

WELSH COSTUME AND THE INFLUENCE OF LADY LLANOVER

Christine Stevens

In order to attempt to judge the influence of Lady Llanover in the matter of national costume, and indeed, Welsh textiles, it is necessary to look at the situation prior to 1830 and to look at other influences which affected the situation in Wales in the mid 19th century and then assess its development in the later 19th century. Undoubtedly by the date at which Curnow Vosper painted *A Market Day in Old Wales* a very definite idea existed of what Welsh national dress should be - what we have here is an intentional image created by an artist - a demonstration of Welshness, not necessarily typical of rural dress in general within Wales, certainly not by the early 20th century when this picture was painted.



[illustration 1: *Market Day in Old Wales*, watercolour by Curnow Vosper, c. 1910. National Museum and Gallery Cardiff, Art no. NMWA 2137. Original in artist's copyright]

How did we reach this point and what was Lady Llanover's role?

Although there is little surviving material culture for the eighteenth century pre-Llanover period, there are a number of sources of evidence for what the rural population actually wore, though many of them have to be used with great care. These mainly consist of travelogues and diaries, and artist's pictorial images. Many of the literary sources are outsiders' accounts which concentrate on the quaint and unusual, paintings were often romanticised or figures inserted into landscape merely for effect. Careful sifting can, however, bring to the surface quite a body of evidence for the actual garments worn in everyday life, particularly occupational dress; and it is possible to identify central elements of rural dress which survive through 'folk dress' and occupational dress: in particular, shawls, aprons, flannel petticoats, and the wearing of hats.

Old fashioned dress surviving in rural areas has created the idea of 'traditional dress' - but in fact, rural dress in the 18th century was even then exposed to fashionable influence. There were those who could afford to follow the fashions of the day; there were those who perhaps had a sister in service in London or Bristol, who had access to the latest ideas, and also to their mistresses' cast-offs, and then there were those who would stick to their good old flannel come what may. All of these elements existed side by side in rural Wales, even in isolated areas, with the additional influence of the many travellers who came to Wales in search of the picturesque.

Mary Yorke visited Wales in 1774 and attended a service in St Davids Cathedral, where she saw fashionable women side by side with an old woman wearing a kerchief over her head and a 'hat like a man's and over her shoulders a square piece of flannel fastened before with a thorn'. [Wrest Park Papers, Bedfordshire County Record Office]

It is certainly the case that in the remoter parts of Wales people were very conservative in their dress, so much so that visitors invariably commented on it - especially the wearing of the bedgown and of men's hats. These main elements were based on a form of dress which had developed in England during the 17th century - itself a progression from Tudor styles. The style of the hat is less relevant than the fact that it was worn by both sexes, a habit which survived in Wales whereas by the 18th century it was less common in other parts of Britain. Most visitors to Wales in the late 18th century describe the women as wearing the ordinary low crowned man's hat of the period.



[illustration 2: *A Welch peasant and his wife*, a print distributed to commemorate the Welsh victory after the French invasion of Fishguard in 1797. Museum of Welsh Life accession no. F84.159.43.]

Catherine Hutton visited Aberystwyth in 1787, and described the dress of the women there – ‘They universally wear a petticoat and jacket fitting close to the waist of striped woollen and a man's hat’. The term jacket here could refer to the *gŵn bach*, a short bedgown or over bodice. [Catherine Hutton, *Reminiscences of a gentlewoman of the last century*, ed. Mrs C. H. Beale, 1891].

She then goes on to describe the wearing of the cloak – ‘a blue cloak many of them have, but it is reserved for dress, and in common they wear a long piece of woollen cloth wrapped round the waist’. There is watercolour illustration, almost contemporary with Catherine Hutton’s visit, painted by Julius Caesar Ibbetson in 1792, which bears out her comments. In *Pembrokeshire Peasants at Newcastle Emlyn Fair*, all of the elements are present - the blue cloaks, woollen wraps and men’s felt hats over kerchiefs.

