# Oscar Wilde as an Ideological Pioneer of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland

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## 1 Foreword

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) is nowadays well known not only as a literary icon of the Decadent movement, but also as a proponent of Aestheticism. Furthermore, he had a deep understanding of the Arts and Crafts movement that originated in late Victorian Britain. A series of lectures Wilde gave in America in 1882 helped to raise international awareness of the importance of the aesthetic sense in socio-economic activity, which was the central aim of the Arts and Crafts movement. However, Wilde's position as a pioneering spirit of Arts and Crafts in his native Ireland has not yet been fully clarified. In Ireland, it was not until 1894 that this movement was formally established, with the foundation of the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland by Dermot Robert Wyndham Bourke (1851-1927), the seventh earl of County Mayo. By that time, Wilde had lived in Britain for nearly twenty years, and played an active role in the literary world of London. A series of Wilde's plays written in the first half of the 1890s was highly acclaimed and established him as a successful playwright. In 1895, however, he was removed from society, having been found guilty of the charge of gross indecency, and imprisoned. Wilde died in Paris in 1900, and never had a chance to see the flourishing of Ireland's craft arts that took place over the first decade of the twentieth century.

However, a sort of predecessor to the Irish Arts and Crafts movement had been started by a group of aristocratic British women, who held the philanthropic ambition to bring about the social reformation of Ireland, and whose activities turned Wilde's ideals regarding art and society into reality. Their efforts toward the economic improvement of Ireland by means of including the daily work of business within the definition of what was considered art were reported in *The Woman's World*, the ladies' periodical on which Wilde worked as editor for two years from 1887. It seems that Wilde's editorial approach was based on his understanding of women's participation in public affairs, while the essays and articles he published in other journals indicated his expansive knowledge and interest in the craft arts in general. Therefore, by examining Wilde's writings and editorship of *The Woman's World*, and relating them to the social improvements accomplished by certain British ladies in Ireland, this paper sheds light on the little-recognized fact that Wilde provided a significant basis for the development of the Irish Arts and Crafts movement, albeit indirectly and perhaps unintentionally.

## 2 Background — The Beginning of the Cottage Industries

In late nineteenth-century Ireland, problems over the enactment of Home Rule had been a recurrent cause of political unrest ever since the Act of Union in 1801. Furthermore, the country had not fully recovered from the effect of the Potato Famine of the 1840s, which had caused a huge loss of population, first through death, and then from the considerable outflux of young emigrants to America. In the international race towards industrial development, Ireland was left behind. Her remaining population, especially the destitute peasantries in the west, needed urgently to find practical ways to support themselves. Sympathy with such conditions of deprivation permeated throughout Britain. From the 1880s wealthy British philanthropists

started to invest in local handicrafts in Ireland, such as lace, crochet, embroidery, metal work and woodcarving, many of which grew to become successful enterprises providing valuable sources of income. These enterprises were called ‘the Cottage Industries’ or ‘Home and Art Industries’.[1]

One remarkable example of the British women’s activity can be seen in the re-establishment of the Royal Irish School of Art Needlework by Geraldine Ponsonby (1863-1944), the wife of the Earl of Mayo.[2] This took place in 1894, the same year her husband founded the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland. Lady Mayo herself excelled in needlework and displayed some embroidered works at the first grand exhibition held by the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland in 1895. With Queen Victoria as patron and Lady Mayo as president, the Royal Irish School of Art Needlework established a highly effective system of instruction in embroidery techniques for Irish women, which would enable them to find employment and earn a decent income. One noteworthy result was the altar frontal of St Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin, with a detailed figure of the saint. This was completed in collaboration with the Scottish church architect Sir Ninian Comper (1864-1960), a pupil of George Frederick Bodley and the most influential church architect practicing in England at that time.[3]

As another noticeable instance, Lady Ishbel Aberdeen (Isabel Maria Marjoribanks, 1857-1939) and her husband the Earl of Aberdeen (John Hamilton Gordon, the first Marquess of Aberdeen and Temair, 1847-1934) were amongst the first Scots to contribute to the revitalisation of local Irish enterprises. As good friends of William E. Gladstone, leader of the British Liberal Party, the Aberdeens expressed support for Gladstone’s Bill for Irish Home Rule. In 1886 they moved to Ireland, where Lord Aberdeen was Lord Lieutenant. There, Lady Aberdeen established the Irish Industrial Association, which was to train craftworkers with the aim of nurturing new industries that would market

locally produced handicrafts.[4] Lady Aberdeen also strove to introduce Irish crafts to Scotland. In 1886, she curated the Irish section of the Edinburgh Industrial Exhibition, displaying numerous products such as lace, knitting and needlework, crochet, and textiles from various parts of Ireland, including Carrickmacross, Limerick, Youghal, Cork and Clone, thus promoting their sales.[5] Toward the 1890s, the auspicious success of the Cottage Industries instigated by these British noblewomen was to lead to the start of the Irish Arts and Crafts movement.

