**Cable Crossings: The Aran Jumper as Myth and Merchandise**

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*This article considers the Aran jumper as a cultural artefact from an anthropological perspective.* *As an internationally recognised symbol of Irishness that comes with its own myth of origin, the Aran jumper carries emotionally charged ideas about kinship and nativeness. Whether read as an ID document, family tree, representation of the landscape, or reference to Christian or pre-Christian spirituality, the Aran jumper’s stitch patterns seem to invite interpretation. Emerging at a particular period in the relationship between Ireland and America, this garment and the story that accompanies it have been shaped by migration and tourism, but may be understood very differently from either side of the Atlantic. The resilience of the myth of a fisherman lost at sea, whose corpse is identifiable only by designs his relatives have stitched into his clothing, is explained in light of its resonance with diasporic narratives and transnational longings.*

keywords: *knitting, nationalism, tourism, migration, Ireland, America, marketing*

introduction

A particular style of pullover has become known as the ‘Aran jumper’, ‘Aran sweater’, or sometimes, ‘fisherman’s sweater’. Densely textured with cabled stitch patterns, giving a visual effect that is simultaneously ornate and rustic, it is both a recurrent fashion trend and an internationally recognised symbol of Irishness. Made and sold around the world, the garment is accompanied on its global journeys by a story about its origins. The basic narrative goes like this: A fisherman goes out onto the dangerous Atlantic Ocean, wearing a jumper knitted by his female relations. Trying to earn a living, he is lost at sea. His battered body, once washed ashore, is unrecognisable. His jumper, however, identifies the corpse as belonging to one particular family, who can then claim and bury his body.

References to this tale appear in a wide variety of contexts, such as tourist information, knitting instructions, museum exhibitions, fiction and poetry.[[1]](#endnote-1) It may be only briefly alluded to, or garnished with extra details, such as the jumper being a gift from a woman to her fiancé or additional stitch patterns being incorporated with each generation.[[2]](#endnote-2) The story often comes with a hint or an outright statement that it is not true.[[3]](#endnote-3) Regardless of its relationship to historical fact, however, it seems that the story still needs to be told.

The history of the Aran jumper is hardly a secret. The emergence of Aran knitwear as merchandise, and its place in Irish life, has been outlined in academic work on social and economic history, in many knitting publications, and in online forums aimed at those with an interest in Ireland.[[4]](#endnote-4) A tone of frustration is common in such accounts. Addressing an audience of hand-knitters, Alice Starmore explains, in the preface to the new edition of her 2010 book, *Aran Knitting,* that ‘15 years ago I wrote this book with the intention of demolishing some of the myths surrounding Aran knitwear’.[[5]](#endnote-5) This particular myth has not been successfully demolished by any such accumulation of facts; indeed, it continues to be elaborated as it travels through transnational networks of migration, tourism, and commerce. I hope to explain the persistence of the Aran jumper myth, to demonstrate the powerful emotional resonance of such marketing strategies, and to make a case for the Aran jumper as a truly meaningful garment, in spite of the so-called ‘codology’ surrounding it.[[6]](#endnote-6)

where did the story come from?

The exact origins of the story are obscure, but we can identify some moments and individuals involved in its development. James Millington Synge’s play *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is often cited as a possible seed of the story; set in the Aran Islands, it features a scene in which a drowned man’s body is identified by his sister from a small mistake - a dropped stitch - in one of the socks that she remembers knitting for him.[[7]](#endnote-7) Robert Flaherty’s early ethnographic film *Man of Aran* (1934) depicts romantically impoverished islanders engaged in a primal struggle with their environment, wrestling a living from their ‘Master’, the sea.[[8]](#endnote-8) While the jumpers worn on screen are not quite the style that later became known as Aran, Flaherty’s female character is shown knitting, and the harsh but romantic depiction of island life broadcast around the world in his film has obvious resonances with the story of the doomed fisherman.

