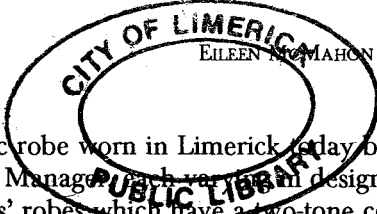


Robes of Office

EILEEN McMAHON

IN RECENT years the wearing of civic robes by city representatives has become another of Limerick's fading traditions. In 1997 only nine of the seventeen councillors in office wear the robes even though the wearing of robes has been a traditional and distinguishing feature of civic office for hundreds of years.



There are four individual styles of civic robe worn in Limerick today by the Mayor, Aldermen, Councillors and City Manager, each with its own design and significance. There are twelve Councillors' robes which have a two-tone colour of red and wine. The robes are made of five metres of 26oz faced finished wool, which may seem excessive, but is necessary for the even fall and presentation of the robe. Apart from its colour and design the Councillors' robe has no other distinguishing feature. There are four Aldermens' robes which have a 3cm strip of gold braid placed on the rim of the sleeves, distinguishing them from the basic council robe.

The mayor's robe has many individual characteristics which are necessary to portray the higher status of the position in City Hall. The robe has the same braid as the Alderman's but it is extended down the front and around the yoke; (the yoke being the fitted part of the garment around the neck and shoulders). This area is then elaborated upon with the addition of gold tassels. The robe also has a braided cord at the front to pull it together. To facilitate the weight of the mayoral chain additions were made in the form of epaulettes added to the shoulders of the robe and a clip was attached to the back of the yoke to prevent the chain falling from the robe.

In recent years the City Manager has been given the privilege of wearing a robe. It has the same style as those of Councillors but is of a different colour, being predominantly dark blue with a lighter blue on the yoke and the sleeve.

Until 1972-73 the robes of the mayor and aldermen were lined with fur. During that mayoral year the robes were refurbished and it was decided that the fur be removed as the condition was poor. Because of the huge expense involved it was decided not to replace the fur and gold braid was substituted.

The present robes of office were made by Limerick tailors, Shekelton & Lawlor. Many have been replaced in recent years by Arthur Ellis of Lower Mallow Street, who is responsible for the replacement of older robes and the maintenance of all Civic Dress.

Broken Traditions

With just nine members of the present seventeen seat City Council agreeing to wear the Civic robes of office the question now arises whether this tradition will be another which will fade into the background of Limerick's civic history. We have already lost to a large extent the presence of the Mace which has only been carried for Civic ceremonies twice in the past two decades, in 1979 for the Pope's visit and in 1995 when the Freedom of the City was conferred on Dr. Edward Walsh, Ted Russell and Dr. Brendan O'Regan.

The Civic Sword has rarely been noticed at civic functions since the foundation of the State, its last important 'sighting' being the occasion in 1956 when the then Mayor, Ted Russell, claimed his position as Admiral of the Shannon. This ceremony has been repeated since, but not with the same pomp and ceremony of 1956.

Why is the tradition of wearing robes fast disappearing? It is not only

Councillors who refuse to wear the robes, but some mayors, such as Jim Kemmy, no longer wear the mayoral robes on civic occasions. The reason given by those who do not wear the robe is that tradition has no place in modern society, and opponents of the robes have even stated that the councillors who wear the full attire do so simply to be noticed and to acquire a sense of status.

Councillors who believe that the robes should be worn include John Quin and the present Mayor, Kieran O'Hanlon (1996-97), who agree that there is a status attached to a person who wears the civic robes. The office of mayor has the status of first citizen of the city of Limerick, second only to the President of Ireland when she visits the city. 'By wearing the robes and chain of office Councillors show a respect for their elected position as representatives of Limerick city', says Councillor Gus O'Driscoll.

Those councillors who do not robe argue that they are not showing disrespect for the position, but are simply moving with a changing world. 'Traditions change and so do dress codes, the robes have no practical significance for the practical work of a councillor', was Senator Jan O'Sullivan's response to the argument. Labour Party colleague Jim Kemmy argues that the tradition of wearing robes is an imitation of royalty and he believes that they are not necessary and create a barrier between the councillor and those whom they are supposed to represent.

Councillor John Quin, of the pro-lobby, referred to the section in the Standing Orders which states:

Formal Civic Occasion:- Mayor and member of City Council.

The Mayor attends formal functions of civic importance in Robe and Chain of Office, accompanied by the City Manager in robes.

Ex-Mayor Tony Bromell agrees with Councillor Quin's stance on the subject - 'if a person is elected to represent the people and the city of Limerick they should follow the traditional protocol set by the City Council'.

It remains to be seen whether the wearing of robes will become another broken tradition. It is possible that in future years, if those who do not robe gain a majority seating in the City Council, the Standing Orders will be changed and the wearing of robes abolished.

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