## 3 The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland, and Wilde's Perspective

From its outset in 1894, the main activity of the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland was based on that of its British counterpart. The Society promoted arts and crafts within the context of small-scale enterprises, employing skilled artisans and craftworkers from Britain. Over the next thirty years the range of enterprises grew from the original 'Cottage Industries' to include weaving, metalwork, enamelling, wood and stone carving, book printing and binding, and stained glass. As the Irish Arts and Crafts movement attracted public attention, it endeavoured to influence people's aesthetic direction in life, industries, and education. Throughout Ireland, secular and religious spaces were enhanced through the decoration of private households, public buildings and monuments, and churches.[6] As a consequence, this movement contributed to the improvement of economic life in the country, and also reflected a strong sense of 'national individuality'.[7] For example, medieval manuscripts such as the Book of Kells, and Celtic metalwork with its interlace traceries and knotwork designs, became the sources of inspiration, while technical progress in craft-making with Celtic motifs helped to raise the aesthetic value of, and pride in, Irish cultural tradition.[8] Consequently, as Gifford Lewis has explained, the Irish Arts and Crafts movement came to be identified with 'the strong

nationalist movement', popularising 'home-produced craftwork that was distinctively Irish and of high quality'.[9]

As the Irish Arts and Crafts movement progressed alongside the awakening of cultural nationalism, it came to interact with the Celtic Revival, a cultural movement that took place throughout the 'Celtic' lands of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. A key part of the Celtic Revival was its literature, and perhaps most notably the works and achievements of the Irish poet and dramatist William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). Since the Irish Arts and Crafts movement and the Celtic Revival shared a common goal, namely to re-evaluate the cultural and traditional greatness of the ancient past and use this to inspire modern Ireland,[10] many Irish artists and craftworkers looked to the Celtic literary revival as a source of themes to enrich their artistic output, while turning to Britain to acquire techniques. Consequently, as Nicola Gordon Bowe points out, the Irish Arts and Crafts movement is now acknowledged as a distinctive visual counterpart to the Celtic Revival, and as 'an artistic and industrial manifestation of national aspirations'.[11]

Indeed, we can identify in these movements an essential contradiction, in that they enlivened a sense of 'Irishness', yet did so by means of the English language or through importing British craftsmanship. Nevertheless, this contradiction did not lessen the social impact, not least because most of the initiators of the two movements belonged to the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. As Vella Kreilkamp argues, these were people, 'English on ethnic grounds', who redefined themselves 'under Gaelic auspices':[12] English in ancestry and language, in their cultural pursuits they considered themselves Irish. Against this background, the Irish Arts and Crafts movement was the outcome of a fraternal association between the high standards of its British counterpart and a cultural representation of Irish identity. It reached its peak toward the establishment of the Irish Free State in

1922, and thereafter declined.

In 1896 the poet T. W. Rolleston, representing the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland, paid tribute to the recently deceased William Morris. In addition to poetry, Rolleston wrote widely in the fields of literature, art, and politics. Having served as managing director of the Irish Industry Association, and as secretary to the Irish Literary Society of London, he was instrumental in improving the Arts and Crafts practice in Ireland. After describing Morris's achievement as 'so happy a transformation in the surrounding of our daily life', and 'the breaking down of the barrier which so long divided Art from Utility', Rolleston's address concluded with a hope for the appearance of an 'Irish Morris':

> To the day of his death, Morris was regarded as the guiding spirit of this movement…That the fates may some day send us an Irish Morris is, perhaps, the best wish we could frame for the cause to which this journal is devoted; and that Ireland should recognise him when he comes would be the best justification of the work of an Irish Arts & Crafts Society.[13]

Rolleston's idea regarding the unification of 'Art' with 'Utility' seems to have something in common with the thoughts expressed in Wilde's lectures given in 1882. In a lecture titled 'Art and the Handicraftsman', Wilde emphasised that 'Ours has been the first movement which has brought the handicraftsman and the artist together…we should remember that all the arts are fine arts and all the arts decorative arts'.[14] In his view, because 'decorative art' produced by 'the handicraftsman' had 'utility', it had not been fully appreciated, and he argued that its intrinsic value should be admitted in the same way as that of 'fine art' created by 'artists', such as paintings and sculptures. In another lecture, titled 'House Decoration', he emphasised that 'what you must do is to bring artists and handicraftsmen together' (161). Wilde admitted that

the idea of connecting ‘artists’ and ‘handicraftsmen’ came from his conversation with Morris, who had told him: ‘I have tried to make each of my workers an artist, and when I say an artist I mean a man’(152). By bringing about this connection Wilde believed that the boundary between ‘fine art’ and ‘decorative art’ would be removed, widening the domain of what was to be defined as art. The consequence would be, he thought, that art would no longer belong to a limited class of people, but instead all people would appreciate its ‘beautiful and noble expression’ (152).

> We do not want the rich to possess more beautiful things but the poor to create more beautiful things…rather shall it [art] be the noble and beautiful expression of a people’s noble and beautiful life. Art shall be again the most glorious of all the chords through which the spirit of a great nation finds its noblest utterance. (183-84)

Thus, it is clear that the influence of Morris was crucial in the development of Wilde’s thought on the Arts and Crafts movement.