In 1930, Muriel Gahan opened a shop in Dublin, called ‘The Country Shop’, as an outlet for the products of the cottage industries, such as weaving, that rural families (particularly women) used to support themselves.[[9]](#endnote-9) Gahan played an important role in a whole range of organisations that concerned themselves with craft industries in Ireland, from the Congested Districts Boards to the Crafts Council of Ireland and the Irish Countrywomen’s Association which she founded.[[10]](#endnote-10)By making knitwear from the Aran Islands available for sale in the capital city, and by making a selling point of its origins and its increasing distinctiveness, she contributed to the emergence of the Aran jumper as a product. It seems that commercial production began in the late 1930s, with several Irish companies supplying knitters with materials and selling the finished products.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The idea that there was such a thing as the ‘Aran jumper’ and that it was significant not just for the islands but for Irish identity, gained currency during a time when the nascent Irish state was engaged in an urgent process of nation-building. In 1922, twenty-six counties of Ireland had become the Irish Free State within the British Commonwealth, while six counties in the north of the Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom; in 1937, the Irish Free State became the Republic of Ireland, as it is today. The ‘Aran jumper’ as a recognisable product crystallised during the 1930s, when most of Ireland was newly independent from the United Kingdom and still recovering after the civil war that followed partition in 1921. As might be expected, there was great preoccupation with creating and agreeing on national symbols and institutions, such as an anthem, coinage and the other trappings of state, as well as with mythologizing the ancient and recent past alike.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Romantic nationalism was fashionable across northern Europe at this time, and Irish eagerness to link Ireland’s pre-conquest past with its untested present chimed with international enthusiasm for this kind of historical imagining. For example, a German textile enthusiast, Heinz Kiewe (1906-1986), suggested a direct connection between the patterns on Aran jumpers and the so-called Celtic swirl designs of medieval and even pre-Christian Ireland, a theory he began promoting in 1938 and elaborated in a later book called *The Sacred History* *of Knitting*.[[13]](#endnote-13) This theory became very influential, in spite of its spurious nature. In her 1982 book, which has a foreword by Kiewe, Shelagh Hollingworth states that ‘the origin of the famous patterns of the Aran Islands is lost in antiquity’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Kiewe’s foreword encapsulates his eccentric claims about the Aran Islanders’ clothing ‘which was their passport and their identity document, expressing their background through its coils and curves more vividly than cold words could manage’. He writes: ‘I know now that the patterns are thousands of years old, though it took Trinity College in Dublin a decade to confirm my discovery that Daniel in the Book of Kells wore Aran-patterned knitted stockings, breeches and sweater.’[[15]](#endnote-15)

The exact genesis of some of these stitch patterns might be lost, but not in the sort of antiquity Kiewe pictured. Joanne Turney observes that, due to its association with a Romantic conception of ‘the rural and the untainted vernacular practices of “simple” people, existing in more simple times, knitting often is situated within stasis’.[[16]](#endnote-16) The widespread tendency to represent knitting as ahistorical, obscuring the material circumstances of its development and downplaying change, lends itself to both the romantic nationalist and the clever salesperson.

By 1962, the story of the fisherman had solidified. In his book *Aran: Islands of Legend* (1927)*,* Pádraig O’ Síocháin reports that ‘the Aran gansey has always been an unfailing source of identification of Islandmen lost at sea’.[[17]](#endnote-17) It is important to note that O’Síocháin was the founder of the Galway Bay Company which sold Aran knitwear along with other products.[[18]](#endnote-18) His book combines ancient Irish mythology, speculative history, local knowledge and political insistence on the supposed purity of the island race, and the 1962 edition demonstrates the interweaving of tourism, manufacturing industries and migration with a deeply mythologised landscape.[[19]](#endnote-19) A photograph captioned ‘Máirín Uí Dhomhnall of Inis Mean holds a magnificent example of the Aran Folk Art Knitting’ is credited to Bórd Fáilte, the Irish tourism board, and the passage presenting the jumper as a form of identification, with patterns passed for ‘untold generations from mother to daughter’, includes a note of contact details for the Galway Bay Company where these authentic products could be purchased.[[20]](#endnote-20) By placing it at the end of this extremely wide-ranging book, O’Síocháin presents Aran knitting as the culmination of thousands of years of unique and mysterious culture, and as an example of human adaptation to a place which was once dangerously inhospitable to its inhabitants, yet where the modern visitor can ‘relax with peace and beauty’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

