

*Oh Francis,*

*What a wonderfully brave man you are, to open such a can of worms, a debate on the Irish Kilt. At least it will draw some comment which can serve all sorts of useful purposes, not least to reassure you that we, your errant and silent members, are still breathing. After reading your email I fear I must beg your forgiveness that it might have been my nit-picking some years ago that forced the change of name of our society but I have always felt that Kilt Society (or club) of Ireland is more inclusive and appropriate.*

*Firstly, in response to your request for our geographical locations, I now live on Ulster's wild and wonderful north-west coast, Donegal, where the men are as wonderful as the women wild. Up here the geology, emigration/immigration, music and Gaelic dialect connect us more with Scotland and Northern Ireland than with the rest of the Republic.*

*Secondly, I hope I'll also be forgiven for saying that your "young lady of the best girl's schools" who is "not keen to marry a man wearing something like my (her) school uniform" may learn, in time to come, that the wearing of a kilt by her future husband could be a great source of sexual inspiration in their 'behind-closed-doors' activities, not to mention the wearing of her school uniform by her, or indeed, by himself!*

*Thirdly, it should be asked ... who am I to expound on the topic? Sur' wasn't it only in 1991 that a German tourist, seeing a photo of me in a Royal Stewart tartan at a Scottish christening asked, "Why the Hell aren't you wearing an Irish kilt?" My reply of "what's an Irish kilt?" brought forth a stream of knowledge from this lady whose expertise was in researching and making costumes and uniforms for the German film industry. She convinced me, in word and in written text, that the Saffron kilt is the original of the species, pre-dating the earliest Scottish kilt by well over 500 years.*



*A lot of my own research since then has been met with cries of "the Irish didn't have a kilt before the Scottish... only a 'leine' (a long shirt or shift). On a single-handed sailing trip round Ireland in 2002, believe it or believe it not, I met a similarly kilted (but his was tartan), similarly wooden-boated, Scottish single-handed sailor in Barloge Harbour, Co. Cork, to where we had both ventured round different sides of the former*

*'British Isles' to explore Lough Hine. He remarked on my un-marked kilt as being something of an oddity. He completely 'scotched' any suggestion that the kilt originated in Ireland and promised to send me some proof. What arrived was a history of the Scottish tartan. His only sop was that "the Saffron kilt, though little used in Scotland, had been referred to in ancient times as the 'Gentleman's kilt", to which I immediately retorted ... "But isn't that proof enough that the kilt originated in Ireland". Sadly, I've had no reply to this and no further correspondence of any kind.*

*I venture to suggest that the Penal Laws did a damned poor job of wiping out our language and freedom of religious expression. They did a reasonable job of suppressing some aspects of the dance (the Irish, unlike the Scots, were not allowed to raise their hands. That would be too defiant altogether). However, they were completely successful in suppressing the wearing of the kilt altogether. In contrast, all ranks (Officers NCOs and Privates) in the Scottish regiments of the British Army were, and still are, allowed wear the kilt, but only the pipers in the Irish regiments of the British army were/are given such tolerance. Small wonder that the Saffron kilt is better known in Northern Ireland than it is in this Republic. Have we forgotten that PH Pearse said that the Saffron kilt is the only proper form of traditional dress for an Irish man? Have we forgotten that it was a favourite code of dress worn by our first President, Douglas Hyde; a Gaelic-speaking protestant.*

*I fear that we could be doing hand-stands forever in debating what a kilt is, or what a shirt, shift or even what a skirt is, not to mind whether it originated in Ireland or Scotland. After all, the present day kilt (filleagh beag) looks more like what we have come to know as a skirt, whereas the older, 'whole nine yards', variety called the filleagh mor could so easily be confused with the 'leine' that some historians like to tell us the Irish wore a thousand years ago. Similarly, lest we Saffron-wearers become purest about it, we should never forget that if the Scots hadn't persisted, as they do to the present day, in preserving and enhancing the tradition, and Queen Victoria didn't encourage Albert to be-sport himself in a kilt, we might have little to girth our loins with right now but a rather restrictive pair of English trews.*



*Some of the more convincing arguments for kilt-wearing which I prefer are that, in general, any man with the balls to wear a kilt will pull the birds ... 'like flies to a cow-shite' (as the old Irish adage tells us). Put another way, as one elderly lady once told me, "it is a very manly garment for any man to wear". Also, it has the tendency, because of some of the aforementioned history, to unite those of us from both the Orange and the Green traditions and it is for this reason that I particularly like to wear the saffron kilt and 'brat' (folded cloak), with a green jacket and green beret, and a little peace-inducing white thrown in, in the form of socks and shirt. In fact, the lady who made my first Saffron kilt, in Belfast, proudly displays the huge array of kilts she used to make for the 12 of July parades, and among them, a photo of some Saffron kilts she made for what she called the Shin Fein Scouts (presumably she meant Fianna Eireann).*



*I was once asked on a live television show why I wear the kilt. Without thinking about it, the reply that came out of the depths of my being was, "besides that wearing the kilt helps me overcome my personal insecurity on social occasions, I feel that since I don't sing, dance, play music or speak Gaelic very well, here's one neglected Irish tradition that I hope to help revive.*

*There is no doubt that I personally have a special fondness for the Saffron kilt, but above all, I would not wish to be found guilty of having said anything that might dissuade any man from wearing any kilt whatsoever. Please, please, wear the kilt, no matter what colour, no matter whether tartan or plain, and only if you find validity in my case for the Saffron kilt that PH Pearse himself recommended, "Then, and only then" will my preference have been vindicated by popular acclaim.*

*Surely the most convincing arguments for wearing the kilt is the amount of 'craic' that results from its introduction to any occasion whether dress, semi-formal, smart casual or informal. I have worn it sailing round Ireland and even across the Atlantic to Trinidad; on motorbike trips around Europe and currently in the Canary Islands; as well as flying round New Zealand and Australia some years ago. Wherever I have been, at home or abroad, it has given me more 'carte blanche' to meeting interesting people than any visa or any other form of introduction ever could. This Bridget's Eve I will wear it as I introduce some Canary islanders to the tradition of making Bridget's Crosses. Who knows but that it will start a new fad here as they might think that the two go hand-in-hand as part of the same tradition?*

*If any of what I have written above is deemed to be technically or historically incorrect I will offer no defence. My plea in mitigation is that if "joy be the indelible mark of the presence of God" then surely She will not judge me too harshly at my final hour, for wearing a skirt and no knickers in my advocacy of a long-lost Irish tradition.*

*Brendan M. Rohan. Comdt (retd).*

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