



Fig. 1 "Clare Embroidery" child's frock: white lawn embroidered in red cotton, D.M.C. thread. The embroidery is done in satin and stem stitch. The yoke and cuffs are smocked. c. 1908.

“Clare Embroidery”: an Irish Cottage Industry

Veronica Rowe

In February 1886 Lord Aberdeen was appointed Viceroy of Ireland by Mr. Gladstone and his Liberal Government. One of the results of this appointment was the profound effect which the arrival of Lady Aberdeen had on the Irish craft scene. She writes in her book *More Cracks with “We Twa”*:*

We had not been installed twenty four hours in the Castle - Dublin, when Lady Hamilton called upon me to report the progress made by the committee of the Women's Home Industries Section of the Edinburgh International Exhibition of 1886, that there should be a representation of *Irish Home Industries*. Time was short to complete the arrangements for the opening of the exhibition on May 1st but it was all sufficient to reveal to us the enthralling interest intertwined in the history of the industries which produced the lovely specimens of laces, embroideries, poplins and other handicrafts which we found scattered up and down throughout the country. It fell to my lot to draw up a catalogue for the Exhibition with some notes about the origin of the industries represented, and this effort brought into relief how, in nearly every case, there was a story of some fine, big-hearted personality trying to find means to bring relief and help to suffering neighbors.

Specimens of the crafts collected by Lady Aberdeen and her committee were exhibited first in Dublin and then at the International Exhibition in Edinburgh in May 1886 where they made a very favourable impression.

In order to encourage the Irish public to take an interest in the products of the Irish craft industry Lady Aberdeen thought up the idea of holding a garden party at the Viceregal Lodge in Dublin at which all the guests were asked to wear clothes made of Irish materials and to bring their children with them in fancy dress, also made of Irish fabrics. (This was at a time when the correct dress for men at such a party would have been a frock coat and tall hat.)

“At first the idea was considered wild and impossible and it was said that no materials were made in Ireland suitable for such an occasion,” writes Lady Aberdeen. But again, she had an answer. An exhibition was held on the Viceregal tennis courts and Irish manufacturers were invited to display their goods. Lady Aberdeen then invited guests, milliners, tailors and dressmakers to come and view the show. The resulting garden party was a huge success with the men wearing white flannels

* The Marquis and Marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair, *More Cracks with “We Twa,”* Methuen and Co., Ltd., London, 1929.



Fig. 2 Detail of Fig. 1. Smocked yoke. The cut-out flower centres reveal the lining of the yoke. The frocks were usually finished with a scalloped collar, but this sample has a crochet edging.

or homespun suits and soft hats and the ladies in linens, laces, embroideries, poplins and woolens. There was wide public interest, the Dublin newspapers issuing special supplements.

In the autumn of 1886 the Association of Irish Industries, under the chairmanship of Lady Aberdeen, was formed, and two depots opened—one in Dublin and one in London. Sales of Irish Industries were held twice a year—one in London and one in some big provincial city.

In America, the Irish Village at the World's Craft Fair in Chicago in 1893 brought Irish crafts to the notice of Americans. It was one of the main financial successes of the exhibition and created a great deal of interest and orders for Irish goods in America.