cable crossings: migration and tourism

The landscape that forms the backdrop of the Aran jumper story, and the context of the jumper’s development as a product, has a special place in Ireland’s cultural geography. As Nuala Johnson remarks, ‘the west of Ireland […] has frequently been treated as an homogenous spatial unit where indices of tradition and modernity can be measured’.[[22]](#endnote-22) Moya Kneafsey characterises the symbolic status of this area as a ‘heartland of Irishness’, the ‘myth of the west’.[[23]](#endnote-23) (America, of course, has its own myth of the West.) Eileen Kane begins her anthropological study of rural western Ireland with a quote from a local man: ‘This is the last place God made, the next parish to America.’[[24]](#endnote-24) The dramatic cliffs of the Aran Islands heighten this sense of being on the world’s edge. The physical peripherality of the place contrasts with its centrality to Irish national identity. The Celtic Revival, the Gaelic League and the strain of romantic nationalism in twentieth-century Irish politics all invoked a ‘pre-colonial golden age located in the rural west’.[[25]](#endnote-25) The very remoteness of the westernmost part of the country from the Dublin metropolis came to be seen as archetypically Irish.[[26]](#endnote-26) Parts of Ireland’s western coast have been singled out in government policy, whether as the Congested Districts, the *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking region), or as designated areas, since the nineteenth century.[[27]](#endnote-27) Concern has consistently centred on how to create sustainable industries in order to raise living standards, stem emigration, and maintain ways of life seen as both unique within Ireland and, somehow, fundamental to it.

Attempts have been made to set up numerous industries as supplements to, or replacements for, unprofitable farming and fishing. Private businesses such as O’Síocháin’s Galway Bay Company were accompanied by government-funded organisations like Arramara Teo, a seaweed-processing scheme, and Gaeltarra Eireann, concerned with ‘the production of tweed, toys and other craft goods’, including Aran knitwear.[[28]](#endnote-28) The production and marketing of Aran knitwear in the mid-twentieth century was relatively successful, as far as such enterprises went. The story of the Aran fisherman romanticizes past hardship, but it is driven by very real economic needs.

Emigration has been a major concern for successive generations and governments in Ireland for more than rational economic reasons. The horror of the mass migration that followed the famine of the 1840s contributed to longstanding anxiety about forced emigration, while the remote areas most affected by emigration are the very parts of Ireland which have been cast as most important to national identity, so their depopulation is seen as a problem for the whole country, in cultural and symbolic as well as economic terms. In spite of political and business efforts, the population of western rural areas and islands continued to fall throughout the twentieth century, as the young, ambitious or desperate left for more economically vibrant parts of Ireland, Britain, Australia, Canada, or the USA. O’Síocháin, an Irish language activist as well as a businessman, whom we have already encountered above, created his Galway Bay Company, which sold and exported Aran jumpers, ‘for the purpose of securing the economic betterment of these Gaelic speakers, who constitute one of the great sources of the living Gaelic tongue’, aiming to prevent ‘the constant mass emigration, particularly of young people, who drift without return’.[[29]](#endnote-29) (Figure 2) The global economic crisis of 2008, the end of Ireland’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ economic boom, and the austerity measures undertaken in response, have recently contributed to another wave of Irish emigration. Photographs of long queues of Irish people waiting to enter the ‘Work Abroad Expo’ in Dublin in March 2012 provoked strong public debate.[[30]](#endnote-30) Even though the experiences of today’s Irish emigrants and their families are so vastly far removed from those of their nineteenth century ancestors, today’s emigration is still described in terms of ‘Famine Levels’.[[31]](#endnote-31)