On the other hand, Wilde was also interested in the more practical aspects of the movement, particularly the question of how to set up systematic institutes to train skilled craftworkers and manage sustainable craft industries. On this point, his position was much closer to that of Henry Cole (1808-1882), a British art educationalist who, for nearly three decades from the 1840’s, contributed greatly to raising the design and technical standards in Britain’s industrial arts. Cole’s first achievements were documented in the *Journal of Design and Manufactures*, the monthly periodical he started in 1849. According to the preface to its first edition: ‘We promised to aid in the reform of our School of Design, and…advocated an improved Copyright law for Designs, and even thus early, a Bill to give effect to our advocacy is

said to have been prepared by the Board of Trade'.[15] Here, the 'School of Design' referred to was the Art School of South Kensington, whose educational system was improved under Cole's instruction. The School played an important role in training many talented, skilled artists and craftworkers who were to become leading icons of the Irish Arts and Crafts movement toward the turn of the century. The extent of Wilde's interest in this kind of art training system is clearly expressed in *The Woman's World*, as will be discussed in the following section.

## 4 The Cottage Industries in *The Woman's World*

In November 1887, *The Lady's World*, an illustrated monthly magazine published by Cassell and Company, was renamed *The Woman's World*, and relaunched under Wilde's editorship. In a communication to Thomas Wemyss Reid, the general manager of Cassel and Company, the new editor made clear his enthusiasm to make the journal 'the first woman's paper in England'.[16]

> We should take a wider range, as well as a high standpoint, and deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think, and what they feel. The Lady's World should be made the recognised organ for the expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life, and yet it should be a magazine that men could read with pleasure, and consider it a privilege to contribute to. We should get if possible the Princess Louise and the Princess Christian to contribute to it: an article from the latter on needlework for instance in connection with the Art School of which she is President would be very interesting.[17]

The 'keynote' of *The Woman's World* was 'the right of woman to equality of treatment with man'.[18] Wilde's letter to Reid shows how he respected women as independent individuals, trusted in their

intelligence, and believed that they should be given equal opportunities with men. In late Victorian society, where the patriarchal custom was still dominant, Wilde's supportive attitude toward women's empowerment was progressive. In 1912, Arthur Fish, who had worked alongside Wilde, recollected that he was an editor 'who would always express his entire sympathy with the views of the writers and reveal a liberality of thought with regard to the political aspirations of women that was undoubtedly sincere'.[19] Fish also recalled that some articles on women's roles had been 'far in advance of the thought of the day', and listed several titles such as 'The Position of Woman', 'The Fallacy of the Superiority of Man', 'Woman and Democracy', 'The Need for More Women Guardians of the Poor', 'Woman's Work in Politics', and 'Women's Suffrage'.[20] It should be noted that these political writings were published alongside articles on women's 'needlework'. As is clear from the letter quoted above, even in its earliest days as editor of *The Woman's World*, Wilde considered the commissioning of an article on needlework in connection with 'the Art School' as a priority.

Some of the needlework topics were very closely related to the Cottage Industries. 'Irish Industrial Art' by Lady Mary Jeune, published in January 1889, introduced readers to a wealthy British lady who had developed a private Cottage Industry into a multiple chain store. Alice Rowland Hart (1848-1931), wife of the renowned London surgeon Dr Ernest Hart (1835-1898), was from a London mercantile family. She had long been concerned with public health and nutrition; indeed, in her younger years she had trained as a doctor in Paris and London.[21] Consequently, when Dr Hart became a medical journalist writing on medical and sanitary reform, she was able to share fully in her husband's field of interest.[22] Furthermore, as secretary of the Popular Ballad Concert Society, she had made practical steps to make musical culture available to working class people.[23] Mrs Hart's financial background and philanthropic sympathy with the disadvantaged

enabled her to offer practical leadership to the Cottage Industries and to make an enormous contribution to County Donegal, which was one of the most poverty-stricken areas of Ireland.

According to Lady Jeune's report,[24] Donegal had been a troubled district: the lack of railroads and sea routes made it hard to secure the supply of goods, while the barren soil meant that harvests were invariably poor. This combination of inaccessibility and low quality agricultural land left the population vulnerable when the grave 'Donegal Famine' struck in 1879. Four years later, in 1883, Mr and Mrs Hart visited the area to inspect the extreme state of starvation. On hearing the local residents' cries of 'Give us work. Let us earn', 'Why should we starve when we are willing to work?',[25] Mrs Hart decided that the best solution was 'to revive the old Cottage Industries, and to develop and improve the ancient arts of spinning, weaving, knitting, sewing, and embroidery'.[26] Through communication with the local parish priests she collected samples of tweeds and friezes remaining in the localities, and made soundings with the London markets concerning the saleability of these items. Receiving their judgement that the samples were old-fashioned in quality and design but had a certain potential for improvement, Mrs Hart bought appropriately modern patterns for hosiery, hand-knitted socks and stockings, and an adequate amount of yarns. She took them to Gweedore, a small Donegal village where still lived over one thousand knitters, and made commissions to the villagers. The result came in the form of large orders from major London retail firms such as Debenham and Freebody. In 1883, the Donegal Industrial Fund was set up, with fifty pounds of basic capital plus donations of five thousand pounds from Mr and Mrs Hart and one and a half thousand pounds from their friends.