A further confirmation of the wearing of blue can be found in Mr Pratt’s *Gleanings through Wales, Holland and Westphalia*, which had reached its 3rd edition in 1797, ‘It is in this part of Wales [Pembrokeshire] that the women dress their heads in a peculiar manner; they wear a

cumbrous gown of dark blue cloth, even in the midst of summer; instead of a cap, a large handkerchief is wrapt over their heads, and tied under the chin: in other places, the women as well as the men wear large hats with broad brims, often flapping over their shoulders'. These were certainly elements which survived for far longer in Wales than elsewhere and were noted as strange by urban visitors. Mr Pratt's account must be viewed with some scepticism, as it contains much of the exact wording of an earlier account by Lord Lyttelton, published in 1774 (*A gentleman's tour through Monmouthshire and Wales*). However, many of Ibbetson's water colours show similar clothing, often in blue flannel.

In 1819, two gentlemen on a walking tour of Glamorgan commented that the 'women's dress was different, all the women wore round hats, the same as the men, a sort of bedgown with loose sleeves, and a dark or striped flannel petticoat, mostly without shoes or stockings.' [T. Jones, 'A walk through Glamorgan, 1819', in: *Glamorgan Historian*, vol. 11, (Barry: S. Williams), p. 116.] Contemporary sketches confirm that their descriptions are not without some truth.



[illustration 3: *Welch woman*, watercolour sketch, artist unknown, early 19th century; showing footless stockings. Museum of Welsh Life accession no. F84.159.48].

Of course there was nothing intrinsically Welsh about most of these garments - they were of a type worn by countrywomen throughout Britain during the 18th century and into the 19th. There

is a well known illustration of men and women knitting, dated 1814, in George Walker's *Costume of Yorkshire* which illustrates a scene from Wensleydale, but could easily be in Wales; this is not surprising in view of the similarity of topography and local industries.

By the end of the 18th century, some external influences were identifiable - especially in the towns. Catherine Hutton visited Wales again in 1796 and witnessed two weddings - one in Llanberis, where 'not a female appeared in anything but woollen or without a man's hat'; the other was in Caernarfon town - not very distant, but a thriving coastal port, and here, 'the town ladies were clad, not like the mountaineers in woollen, but in printed cotton gowns, white petticoats and white stockings; but they retained the beaver hat and the blue cloak'.

The changes in fabric were already established in the town therefore - like many other areas of England, but not in the mountains, where woollen remained the rule. This is illustrated by Ibbetson in his painting *A street in Llangollen*; there is quite a lot happening in this picture - two women on the left are washing clothes, one with her bedgown pinned back. The little girl is wearing a headcloth under her hat; the child's mother is wearing a cloak and the other woman a nursing shawl. The spinner however is much more urbanised: the bedgown is lighter in colour and weight - possibly cotton or linen - the petticoat is wider, and she is wearing a bonnet rather than a headcloth. A watercolour in W. H. Pyne's *British costumes* shows Welsh washerwomen in 1805 with a mixture of working dress with touches of fashion in the waistline and one of the caps. Lighter fabrics can also be seen in some of the watercolours of George Delamotte in the collection of the National Library - such as the muffin seller, an elderly woman in old fashioned styled dress for the date of 1820, but not the dark colours normally associated with flannel cloth; the hat however, does closely resemble the description given by Mr Pratt.

It was during this period, from the 1820s and into the 1830s, that the idea of a national dress really began to be promoted, based upon the more archaic elements of rural and occupational dress until, by the time of Hugh Hughes' cartoon of Modryb Gwen, all of the elements of what was to become national dress were already instantly recognisable as an elderly Welsh woman.



[Illustration 4: *Dame Venodotia alias Modryb Gwen*, cartoon by Hugh Hughes, c. 1845-50. Museum of Welsh Life accession no. 49.499.]