As Padraig O’Síocháin’s appeals to the potential visitor make clear, one response to hardship and the resulting emigration from the west of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century was inviting tourists to travel in the opposite direction.[[32]](#endnote-32) A Romantic ideal of the place and its people as ancient, natural and untouched has always been central to the area’s depiction as a tourism product and, even in recent years, the tourist marketing of the west of Ireland presents it as ‘an authentic, primitive escape from modernity for the cultural traveller’.[[33]](#endnote-33) One of Ireland’s major, if intangible, resources is its perceived authenticity. Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland see Ireland as a case where ‘the in/authenticity of the colonised is overturned’ and transformed into ‘a marketable sign of value’.[[34]](#endnote-34)

craft, authenticity and kinship

The Aran jumper and its accompanying story not only evolved in the context of twentieth- century Ireland’s politics. It also evolved within the context of a whole class of comparable objects: items whose monetary value comes from the perceived authenticity of native craft. Whether identified as ‘vernacular craft’ or ‘folk art’, such objects embody ‘the functional, historic and symbolic relevance of a community or region’s preoccupations, social relations and environmental interaction’.[[35]](#endnote-35) This class of objects is caught between ‘a Romantic affirmation of “place”’ and the fluctuating, mobile imperatives of tourism and global trade.[[36]](#endnote-36) In a world which is experienced as increasingly undifferentiated by place and destabilised by the virtual, qualities such as locality and continuity are valorised as signifiers of authenticity. Authenticity is often understood as antithetical to commercial concerns. Celia Lury defines it as the ‘desire for cultures that are relatively untouched by the processes of commodification’.[[37]](#endnote-37) Moreover, crafts have come to be seen as ‘the antithesis of the archetypical capitalist individual: the entrepreneur’, and vernacular crafts in particular are prized as communal forms of cultural engagement rather than individual creative endeavour.[[38]](#endnote-38) This makes marketing this type of product a delicate business, not least for craftspeople who, in order to survive as both artisans and entrepreneurs, must appear to occupy only one of those roles.

The most obvious parallel to the Aran jumper in this respect is Scottish tartan.[[39]](#endnote-39) The rise of tartan as a symbol of Scottishness is famously analysed by Hugh Trevor-Roper as an example of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger call ‘the invention of tradition’.[[40]](#endnote-40) The Scottish tartan industry continues to successfully market the idea that tartan weave patterns correspond to different ancient Scottish clans, and that these can be connected to particular surnames. This enables tartan products to be targeted at people with these names across the globe, not least, families in America with an interest in their Scottish ancestry. New segments of the international market are still being targeted; 2008 saw the announcement of ‘the Jewish tartan’ and there are registered patterns for ‘Sikhs, Chinese, the state of Indiana and the Fire Department of New York’s bagpipe band.’[[41]](#endnote-41) Given the success of the tartan industry, it is no surprise that Aran knitwear companies pursue similar strategies.

A striking example of this is the ‘Clan Aran’ range from GlenAran Ltd, a company which also sells knitwear under the Aran Sweater Market brand at various locations around Ireland, including on the largest of the Aran Islands.[[42]](#endnote-42) Against a photograph of a ruined castle in an uncharacteristically sunlit landscape, the site shows different Aran jumpers, each accompanied by a heraldic crest. The text reads: ‘The history of our forefathers is woven into our being: over 500 Irish clan patterns registered’, and a button invites the reader to ‘FIND YOUR CLAN’.[[43]](#endnote-43) Clicking on this leads to an alphabetical list of surnames, including variations, each corresponding to a crest and an Aran jumper. Clicking on a name produces a short account of the name’s origins and promises that the garment is ‘hand crafted in the Irish style’ and that it ‘comes to you complete with a clan history and crest’. As well as the ‘Woolmark’ and ‘Made in Ireland’ symbols that verify the jumpers’ make-up and provenance, some product descriptions also include a Facebook link, enabling consumers to ‘like’ pages such as the ‘O’Donovan Irish Clan’. (Figure 1)