The workers of the Donegal Industrial Fund spent the next year improving the local tweeds and friezes, and in 1884 their products attracted public attention at the International Health Exhibition in

London. Their auspicious sales records prompted Mrs Hart to further develop her business. A letter appealing for individuals to join in her enterprise appeared in over thirty local Irish papers, and led to the setting up of Donegal House as a head office in London, and several more agencies and workshops all over Donegal. Other genres of handicrafts were added to the original two of tweed and frieze making. In the Gweedore studio, remarkable progress was made in textile dyeing, a technical development to which Mrs Hart herself contributed by means of a number of experiments, using various natural products such as 'shop dyes', namely madder and logwoods, lichens and heather from local bog lands, a variety of wild plants and their roots and leaves. Even chimney soot was used to produce a good olive-brown colour. In 1887, when the British government granted Mrs Hart one thousand pounds for teaching purposes for the benefit of the Irish peasantry, she invited technical instructors from Lancashire to train the Gweedore workers in drafting, pattern-designing, textile calculations, and how to use the Wych and Jacquard looms. Furthermore, two girls were sent to England to learn Torchon lace-making, an art they brought back to other Donegal studios in Bunbeg and Derrybeg, while more classes to teach stitching needlework were opened in Milford, Termon, Dore, and Barnesmore, in order to meet the orders promised by manufacturers in Belfast.

Mrs Hart exercised her design sense in a style of needlework she called 'Kells Embroidery' (Fig.1), which later became the signature product of the Donegal Industrial Fund. As the name suggests, the basic design of 'Kells Embroidery' was based on the Book of Kells, an Irish illuminated manuscript of the seventh or eighth century, featuring interlaced, spiralling patterns and zoomorphic motifs. Designed 'to create a new Irish industry with Irish materials, and worked by Irish workers', the Kells Embroidery proved to be 'one of the most artistic and beautiful methods of modern embroidery'.[27] It consisted of various colours and tints of dyed, polished flax threads worked on

linens, and was applied to a number of fabric products for daily use. In addition to the uniqueness of its design, the key to the popularity of Kells Embroidery lay in its usability and the sufficient workforce for production. As Mrs Hart explained, 'I have started 14 classes in different parts of Ireland, and I am now employing a considerable number of peasant girls, and also poor ladies. This new embroidery being inexpensive, effective and washable, is applicable to all kinds of domestic and decorative purposes, curtains, table linen, chair backs, dresses, &c.'[28] These products were first introduced to the public in the International Inventions Exhibition held in London in 1885, where they were awarded a gold medal. Lady Aberdeen often wore elaborate dress decorated with Kells Embroidery in high-class fashion salons in England, so the products of the Donegal Industrial Fund spread amongst aristocrats as well as the middle or lower classes.[29]

The reputation of the Donegal Industrial Fund spread internationally through the exhibitions held in major cities. At the Edinburgh Exhibition of 1886, it was reported that Queen Victoria much admired Kells Embroidery curtains and purchased a set in red and yellow for Windsor Castle.[30] In 1889, at the International Exhibition in Paris, the Donegal Industrial Fund won five awards, more than any British entrant. The Irish Exhibition held at London's Olympia in 1888 and at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 offered further opportunities for the Donegal Industrial Fund to draw international attention. Examples of their knitting, embroidery and weaving were demonstrated in the 'Donegal Industrial Village', a mock-up of a workshop consisting of a dozen thatched cottages, life-sized replicas of an Irish cross and a ruined tower.

Nevertheless, the success story of the Donegal Industrial Fund documented in *The Woman's World* was not a typical case. Many more articles called for urgent action to alleviate the poverty in Ireland and even in Britain. For example, in May 1888, a female trade unionist,

Clementia Black, reported conditions of low-wages and long working hours, based on field data she had collected from interviews with needlewomen in London.[31] The working conditions documented in Black's article are reminiscent of a scene in Wilde's 'Happy Prince' (1888), in which a poor seamstress embroiders all day, yet cannot earn enough to pay for treatment to cure her son's sickness. In another article published in July 1888, the Irish journalist Charlotte O'Connor Eccles appealed for public action to save the impoverished Dublin poplin-makers from starvation. She attributed their precarious livelihood to the lack of a reliable customer base to provide them with a stable income.[32] Against this background, the significance of Mrs Hart's contribution to the Donegal Industrial Fund becomes clear, and all the more so because it was not always feasible to 'enable poor women to make some provision for the future' through work of 'a certain artistic value'.[33] It should also be noted that Mrs Hart's achievement was able to gain wider recognition through *The Woman's World* under Wilde's editorship.

