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‘What, No Costumes?’
An Article from the
Dublin Evening Mail
National Library of Ireland
Ms. 49,806/82

Press cutting from *Dublin Evening Mail*, 11 July 1953
National Library of Ireland, Ms. 49,806/82

In July of 1953 an English woman named Violet Alford acted as a judge of folk dancing for the International Eisteddfod competition in Llangollen, Wales. That year, the newly coronated Queen Elizabeth II visited the festival and to mark this singers and dancers of 32 nationalities attended. At the Eisteddfod, Alford reportedly made several remarks about the lack of traditional dress worn by some competitors. An article published in the *Dublin Evening Mail* on 11 July 1953, addressed Alford's comments on the Irish costumes present, and further questioned the existence of a 'traditional' Irish step dancing dress.

Violet Alford allegedly described the step dancer's dresses as 'funny', insulting, at the very least, the journalists at the *Evening Mail*. The author of this article stated that he or she 'disagreed violently with Miss Alford's view that they are funny.' They also added that these 'funny' costumes displayed 'embroidered hems based on designs from ancient manuscripts in Dublin,' suggesting Alford was insulting Irish heritage. Alford also expressed that she did not believe a traditional Irish dance costume truly existed. The author of the article was disturbed by this idea and called for scholars to research and discover what the true traditional dress was. If there was no agreed upon traditional costume, then a 'new school of dress designers' must be tasked with creating an official Irish dance costume.

This article called for the recognition of a national costume for festive occasions. It is an example of the continued prominence of 'traditional' Irish culture throughout Ireland's twentieth century. After 1922, a newly independent Ireland sought to create its own unique cultural identity. Traditions can serve to unite a group of people as one and, for Ireland, that meant creating an Irish identity separate from the English culture. The complicated issues that arise when discussing heritage and tradition were also a central theme in Violet Alford's own work. Alford authored a piece for the *Folklore* journal titled 'Folklore Gone Wrong' where she discussed the troubling habit of accepting tradition and heritage at face value without looking deeper into the history of these traditions. It is through this piece that we can gain further insight into Alford's earlier comments about Irish step dance costumes. In her article, Alford writes that,

costume is a highly specialized branch of folklore but the leaders of modern groups appear to know all about it without difficulty. Costume is not National ... but regional. Often it is local, so local that it varies from valley to valley, from village to village.

Historically, traditions tend to be localized to a specific area of a country but often are adapted by entire nations in order to secure a shared heritage and unite a people under a singular history. It is through this lens Alford views the 'traditional' Irish step dancing costumes, pondering whether or not the costumes she witnessed are truly traditional to all of Ireland. Even the author of this *Evening Mail* article is unsure about the true heritage of the costumes, demanding the recognition of a widely accepted traditional dress.

The question of the traditional dress of Irish dance may never be completely answered. Helena Wulff, in her book *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and mobility in Ireland*, encapsulates this notion by saying, 'In Ireland, the idea of tradition is both cherished and contested, loaded with claims of authenticity and authority.' Even today there is no clear cut, final authority on the matter of dress. Regardless of this, Irish step dancers still dance, still perpetuate Irish heritage and tradition, no matter how, or when, such tradition may have been created.

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Further Reading

Violet Alford. 'Folklore Gone Wrong', *Folklore*, 72, no. 4 (1961), pp 599-611.

Ronan Fanning. *Eamon De Valera: A Will to Power* (London, 2016).

Eric Hobsbawm, and Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (New York, 1983).

Helena Wulff, *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland*. (Oxford, 2007).

‘What? No Costumes?’, Dublin Evening Mail, 11 July 1953
 IX.viii: Documentation relating to traditional dress in Ireland, 1953-1967. Ms.
 49,806/82, Muriel Gahan Papers, National Library of Ireland.

Image courtesy of the Irish Times.