**Irish America/American Ireland**

As discussed above, emigration forms an important and sometimes painful part of Ireland’s history and national narrative. The other side of this story is that of the Irish diaspora: particularly, for our purposes, more than 34.7 million people who identify as Irish American.[[44]](#endnote-44) As the gulf between Irish Americans and their migrant ancestors grew ever greater, Ireland was viewed with nostalgia from across the Atlantic, and such ‘sentimental perceptions’ achieved ‘popular appeal’ through ‘the appropriation and commodification of these sentiments by the early twentieth century music-halls’.[[45]](#endnote-45) The mid-20th century rise of the Aran jumper coincided with the rise of Irish America in terms of social status, economic resources and political power.[[46]](#endnote-46) The range of objects, music, dance, food, drink, and customs associated with Irishness by Americans became more rigidly defined and commercialised. The Aran jumper (along with such phenomena as Guinness, Irish dancers in pleated skirts, and meals of bacon and cabbage) gradually became reified as a uniquely and desirably Irish product, with appeal far beyond emigrant audiences.

During the 1960s, the Aran jumper was used as branding by a popular folk group, the Clancy Brothers, who wore Aran jumpers on all but one of their many album covers. (Although they wear tuxedos on the remaining cover, each carries an Aran jumper under his arm.) With hits like ‘Wrap the Green Flag ’Round Me Boys’, the Clancy Brothers projected a wholesome, nostalgic vision of Irish nationalism, which was palatable for Irish-American audiences, and allowed broader society to view Ireland through what Marion Markwick calls ‘emerald-tinted spectacles’.[[47]](#endnote-47) The Clancy Brothers’ influence was felt back in the Irish knitting industry:

‘We all knitted fair isles for Gaeltarra Éireann for a few years until the Aran sweaters became fashionable. I think they became popular with the Clancys. You remember the Clancys? They went to America wearin’ the Aran sweaters…’

(Mary McNelis, Donegal knitter and entrepreneur.)[[48]](#endnote-48)

(Figure 2)

Aran jumpers remain desirable to American consumers, especially if they can be acquired from Ireland. Madeleine Leonard writes about women’s paid and unpaid labour in a Belfast housing estate in the early years of the Northern Irish peace process.[[49]](#endnote-49) A side-effect of children’s cross-community trips to the USA, she reports, was that they generated Aran knitting orders from the American hosts, for the children’s mothers in Belfast.[[50]](#endnote-50)

**Crossed cables: Irish hospitality and the darker side of myth-making**

The desires of the diaspora and the international profile of ‘Brand Ireland’ are a serious resource for a small country in need of visitors and investment. For example, one of the Irish government’s responses to the current economic crisis is a direct appeal to Irish emigrants and their descendants around the world. Playing on ideas of family warmth and hospitality that have become associated with Irishness, the government launched a campaign to invite the diaspora to return, for a celebratory (and profitable) year-long event called ‘The Gathering’ in 2013.[[51]](#endnote-51) Postcards were distributed to 1.8 million households, for residents to send as invitations to family overseas, and Irish people were encouraged to organize reunions based on localities or family names.[[52]](#endnote-52) The emphasis on Irish biological kinship in The Gathering extends to a team from the National Geographic’s Genographic project being invited to ‘take a DNA sampling and create a genetic sampling of the country’.[[53]](#endnote-53) ‘The Gathering’ attracted some controversy, with the campaign’s critics condemning it as a ‘scam’, and ‘the return of the begging bowl’.[[54]](#endnote-54) (The Gathering has also proven ripe for subversion. For example, a much-photographed placard at a November 2012 rally demanding abortion legislation in the wake of Savita Halappanavar’s death addressed the Taoiseach (prime minister) Enda Kenny with ‘How’s this for a gathering, Enda?’.) The possibility of approaching the diaspora as allies and as deep-pocketed tourists is an advantage in such unstable times, but relationships based on the commercialization of national identity are often tinged with ambivalence.