## 5 *The Woman's World* as an International Craft Arts Catalogue

Another notable feature of *The Woman's World* was its introduction of a world-wide variety of needlework, reflecting Wilde's own interest in that craft and his editorial policy of encouraging women's activity. In addition to Mrs Hart's 'Kells Embroidery', many articles featured techniques and materials from the embroidery patterns designed at the Royal School of Art Needlework in South Kensington, while others showcased the embroideries of Italy, Spain, and Portugal, in each case tracing their histories back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[34] Consequently, *The Woman's World* can be seen as a large volume catalogue of the world's handicrafts, both old and new.

It should be noted that Wilde contributed several articles on these topics. In March 1888, he reported upon the recent activities of May

Morris (1862-1938), the daughter of William Morris and an Arts and Crafts needlewoman in her own right. Wilde's review indicates his appreciation of the highly developed technique and refined designs in her works:

> Miss May Morris, whose exquisite needlework is well known, has just completed a pair of curtains for a house in Boston. They are amongst the most perfect specimens of modern embroidery that I have seen, and are from Miss Morris's own design. I am glad to hear that Miss Morris has determined to give lessons in embroidery. She has a thorough knowledge of the art, her sense of beauty is as rare as it is refined, and her power of design is quite remarkable.[35]

In the same year as this report was published, Susan Mary 'Lily' Yeats (1866-1949), a younger sister of W. B. Yeats, started to learn the art of embroidery as Morris's assistant. After six years of training Lily Yeats brought Morris-styled English embroidery to Ireland, and played an important role as a notable needlewoman of the Irish Arts and Crafts movement.

In addition to embroidery, *The Woman's World* also covered another Cottage Industry, namely lace-making. In articles richly illustrated with relevant photographs, it explained in detail the traditionally handed-down techniques and designs of Valenciennes, Le Puy, Mechelin, and Brussels, all cities with long-established reputations as lace-makers.[36] In March 1888, the journal also reported on 'the rise, growth, and present position of lace-making in Ireland',[37] explaining how, although coming late to the craft, Ireland had soon become home to many excellent manufacturers, who could be considered alongside those in the traditional lace-making centres in France and Belgium. As in the case of embroidery, well-organised training and supervision of

the peasant workers was crucial in order to establish the lace industry and keep it sustainable. Here the work of lace specialist Alan Cole (1841-1934) was crucial, to the extent that 'the Irish lace-makers cannot be too grateful'.[38] The son of Henry Cole, devoted reformer of South Kensington's School of Art, Cole followed in his father's footsteps as a distinguished servant of art education, and in 1883 he was deputed to Cork School of Art to teach lace-making.[39] From the beginning Cole had systematised back-up from the South Kensington and the Cork Schools of Art, and was privileged to be able to borrow and show to his students typical specimens of Italian, Flemish, and French laces, which reportedly became the prototypes of the Irish lace. Cole's instruction proved an inspiration to the young Irish learners: in May 1889 Wilde reported that two female students of Cork School of Art had won 'the gold and silver medals for their designs for laces and crochets, at the national competition which annually takes place in London between all the Schools of Art in the United Kingdom'.[40] In cooperation with the headmaster of Cork School of Art, Cole also lectured frequently at convents, especially those in County Kerry, where the highly motivated nuns wished to learn the art but were not allowed to leave their houses. In 1884 the nuns' designs, such as the one in Fig.2, received many prizes, including a bronze medal and six Queen's Prizes, and the best of them were presented to the Pope by the Irish bishops.[41]

The extent of Cole's contribution to support the Irish lace-makers is clear from T. W. Rolleston's report on the Cork Exhibition of 1902, which displayed numerous lace products made by women workers from the south of Ireland. While admitting the need to improve the products' design in order that they might be considered 'modern', Rolleston commended the lace makers' efforts as 'the spirit of modernity'. Echoing Wilde's own attitude toward women craft-makers, he wrote: 'In the modern reaction in favour of decorative art, the position of women is strongly defined…The spirit of modernity is no

slower in its operation on the mind of woman than of man, and in the best craft-work of the women of to-day we can feel the tide of the new renaissance flowing fresh and strong'.[42]

Cole's work also inspired other wealthy Britons to open private lace-making workshops in Ireland. Most notably, Mrs Florence Vere O'Brien took many suggestions from Cole,[43] and using her connection with London merchants she re-established a lace factory in Limerick that had long ceased operation. The lace products made there became known as 'Limerick Lace', and in 1888, as well as being featured in *The Woman's World* (Fig.3),[44] they were displayed at the Exhibition in Olympia as part of a cooperative project with Mrs Hart's Donegal Industrial Fund.[45]

Eventually, the Irish lace industry thrived in Counties Cork, Clare, Kerry, Wexford, Waterford, and Monaghan. In *The Woman's World*, Wilde praised Cole, who had shown that Irish lace could be unrivalled in design and quality. Importantly, he also gave credit to the aristocratic British ladies who had breathed new life into Ireland's artistic and economic landscape.