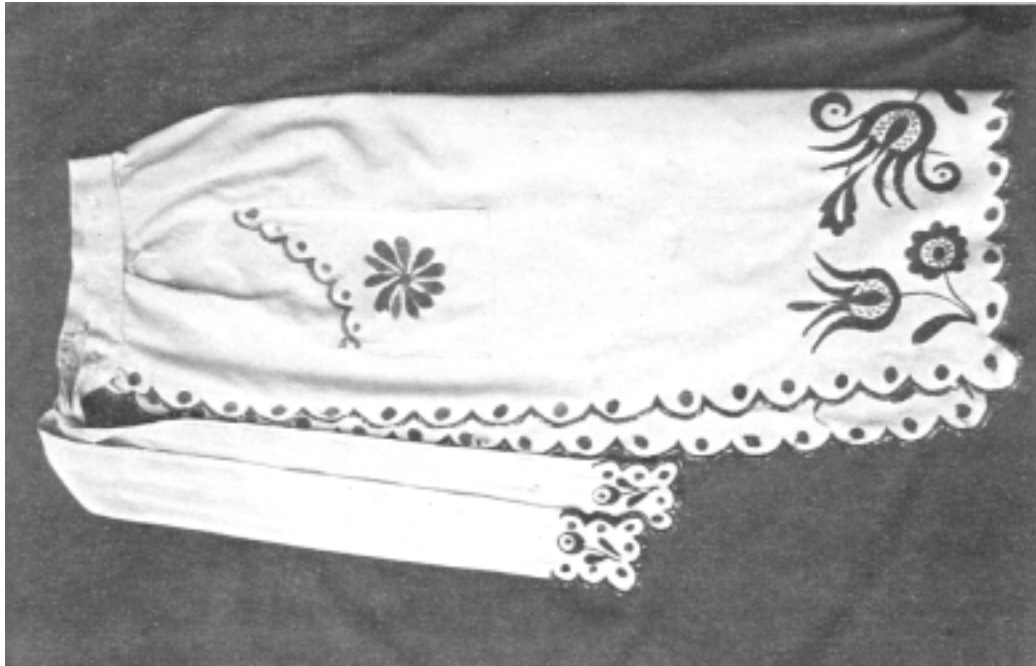


Fig. 3 “Clare Embroidery” apron. White cotton embroidered in red and blue cotton D.M.C. thread. Satin and stem-stitch embroidery. Scalloped edgings. c. 1900.

Many small industries were started around this time. Lady Aberdeen’s enthusiasm was infectious and outlets provided by her Irish Industries Association helped to make it possible to find markets for the goods at home and abroad. Organizations such as the Gaelic League, Sir Horace Plunkett’s Irish Agricultural Co-Operative Society, the Congested Districts Board, and the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction also became involved in encouraging craft workers.

One of those whom Lady Aberdeen would have described as a “fine big-hearted personality” was Mrs. Florence Vere O’Brien. She was born Florence Arnold and was the granddaughter of the famous headmaster, Dr. Arnold of Rugby. Both her father, William Arnold, a Director of Education in the Punjab, and her mother had died young, leaving four orphaned children. Florence, her sister and her two brothers were sent home from India and were adopted by their aunt, Jane Arnold, and her husband, William E. Forster. In 1880 Mr. Forster was appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland by Mr. Gladstone and came to live in Dublin with his wife and adopted family. In 1883 Florence married Robert Vere O’Brien—a young barrister, son of the Hon. Robert O’Brien of Dromoland Castle, Co. Clare, and went to live in Limerick, where, almost immediately, she became involved in the revival of Limerick lace and the setting up of a lace school. With Florence’s educational and political background, her long training in community service and her considerable artistic ability, she was an ideal person to take on the revival of such a prestigious craft. Soon the newly revived



Fig. 4 “Clare Embroidery” nightdress case. White lawn embroidered in blue cotton D.M.C. Satin and stem stitch. Whipped edging. Initials F.V.O.B.

Limerick lace industry was sending work to Lady Aberdeen’s Irish Industries Association Depots in Dublin and London; and to the major needlework shows as well as winning prizes at exhibitions. A Limerick lace wedding dress exhibited at the Irish Village at the Chicago Fair in 1893 was bought by Marshall Field.

By 1890 the Vere O’Briens had moved to Ennis, Co. Clare, about twenty-four miles from Limerick. Florence—while continuing to run the lace school — set up a small cottage industry in her new home, with the help of a talented young Scottish needlewoman, Mina Keppie, who had come to help to look after the O’Brien children. The new industry was called “Clare Embroidery” and the first classes were attended by twelve to fifteen girls who came for two hours weekly and were instructed in the embroidery stitches by Mina Keppie.

