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## *The history of* **IRISH LACE**



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# The history of Irish Lace

**The most prized and beautiful of materials, lace was once worn by the most affluent women across Europe, yet made by some of the poorest women in Ireland.**

It was a luxury product, used to decorate elaborate wedding dresses, christening robes, and church vestments. Moreover, it played a significant part in saving many Irish families from hardship and starvation.

Initially produced in Ireland from the 1730s, it required little equipment beyond bobbins and fine cotton or linen thread, combined with a great amount of patience and skill. It was suitable for isolated parts of the country that had little industry and limited employment options.

Many of the earliest lace-making schools were founded by two different types of women. The first were very wealthy Protestant female philanthropists, who provided training for young women on their estates. They frequently bought expensive pieces from Europe, shipping them back to Ireland for their students to copy.

The aristocracy played an important role in the promotion of Irish lace, as they had the funds together with the social connections to guarantee a high profile.

At the other end of the spectrum, orders of nuns took an active part in forming lace-making schools in their convents, supplying training and materials that permitted young women to earn money to support their families, and to save for the costs of emigration.

Different parts of the country produced distinctive types of lace, and keen customers learnt to ask for 'Carrickmacross' (County Monaghan) or 'Borris' (County Carlow) or 'Youghal' (County Cork) lace, depending upon their favoured style. Limerick lace also became well known from the 1830s.

In the later nineteenth century, demand for the product in the United States and across Europe grew so great that the government provided funding for its manufacture, with the Congested Districts Board establishing additional schools throughout the country, including fifteen in Erris (County Mayo) alone.



*Image from Linked by a Thread – the Story of Clones Lace*

While major efforts were made to promote Irish lace in the early twentieth century, it had reached its peak. Changing fashions made embellished dress unpopular after World War One, the lace industry weakened internationally and young women pursued higher paid employment in towns and cities.

Today Irish lace lives on, groups including the 'St Louis Stitchers', the Guild of Irish Lace-makers, and the Traditional Lace-makers of Ireland are all lace enthusiasts who ensure that Ireland's long association with lace-making will remain strongly interwoven into the future.

Reference:  
[www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie)

**DID YOU KNOW?**

The international fashion designers, Emmanuelles, used Carrickmacross Lace on the late Princess Diana's Wedding dress.



**BOOK OF THE WEEK**

**ÉIREANNACH**  
Celebrating native plants of Ireland

€25 (+postage)

The Irish Society of Botanical Artists which was established in 2014 produced this very attractive reference book and exhibition catalogue.

This publication is available from Reception or from the North Mayo Heritage Centre ebay bookstore.



The old Lace School at Muings, Barnatra, Co. Mayo  
(Images from [laceschool.com](http://laceschool.com))

The Muings Lace School (located on the main Belmullet-Ballycastle road) operated from 1914 but finally closed in the early 1990s. It was the last of the Erris Lace Schools in operation.