> This lovely Irish art of lace-making is very much indebted to Mr. Cole, who has really re-created it, given it new life, and shown it the true artistic lines on which to progress…as Mr. Cole points out, it is possible to produce Irish laces of as high artistic quality as almost any foreign laces. The Queen, Lady Londonderry, Lady Dorothy Nevill, Mrs. Alfred Morrison, and others have done much to encourage the Irish workers, and it rests largely with the ladies of England whether this beautiful art lives or dies.[46]

In November 1888, Wilde reviewed Cole's translation from French of M. Lefébure's *History of Embroidery and Lace*, noting that:

> Indeed, as the translator himself points out, M. Lefébure's book suggests the question whether it is not rather by the needle and the bobbin, than by the brush, the graver, or the chisel, that the influence of woman should assert itself in the arts. In Europe, at any rate, woman is sovereign in the domain of art-needlework… In the beautifying of modern houses it certainly must be admitted — indeed, it should be more generally recognised than it is — that rich embroidery on hangings and curtains, portières, couches and the like, produces a far more decorative and far more artistic effect than can be gained from our somewhat wearisome English practice of covering the walls with pictures and engravings.[47]

Here, in his insistence that the same value should be recognised in the applied, decorative arts represented by 'the needle and the bobbin', as in the high or fine arts represented by 'the brush, the graver, or the chisel', Wilde clearly supports the fundamental idea of the Arts and Crafts movement. In addition, it should be noted that Wilde acknowledged and respected women's talent and skill exercised in a variety of types of needlework.

## 6 The Importance of Modernising the Tradition

In his editorship of *The Woman's World* Wilde did not focus on the development of Ireland's craft arts in isolation, but placed it within the wider scope of progress in all sorts of decorative arts across Europe. In addition to this sense of internationality, he emphasised the necessity of modernising the tradition.

From the mid-nineteenth century, archaeological discoveries of ancient Celtic items, such as Tara Brooches and the Cross of Cong, and the reprinted illuminations of the Book of Kells produced by Irish antiquarian Margaret Stokes (1832-1900), had been drawing public attention to Celtic subjects. This interest was reinforced when, at the

very beginning of the Irish Arts and Crafts movement, Mrs Hart's 'Kells Embroidery' helped to spread the popularity of Irish motifs. In 1887, commenting upon the publication of Stoke's *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, Wilde stated that there was 'no reason why [Celtic Spirit] should not contribute something to our decorative art'.[48] In an article for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Wilde demonstrated his understanding of the aspirations of Stokes and other Irish archaeologists towards 'the revival of a native Irish school in architecture, sculpture, metal-work and painting'.[49] Nevertheless, he noted that 'there is always a danger of these revivals being merely artificial reproductions, and it may be questioned whether the peculiar forms of Irish ornamentation could be made at all expressive of the modern spirit'. His concern was that mere reproduction of the same motifs over time would make any artistic activity stagnant. For that reason, he issued 'a warning' to 'all who fancy that reproduction of a form necessarily implies a revival of the spirit that gave the form life and meaning, and who fail to recognise the difference between art and anachronisms'.[50]

In 1924, an article in the *Irish Times* criticised the Irish Arts and Crafts movement on the basis that 'too many of the workers cannot get away from the Celtic design obsession'.[51] By that time, the growth of Celtic ornament had created a general pride in the heritage of Irish decorative arts, but as Paul Larmour points out, it had lapsed into the 'imitative or copyist tendency'[52] of mere reproduction of a certain cultural trend. In fact, the necessity to modernise design by refreshing the tradition had been addressed by T. W. Rolleston as early as 1906. He cautioned the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland: 'don't imitate: don't conceal the qualities of your material. Study the arts of the past, above all those of your own land, but remember that you do not live in the times of Brian Boru, but of Mr Edison'.[53] Wilde had made the same point nearly twenty years earlier. In a lecture delivered in America in 1882 he told his audience:

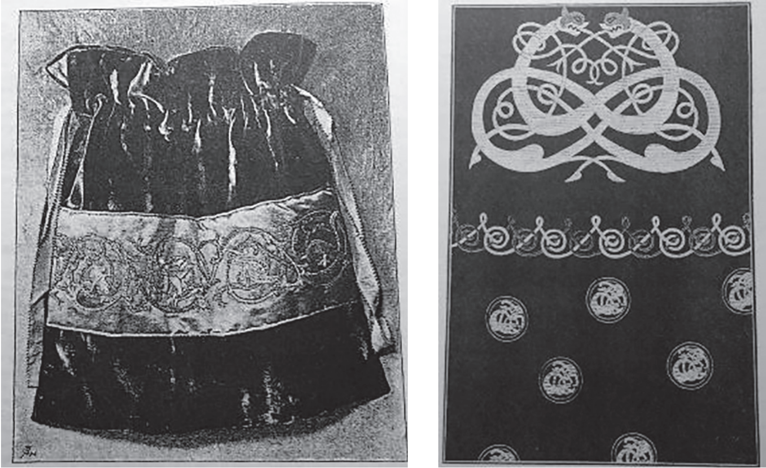
> I do not wish you…to bring 'the life or the decorations of the thirteenth century back again'. 'The circumstances with which you must surround your workmen are those' of modern American life, 'because the designs you have now to ask for from your workmen are such as will make modern' American 'life beautiful'. The art we want is the art based on all the inventions of modern civilisation, and to suit all the needs of nineteenth-century life.[54]

