, p. 115.
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23. *Ibid.*
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27. *A Bishop of the Penal Times*, Irish Historical Documents No. 3. ed. Rev. Prof. P. Canon Power, Cork 1932, p. 32. I am deeply indebted to Raymond Gillespie for this reference.
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29. Wake traditions have been thoroughly treated, for example by W. G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, vol. I, London 1902, ch. 8, "Ideas regarding the Dead", pp. 285-340, and by Seán Ó Suileabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements*, Cork 1967.