American enthusiasm for the Aran jumper finds mixed reactions in contemporary Ireland. The garment has become almost as recognizable a visual symbol as a pint of Guinness. Racks of Aran jumpers (not to mention miniature versions on key-rings, teddy bears and novelty gifts) are a staple of Irish souvenir shops. (Figure 3). Around the Aran Islands themselves, the tourist trail is festooned with cabled knitwear. On Inis Mór, ferry passengers disembark beside the Aran Sweater Market shop. Visitors to the spectacular Iron Age fort, Dún Aengus, begin their walk at a complex of small shops, built in a traditional farmhouse style, staffed by women knitting by hand, and selling the fruits of their labour alongside factory-produced items. While the focus is on knitted garments, the current resurgence in hand-knitting as a leisure pastime has increased interest in the raw materials, and hanks of yarn are available for sale under the label ‘*An Túirne*’ (Irish for ‘The Spinning Wheel').

However, American inquiries about Aran knitting are not always met with a cheerful welcome. The surge in hand knitting in the twenty-first century has been shaped and fuelled by the internet.[[55]](#endnote-55) Much of the English-speaking online knitting world has been brought into close proximity through *Ravelry*, the social networking site for knitters.[[56]](#endnote-56) In this context, where people with a passionate interest in knitting and different cultural backgrounds have a common forum in which to share information and opinions, the Aran jumper has sometimes been a focus of heated discussion within a group intended for Irish knitters.[[57]](#endnote-57) One member begins a discussion thread with ‘I know we’re all aware of the aran sweater myths, and are a little frustrated by the number of questions we can get here about them. It’s a bit like the song that doesn’t end - the myth that doesn’t die’.[[58]](#endnote-58) Aiming to create a resource that curious visitors could be directed to, to forestall repetitive arguments, another group member created a list of ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, which include: ‘Why have Irish knitters abandoned the Aran tradition?’; ‘Why do Irish-Americans respect the Aran Traditions more than people who live in Ireland?’; and ‘Why are Irish knitters so angry about Aran knitting?’.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Online communication has made it more difficult than ever to distinguish images consumed ‘within’ a country from those consumed ‘outside’.[[60]](#endnote-60) It has also undermined the public/backstage dichotomy that previously structured the tourism industry.[[61]](#endnote-61) Just as marketing increasingly pervades areas of life previously considered private, it is now possible for so-called ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ to engage with each other in more immediate and intimate ways, beyond the physical and temporal constraints of touristic encounters.[[62]](#endnote-62) Similarly, the objects and images used to ‘brand’ nationalities may be viewed and discussed from a wide range of conflicting perspectives simultaneously. Thus, when Irish hand knitting enthusiasts enter online spaces in which they may think of themselves as contemporary craftspeople, artists, hobbyists, consumers, or experts, but find themselves thrust into the role of virtual ‘host’, tensions can emerge. While the ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ document, and the Irish Knitters’ various message forum discussions on Aran jumpers, can be seen as more attempts to make the Aran ‘myth’ disappear by juxtaposing it with facts, they contain not only historical information, but emotional debate around authenticity, global economic relations, who has the right to determine what is ‘really Irish’, and who is responsible for maintaining whatever that might be. For example:

‘Many Irish knitters are uncomfortable with regular castigation about not respecting the Aran Knitting Tradition and about allowing it to die out, while the commentators have no idea what their history or experience around Aran Knitting is…For a long time Ireland was very dependent on Irish Americans for money…some illusions were in many ways more important than the truth’[[63]](#endnote-63)

Although the myth of the lost Aran fisherman is a story of desperate poverty, it is set in a distant, static past and its tragic end is softened by a redemptive dénouement. The bald truths of economic need and historical inequality are jarring intrusions into the myth’s nostalgic celebration of shared identity between today’s Irish-Americans and Irish people.