Wilde's argument that making modern American 'life beautiful' was more important than reviving the thirteenth-century style of decoration, is surely in accord with Rolleston's urge to represent the modernity of 'Mr Edison' instead of 'the time of Brian Boru'.[55]

It is also notable that Wilde carried these ideals into practice. In 1884, Wilde's London house was refurbished under the advice of E. W. Godwin and J. M. Whistler; compared to Morris's well-known interior styles, the result was, as Philip Henderson points out, 'far more revolutionary, and anticipated modern taste'.[56] Likewise, in his *Autobiographies*, W. B. Yeats recollected a visit he had made to Wilde's house in 1888, noting that, contrary to his expectation, 'there was nothing medieval, or Pre-Raphaelite', but that he had found instead 'a white drawing-room with Whistler etchings 'let into' white panels, and a dining room all white, chairs, walls, mantelpiece, carpet'.[57] In fact Wilde was critical of Morris's wallpapers, stating that: 'They seem to me often deficient in real beauty of colour….when everything is covered with a design the room is restless and the eye disturbed'.[58] Such criticism of Morris's designs, even while he admired the Arts and Crafts ideas addressed by Morris himself, is further evidence of the importance Wilde placed on the necessity to refresh the established tradition and make it fit the modern times.

## 7 Conclusion

Shortly after the turn of the century, as the British-originated Cottage Industries burgeoned around Ireland, many Anglo-Irish ladies joined in the movement. Some of them set up craft enterprises under Irish names, such as the ‘Dun Emer Guild’[59] meaning ‘the guild of Emer’s fort’ a reference to the legendary female icon of Celtic myth; or ‘An Túr Gloine’, which means ‘the Tower of Glass’.[60] By doing so they emphasised the Irish nature of the products made there, but they were still receptive to the high standard of British arts and crafts. Over time, their effort to import and practice British craft-making techniques resulted in the training of many competent, talented Irish craftworkers. Although none of these Anglo-Irish ladies were in direct communication with Wilde, their work led to the actualisation of his hope for women’s involvement in society. Yet before any of their enterprises began, Wilde had foreseen both the development and the cause of decline of the Arts and Crafts movement in Ireland. Indeed, from the beginning of the movement there were some distinctive figures, like Rolleston, who were instrumental in Ireland’s cultural development. Yet even their influential remarks were echoes of Wilde’s foresight. Wilde had been a step ahead of his contemporaries, and even of the subsequent generation. This was because, as has been shown above, he had an all-encompassing perspective that looked beyond Irish borders and a readiness to renovate time-honoured designs, both of which would be essential to assure the comprehensive quality and cultural value of the movement. Therefore, considering his thoughts and perspectives on the social role of art and women’s empowerment, coupled with his sense of international modernity, Wilde can be considered an ideological pioneer of the Irish Arts and Crafts movement.



(Fig. 1) ‘Kells Embroidery’ work bag and portiere by the Donegal Industrial Fund. *The Woman’s World*, vol. 2 (1889), 160, 163.

(Fig. 2) Lappet of Point Lace. Made at the Convent of Poor Clares, Kenmare, Co. Kerry. *The Woman’s World*, vol. 1 (1888), 197.

(Fig. 3) Limerick Lace. Made by Mrs. Vere O'Brien's workers. *The Woman's World*, vol. 1 (1888), 196.

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## Notes

1 Nicola Gordon Bowe, 'The Irish Arts and Crafts Movement (1886-1925)', *GPA Irish Arts Review Yearbook* (1990-1991), 173.

2 The original Irish School was set up by Countess Cowper (Lady Lieutenant of Ireland) in Dublin in 1882, following the model of the English Royal School of Art Needlework. It was run by the Baroness Pauline Prochazka of Austria, herself a skilful needlewoman, until she moved to Kilkenny in 1886. The school continued until 1915. See Nicola Gordon Bowe and Elizabeth Cumming, eds., *The Arts and Crafts Movements in Dublin and Edinburgh 1885-1925* (1998), 183-84.

3 Anthony SJ Symondson, 'Art Needlework in Ireland', *Irish Arts*

*Review Yearbook*, vol. 10 (1994), 126-28.

4 John Turpin, 'The Metropolitan School of Art, 1900-1923 (Part 1)', *Dublin Historical Record*, vol. XXXVII, no. 1 (1983), 71.

5 Jeanne Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past: the Celtic Revival 1830-1930* (1980), 103; Bowe and Cumming, 87.

6 Yuki Takahashi, *W. B. Yeats in the Irish Arts and Crafts Movement* (2016), 21.

7 T. W. Rolleston, 'Art and Industry in Ireland', *Journal and Proceedings of the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland* (1901), 232.

8 Takahashi, 22.

9 Gifford Lewis, *Yeats Sisters and the Cuala* (1994), 54.

10 Takahashi, 18.

11 Bowe, 172.

12 Vera Kreilkamp, ed., *The Arts and Crafts Movement: Making it Irish* (2016), 13.

13 Rolleston, 'William Morris', *Journal and Proceedings of the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland* (1896), 52.

