

Sources for the study of Welsh rural dress

One problem in any study of dress in Wales is that the postcard image of the 'Welsh Lady' has become such a strong one that it is difficult to excavate a true picture, particularly in an area of textile history where little material culture survives.

In order to discover the true nature of rural dress within Wales during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is necessary to investigate contemporary sources, though many of them must also be approached with great caution. For the earlier period, the main sources are manuscript and published accounts, diaries and letters of travellers to Wales, together with paintings produced by artists who journeyed through Wales at this time. From the 1830s, there are more frequent accounts from those who lived in Wales, and had an interest in the Welsh language and traditional ways of life, not only artists and historians, but also enthusiasts such as Augusta Hall, Lady Llanover.

Later in the century, the arrival of the railways brought the beginning of mass tourism, which engendered the production of souvenir prints, china and, finally, postcards. Fortunately, there were also numerous photographers with a real interest in traditional culture and rural crafts and agriculture, who have recorded a lost society, and, incidentally, their clothing. Finally, there is material culture, the surviving garments, worn for various reasons and with various conscious and unconscious motives. Most of the existing garments in museum collections date from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.

All of these sources can be problematic. Most of the literary sources are outsiders' accounts which concentrate on the quaint and unusual. Paintings can be romanticised and photographs were often staged. Much of the surviving material culture consists of 'conscious' Welsh costume rather than genuine occupational garments. The huge interest in national identity at the beginning of the nineteenth century within Wales, which resulted in the creation of an artificial 'standard' national dress, has for many years hidden the true, varied image of the rural population. Careful analysis can, however, bring to the surface quite a body of evidence for the actual garments worn in everyday life, particularly with regard to occupational dress. It is certainly possible to identify certain central elements of rural dress, such as the general use of woollen fabric, the wearing of aprons, kerchiefs and men's hats, some surviving as part of rural dress even into the twentieth century.

Only aprons and shawls have survived in any number, dresses and skirts mostly having worn out or been used as rags. This is hardly surprising when one considers the condition of some of those depicted in photographs. A number of flannel petticoats, however, have survived, perhaps due to the fact that, as undergarments, they received a measure of protection. Many



Watercolour sketch of Welsh woman knitting, showing footless stockings, mid-19th century

of these have been accessioned into museum collections as examples of 'Welsh costume', but are in fact not garments belonging to a conscious 'national' dress at all, but real 'peasant' or rural dress, part of the flannel wearing tradition.

In terms of these basic garments and also the general use of woollen cloth, the national dress borrowed directly from the clothing worn by women in the countryside, and their use as part of the created national dress has ensured their survival.

For a full discussion of this subject, see the article 'Welsh Peasant dress – Workwear or National Costume' in the May 2002 issue of *Textile History*.

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