The original designs—which were based on the flowers and foliage of Co. Clare—were all drawn by Florence. Stitches were simple, satin and stem stitch combined with smocking, buttonholing, cutwork and scalloping. The materials were washable cotton and linen embroidered with French D.M.C. threads, predominately blue and

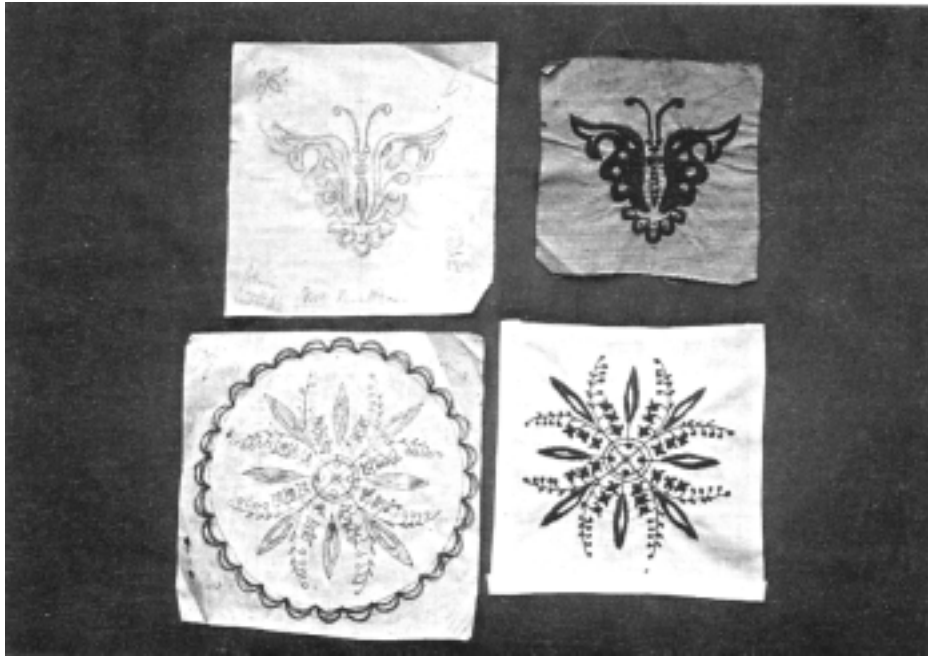


Fig. 5 “Clare Embroidery” sample pieces. Designs: “Chinese butterfly” and “Lily of the Valley.” Drawn by Florence Vere O’Brien.

red. The first items offered for sale were children’s frocks (Figs. 1 and 2), pinafores and aprons (Fig. 3). Later there were embroidered patchwork bedspreads, fire screens, nightdress cases (Fig. 4), et cetera. The girls had to make a number of trial pieces (Figs. 3, 5, 6, 7) before being allowed to work on a garment for sale. Most of the work was done at home and then brought in for the finishing, sewing up, and posting.

“Clare Embroidery” began to appear regularly at the sales and exhibitions in Ireland and England. At one sale in Windsor in 1902 an order was given by the Princess of Wales for twelve “Clare Embroidery” smocked frocks for Queen Victoria’s granddaughter Princess Victoria—which encouraged sales in England.

The small industry continued to flourish through the early 1900s—by 1910 there were 27 girls employed—By the 1920s Florence’s two daughters Jane, (later Mrs. Godfrey Hardy—the author’s mother) and Flora, were helping with the drawing and designing while Mina Keppie continued the cutting out, distribution, book-keeping and correspondence with customers. Many of the customers were now American and Canadian.