14 Oscar Wilde, *Essays and Lectures* (1920), 185-86. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this book are given in brackets.

15 Henry Cole, Preface to *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 1 (1849), vii-viii. See also Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Study of Its Sources, Ideals and Influence on Design Theory* (1971), 18-20.

16 Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde* (1979), 69.

17 *Ibid*., 67-68.

18 Arthur Fish, 'Oscar Wilde as Editor', *Harper's Weekly*, vol. 59 (1912), 18.

19 *Ibid*.

20 *Ibid*.

21 Janice Helland, 'Exhibiting Ireland: The Donegal Industrial Fund in London and Chicago', *RACAR: revue d'art Canadienne = Canadian Art Review*, vol. 29, no. 1/2 (2004), 29.

22 Paul Larmour, 'The Donegal Industrial Fund', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* (1990), 128.

23 In January 1888, Wilde used an editor's note in *The Woman's World* to appeal for public donations to the Society, which trained working class people in the enjoyment and performance of music. See Wilde, 'Literary and Other Notes', *The Woman's World*, vol. 1 (1888), 136.

24 Lady Mary Jeune, 'Irish Industrial Art', *The Woman's World*, vol. 2 (1889), 159-63. Hereafter the information about Mrs. Hart and her work is based on this article, except for quotations of Mrs. Hart's own words.

25 Alice Hart, *Cottage Industries and What They Can Do for Ireland: Being a Verbatim Report of an Address Given by Mrs. Ernest Hart* (1885), 12.

26 *Ibid*.

27 Jeune, 161.

28 Hart, 14.

29 Helland, 36.

30 Larmour, 131.

31 Clementia Black, 'Something about Needlewomen', *The Woman's World*, vol. 1 (1888), 300-04.

32 Charlotte O'Connor Eccles, 'The Poplin-Weavers of Dublin', *The Woman's World*, vol. 2 (1889), 396-99.

33 Jeune, 163.

34 Articles such as 'How to Copy the Designs of Ancient Needlework' (vol. 2, 59-63) and 'Quaint and Curious Needlework' (vol. 2, 382-85) by Ellen T. Masters, are good examples.

35 Wilde, 'Literary and Other Notes', *The Woman's World*, vol. 1 (1888), 232.

36 Articles such as 'The Lace-Makers of Le Puy' by E. Betham-Edwards (vol. 1, 550-54) and '"Speldewerksters", or Belgian Lace-Makers' by Andrew T. Sibbald (vol. 2, 500-2), are good examples.

37 H. E. Keane, 'Lace-Making in Ireland', *The Woman's World*, vol. 1 (1888), 195.

38 *Ibid*., 196.

39 The information regarding Alan Cole's activity in Ireland is based on Wilde, 'Some Literary Notes', *The Woman's World*, vol. 2 (1889), 390-

91.

40 Wilde, ‘Some Literary Notes’, 391.

41 Keane, 197.

42 Rolleston, ‘Studio-Talk’, *The Studio*, vol. 26 (1902), 295.

43 Helland, 35.

44 Keane, 196.

45 Helland, 35.

46 Wilde, ‘Some Literary Notes’, 391.

47 Wilde, ‘A Fascinating Book’, *The Woman's World*, vol. 2 (1889), 53.

48 Wilde, *A Critic in Pall Mall* (1919), 84. (This article originally appeared in ‘Early Christian Art in Ireland’ in *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 December 1887.)

49 *Ibid*., 83.

50 *Ibid*., 84.

51 *Irish Times*, 7 August 1924. Quoted by Larmour, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Ireland* (1992), 203.

52 Larmour, *Celtic Ornament* (1981), 1-2, 16.

53 Rolleston, ‘Art Works of Irish Exhibition’, *Journal and Proceedings of the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland* (1906), 286.

54 Wilde, *Essays and Lectures*, 176.

55 Rolleston, ‘Art Works of Irish Exhibition’, 286.

56 Philip Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* (1967), 206.

57 W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (1955), 134.

58 Peter Faulkner, ‘William Morris and Oscar Wilde’, *Journal of William Morris Society* 14.4 (2004), 31. Originally appeared in R. Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (1962), 174.

59 In 1902, the suffragist Evelyn Gleeson (1855-1944) founded the ‘Dun Emer Guild’, in partnership with Lily Yeats and her younger sister Elizabeth Corbet ‘Lollie’ Yeats (1868-1940). Gleeson was in charge of hand-tufting carpets and rugs, and Lily Yeats supervised the embroidery making, while Lollie Yeats became a successful book maker after learning the art from Emery Walker (1851-1933), the top specialist in book-printing of the English Arts and Crafts scene.

60 An Túr Gloine was a stained glass studio founded in 1903 by Sarah Purser (1848-1943), a Dublin portrait painter. It was run according to the advice of Christopher Whall (1849-1924), the leading stained glass artist in the English Arts and Crafts movement.

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