A disturbing element of twentieth century Aran jumper production came to light in 2013, due to inquiries into the Irish government’s role in the Magdalene laundries and the rights of survivors.[[64]](#endnote-64) Some women who spent time in the laundries report that their unpaid labour included Aran knitting.[[65]](#endnote-65) While exact information about the work done may never be available, oral histories are being collected, and will soon be accessible through the Irish Qualitative Data Archive.[[66]](#endnote-66) If any of the women who were separated from their families, and in many cases their own children, with the involvement of the Irish state, knitted garments which were then sold using a vision of Irishness that glorifies kinship ties and knowing where your family comes from, the ‘illusion’ of the Aran jumper myth appears particularly cruel.

**The Aran Jumper as a cultural symbol within Ireland**

Given the misunderstandings and fabrications surrounding the Aran jumper, it is understandable that many Irish people are quick to deny that it has any relevance for them. However, regardless of fanciful ideas about the Aran jumper’s origins and the meanings behind its stitch patterns, it *is* symbolic for, as well as of, Irish people. It is used to convey a range of complex messages between ‘insiders’, as well as to sell Ireland to the world. To illustrate the diversity of contexts in which the Aran jumper is used as a symbol, I will outline examples from entertainment, politics and contemporary art.

In the 1990s comedy *Father Ted*, the title character gives a presentation on the many cultures of Craggy Island, in order to convince his neighbours that, contrary to what they may have heard, he is not racist. During his slideshow a picture of a Maori man appears, and Ted says ‘Dunno how that got in there - of course there are no Maoris on Craggy Island.’ When the camera predictably cuts to an angry man in the audience, with an approximation of Maori tattoos on his face, he is wearing an Aran jumper, which signals that he is one of us: this Maori is from the island.

The use of the Aran jumper to signal belonging and authenticity is not restricted to such light-hearted contexts. Perceived shifts in Irish republican strategy and ideology since the peace process in Northern Ireland have repeatedly been represented in the media in terms of two contrasting garments: the Aran jumper and the Armani suit. Prominent republicans were said to wear Aran jumpers in the early years of the Troubles, the late 1960s and 1970s (journalist Ed Curran recalls first meeting Martin McGuinness, now Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, in 1972: ‘a young, curly-haired man, dressed in a soiled Aran sweater’) and the figure of the fervent republican in his Aran jumper became a stereotype.[[67]](#endnote-67) More recent journalistic accounts also mention it. For example, Bennett describes Gerry Adams (leader of Sinn Féin) arriving for a 1999 *Guardian* interview: ‘dressed casually in blue jeans, dark brown Aran sweater, green checked flannel shirt, he appears comfortable, relaxed, confident’.[[68]](#endnote-68) Worn by the public faces of republicanism in this way, the Aran jumper is a ‘comfortable, relaxed, confident’ way of saying ‘I am Irish and so is the north of Ireland’.