Many of the girls walked long distances to get to the classes and at a time when opportunities were limited they enjoyed the stimulation of learning new stitches, work-

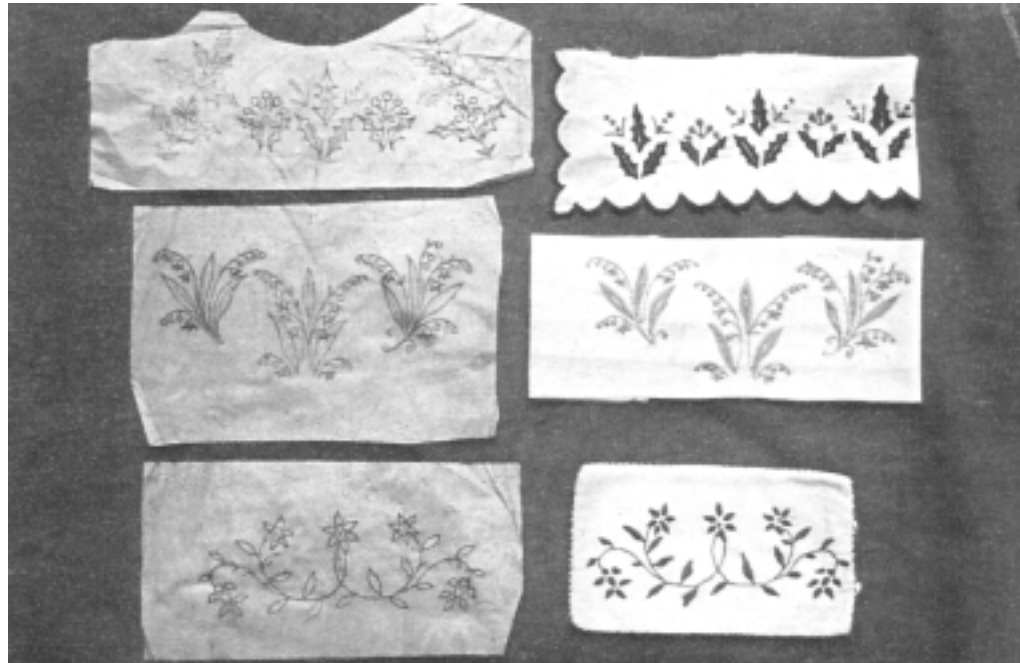


Fig. 6 “Clare Embroidery” sample pieces. Designs: “Holly,” “Lily of the Valley” and “Periwinkle.”

ing out new designs and the chance of winning awards for their work at exhibitions. The classes were a social occasion too, of course. Those who are alive today talk of the times in the 1920s when Mrs. Vere O’Brien used to read to them while they worked—her pet robin on her shoulder—tales from the classics and adventure stories, followed by a cup of tea and homemade cake. The social events included dances in the coach house, Christmas parties and special picnic trips to places of interest.

Florence Vere O’Brien died in 1937, and with the outbreak of the second World War in 1939 “Clare Embroidery” came to an end. It was unique in lasting more than forty years. Indeed many of the small cottage industries started at the end of the nineteenth century did not survive the first World War.

“Clare Embroidery” is an example of a small but important economic development in Ireland at the turn of the century, based on the public-spirited attitudes of some of the more privileged towards the encouragement of self-confidence and self-help amongst their neighbors. The motivation was not profit, since no surplus was ever retained by the promoters. Even amongst the countrywomen themselves the benefits were clearly not alone commercial but social as well as educational. Those who participated in these enterprises gained pleasure and confidence through being able to make and sell something both beautiful and useful.



- Fig. 7 “Clare Embroidery” sample pieces of edgings.
- (1) Scalloped hem, buttonholed edging with cut-work flowers, before excess material is cut away.
 - (2) Scalloped hem with cut-work flowers.
 - (3) Similar to (1) but with excess material cut away.
 - (4) Fancy scalloped edging.
 - (5) Scalloped edging with cut-work at scallop joins.

It will be seen that in four of these examples, the scalloped edges are themselves scalloped.