It is during these years of the first third of the 19th century that Lady Llanover and a number of other interested parties began to take a hand. Lady Llanover's motives, though stated in her essay, 'On the advantages resulting from the preservation of the costumes of the Principality', are not entirely transparent. She rails against 'false respectability which encourages forms of dress incompatible with "active employments"' and 'exchanging wool packs for bales of cotton', with the resultant demands for higher wages, as well as the loss to artists of the picturesque. What she does not state, interestingly enough, is that people should wear these costumes in order to express their nationality, more rather to support the manufactures of their country. Nowhere does she advocate one particular type of 'costume' and in fact the watercolour sketches which she produced to accompany her essay are all quite different and although not necessarily in reality restricted to the counties to which she assigns them, they all contain elements of traditional dress recognisable from the earlier illustrations and descriptions mentioned above. More interesting, perhaps, is the fact that they also contain elements of fashionable dress of the period, such as high waistlines, puffed sleeves and caps with lappets.

One of her clearly stated motives was the encouragement of the Welsh woollen industry, which was in a state of decline. In the prize winning essay at Eisteddfod Gwent a Dyfed 1834,

mentioned above, she deplored the way in which the young women of Wales were turning to flimsy cotton - which means of course that cotton was being extensively worn.

It is not only from the nature of their materials, but likewise from their make and form that Welsh costumes are admirably adapted for active employments, and it is to the tyranny of fashion that their recent decline is to be attributed There was a time when the garment of home manufacture formed the boast of the wearer ... how are circumstances changed!. How frequently do we now see the hale and robust mother of fifty, and even grandmother of eighty, returning from church or market secure from the storm, under the protection of the warm Woollen gown, and comfortable cloak or whittle of Gwent or Dyfed, with a neat and serviceable beaver hat, and black woollen stockings, pursuing her homeward path unobstructed by the influence of cold or wet, while the delicate and cotton-clad daughter or grand-daughter, with perhaps the symptoms of consumption on her cheek, is shivering in the rain, seeking the precarious shelter of the nearest hedge ... while her flimsy straw bonnet, saturated with water, and dyed like the rainbow by the many coloured streams descending from its numerous and once gaudy ribbons...

Her concluding comments include the phrase 'let them [i.e. people of influence] in their own persons at least set an example that will have a beneficial effect on those who behold it', and indeed she certainly lived up to this herself. For example, a quote from the *NLW Journal* (vol. XIII, p219) article by Maxwell Fraser:

'On Wednesday morning all the ladies of the Llanover party, with the exception of Mrs Waddington, dressed themselves in Welsh costumes, including a round block beaver hat and mob cap and set out in three carriages for Abergavenny Angel Inn, and walked from there to the Free Grammar School' ...

Others of her circle followed suit, even at private parties, such as one described by Lady Greenly in 1837 (*NLWJ*, XIII, p316):

‘Mrs Hanbury Leigh wore a costume the material of which was of Welsh manufacture, but she had had her gown made up by a London artist, and he had embroidered the edge with oak leaves and acorns, to which she had added her jewels ... Many of the younger people were ‘very correctly dressed from Mrs Hall’s “Book of Welsh Costumes”, and looked extremely well’. Augusta Charlotte Hall, then thirteen years of age, ‘looked very nicely in a checked jacket and petticoat of silk in imitation of Welsh colours, with an apron to match’, and Augusta herself was, of course, in Welsh costume, with a superb diamond leek in her black silk hat.’

In order to encourage the wearing of flannel, she and her fellow nationalists produced more attractive and lighter coloured flannels in the woollen mills on their estates - where eisteddfod competitions had failed to elicit ‘real national checks and stripes with their Welsh names’.

[By Gwenynen Gwent A prize of £5]

For the best collection of specimens of Welsh woollens (not less than three inches square each) in the real national checks and stripes, with the welsh names by which they are known, and with any account of them which can be added. No specimens to be included which have not been known for at least half a century, whether of wool alone, or of wool with flax or cotton. The object of this prize is to authenticate the real old checks and stripes of Wales, and to preserve them, with their proper welsh names, distinct from new fancy patterns. Open to all Wales, including Gwent and Morganwg. – No award].

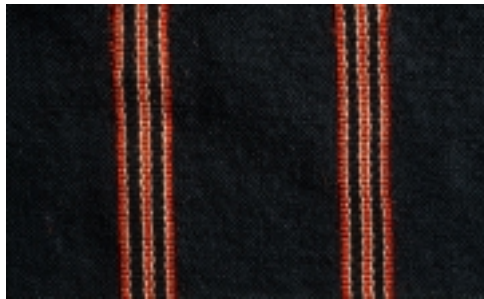
However, not all of the prizes were quite so prescriptive and they had an apparent good effect on the local industries at least.

I quote from the *Cambrian Journal* of 1854 (in a report of the Cymreigyddion eisteddfod):

Rev David James warden of the Welsh Institution of Llandovery:

Before the foundation of this Cymreigyddion y Fenni, it is true we had weavers of woollen, knitters of stockings, but now the Welsh woollens of this neighbourhood, and indeed the whole of Gwent and Morgannwg, in consequence of the encouragement given by the prizes awarded from time to time, are twice as good as they ever have been before, and fit to be worn by those whom we are proud to call the patriots as well as the aristocratic females of our own dear native land; and there is also a larger demand in consequence of the vast improvement in the brilliancy of the colours.

Some evidence of this is provided by surviving textiles. Maria Jane Williams of Aberpergwm House dressed her maids in a red, black and white check fabric, of which only a dress front now survives. A green and white linsey walsey stole was worn by Lady Llanover's staff and a still brighter fabric was part of the weird and wonderful outfit worn by Lady Llanover's harpist, Thomas Gruffydd, and this is the striking fabric of a *pais*, part of a costume donated by his grand-daughter and worn at the 1913 National Eisteddfod at Abergavenny, but probably of an earlier date.



[illustration 5: Striped woollen petticoat, detail. Museum of Welsh Life accession no. 53.48.8]

Although Lady Llanover failed to convert Wales to the wearing of flannel alone, it certainly did continue to be a noticeable characteristic of Welsh rural clothing, and not only for what was to become Welsh national dress. There are numerous surviving examples of flannel clothing, some of which follow the fashions of their period. In addition, photographic and literary evidence and the survival of vast numbers of tall black hats, demonstrate that some also really did wear various versions of a Welsh costume.

Although the original idea of a national dress was promoted by the land-owning and literary and artistic elite of Wales, and this was certainly based on what was being worn in some areas of rural Wales, the widespread acceptance and wearing of a particular form of dress as a conscious expression of Welshness, was undoubtedly also influenced strongly by the tourist industry. Long before the ubiquitous postcard image, artists and publishers were printing mass produced lithographs, headed notepaper and souvenir booklets for the thriving middle class tourist market which boomed with the expansion of the rail network into Wales. Tourism was no longer restricted to wealthy travellers.

The very earliest prints seem to have been based upon real images, gathered together by the artist from a number of different sources, and put together to form a representation of a variety of Welsh dress. One widely reproduced and copied print was taken from a drawing by J. C. Rowland in 1848, the costume is not so exaggerated as to be unbelievable and includes a reasonable variation in styles. Another group from Llanberis from the same period shows that, although the tall hat is beginning to appear, the old form of the man's felt hat still exists. Another rather primitive print by R. Griffiths dated 1851 also shows different styles of bedgown, including the loose gown which did not gain universal popularity and would now not be recognised as part of a Welsh costume. It is probably not a coincidence that this is a rather bulky and unattractive garment.



[illustration 6: A Market Day in Wales, 1851, Museum of Welsh Life accession number 52.26.1]

It is the mass produced prints published by Newmans and Rock & Co. from the mid 1850s onwards which begin to exaggerate the 'quaint' tall hats and blue capes, which finally were overtaken by the totally theatrical postcards, produced in their thousands from the late 19th century and are still here to haunt us even today. All of these have guaranteed that the false image of the Welsh lady preserved in aspic remains with us.

Throughout the 19th century there are written accounts, all purporting to have been written so as to preserve a description of a rapidly disappearing form of dress - from Lady Llanover up to Mary Curtis and Marie Trevelyan at the end of the century. All believed they were describing something quite ancient, but each was describing the rural dress of their time, rather than any static so-called 'national' dress. As has been noted above, Lady Llanover's sketches contain many fashionable elements from the 1830s, and Marie Trevelyan's description of cottage women contains many elements which did not exist prior to the 1870s [*Glimpses of Welsh Life and Character* (1893),p 163]:

Over their shoulders in the winter time they wear small square flannel shawls, called 'turnovers' folded cornerwise, and pinned rather low under the chin. On their heads they wear neat sun-bonnets of printed calico, under which the old women wear prim caps tied with black or coloured fancy ribbons. Welsh flannel dresses are still much worn, though they are being rapidly superseded by woollen or cotton fabrics of English manufacture.

If we look now at surviving garments and photographs of actual women going about their everyday tasks, we can see that although many do conform to a standard style, these tend to be the ones which were worn as 'display' garments rather than everyday dress. Many of the bedgowns in museum collections have been preserved as 'Welsh costume' and worn perhaps for special occasions; one certainly is recorded as having been worn as a wedding dress, and very few examples of working clothing have survived.

The view we get if we use only material survivals is therefore rather lop-sided, and we must use photographic evidence as a balance. The photographs of course must be used carefully themselves, as many were taken by the postcard photographers, who wished to project a certain

image (and many of whom kept a 'dressing up box' for this purpose), but there were others working in Wales, who were more interested in preserving a vanishing way of life, or recording a particular craft or occupation, and these can be extremely useful to the historian.



[illustration 7: Carte de visite of Swansea cocklewomen, taken by T. Gulliver of Union Street, Swansea, *circa* 1860. Museum of Welsh Life accession no. 42.126]

They show the garments which were the true traditional survivals – many noted by Lady Llanover - actually in use. These are the particular garments which almost invariably appear in the photographs taken of Welsh countrywomen in general during the 19th century - the apron, the shoulder shawl, and hat and/or kerchief.

They appear in many different shapes and sizes, from the peasants to the chapel going elderly lady, women working in fields, collecting firewood, fetching water, or just posing picturesquely for the photographer outside their homes. The images range in date from the 1860s up to the mid 20th century. The true survivals of traditional clothing can best be seen in the cockle gathering and fishing industry, where the connection can be clearly seen between the Swansea cockle girls of the 1860s, through the turn of the century, and up to the Carmarthen market women of 1932.



[illustration 8: Nani Jack, Winkin Street, Rhandirmwyn, Carmarthenshire, showing use of headcloth under hat and wearing fashionable bodice with working apron. Museum of Welsh Life photographic archive.]

How much of this survival was due to Lady Llanover and how much to a traditional Welsh conservatism or industrious printmakers and photographers? Does today's image of a Welsh lady owe more to Siân Owen in a borrowed hat and shawl in Salem chapel, or the fact that the painting was used to promote Sunlight soap?

There is probably no single answer, but it is undeniable that Lady Llanover's passions and energy contributed in a significant way to the development of the Welsh national dress from an ideal to an internationally recognised symbol. This is also due in part to the fact that she based her ideas on a form of dress which was actually being worn by Welsh women, rather than trying to invent a completely spurious outfit, even though eventually it did become 'fancy dress' when radical changes in everyday dress left it far behind.