Commentators reflecting on changes in Sinn Féin relate its current professional image to the Aran-jumpered cliché. For example, an *Irish News* report on the 2013 Ard Fhéis (Sinn Féin’s party conference) conveys the glossiness of the event by remarking that ‘It’s all a long, long way from Aran sweaters and big hairy tweed jackets’.[[69]](#endnote-69) Just as Sinn Féin are portrayed as having moved away from the Aran jumper, it is often suggested that they have moved towards the Armani suit.[[70]](#endnote-70) Sinn Fein’s sartorial ‘makeover’ is used as shorthand for political and ideological shifts which are criticised by some as ‘accepting the rule of the enemy’ and others as a mere ‘veneer of political respectability’.[[71]](#endnote-71) They are accused of ‘swapping AK-47s for Armani suits’ by those who condemn the provisional IRA campaign, and of accepting ‘Armani suits, expensive cars and holiday homes as a pay-off’ by so-called dissident republicans opposed to the Belfast Agreement.[[72]](#endnote-72) Artist Rita Duffy recalls that as the peace process progressed, ‘that was when they all started wearing suits. The black leather jackets disappeared, the woolly jumpers disappeared and [in place of ‘*Tiocfaigh ár lá’*/’Our day will come’] the new phrase Tiocfaigh Armani was coined’.[[73]](#endnote-73) Whether Sinn Fein’s suits were ever from Armani or not, the symbolic poles of the Aran jumper and the Armani suit have been used as a barometer of more important developments.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Irish artists have used the Aran jumper as a way of approaching ideas about landscape, gender, sexuality, home, work and creativity. Rita Duffy calls her (1996) painting, ‘Geansaí’, ‘a dialogue across generations of women.’[[75]](#endnote-75) Depicting her son’s small Aran jumper, knitted by her own mother, hanging on a washing line, Duffy reflects on forms of work, creation and love. Pauline Cummins’ (1985) video installation, ‘Inis t’Oirr/Aran Dance’ plays with ideas about landscape, craft, sexuality and the female gaze. The installation consists of:

‘slowly changing slide images of a male torso and images of wool, knitting patterns and an Aran jumper, accompanied by the voice of the artist over its 10-minute duration. The artist narrates her thoughts about knitting, story-telling, landscape and the movement of her hands over the male body while images of the body, first dressed in the Aran jumper, then naked, slowly evolve on the screen’[[76]](#endnote-76)

Catherine Nash sees the piece as related to ideas about the west of Ireland, 'a highly significant and contested national landscape', and 'the male body as fleshy terrain'.[[77]](#endnote-77) Talking about the piece in an interview, Cummins gives her own interpretation of the meanings carried by stitch patterns: ‘what I liked about the text is that it suggests that the woman has a vision – an aerial vision of the land – and that that was translated into the imagery within the knitting. This sets out an idea for her creativity in a fine art way – one which was always available to all women.’[[78]](#endnote-78)

**Conclusion: myths and markets**

Ever since its development as a recognisable object, the Aran jumper has been bound up with ideas about kinship and national identity on the one hand, and immediate economic motivations on the other. As objects of exchange, Aran jumpers occupy a position common to items endowed with ‘folk’ souvenir status, at the intersection of conflicting expectations about capitalist economic processes versus the romanticized (and derided) realm of ‘native’ handicrafts. As an internationally recognised symbol of Irishness that comes with its own potent myth of origin, the Aran jumper encapsulates emotionally charged ideas about nativeness and diasporic identities. While it may seem to offer cosy kitsch, the kinship the Aran jumper represents includes uncomfortable truths and complicated relationships.

Aran stitch patterns have been interpreted in many ways, such as the ‘toe-tag’ identifying a body, a family tree elaborated with each generation, representations of the natural world or pre-Christian Celtic symbols.[[79]](#endnote-79) While the idea of the stitches carrying messages to be decoded in a pre-literate society is erroneous, the twisting cables have been used to express evolving networks of ideas about place, belonging and cultural ownership from within and outside Ireland.

Returning to the story that accompanies the Aran jumper, it is easy to see the unidentified fisherman being claimed by his relatives as an allegory for the Irish diaspora being reunited with the land their ancestors came from, and being recognised by the people there. The story is a fantasy of reunification, emerging in a post-partition era, which undoes loss and fulfils diasporic longings for the melding of the old world and the new. It is a vision of stasis produced from a period of movement and change, during which mass migration and tourism shaped ideas about craft and authenticity, just as they created new relationships between people and peoples.

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    CAPTIONS

    Figure 1: An invitation to ‘find your clan’ through [www.clanarans.com](http://www.clanarans.com) (© 2013 Glenaran)

    Figure 2: Clipping from defunct Irish newspaper (Evening Press, 1962) reporting the Clancy Brothers’ success in America (©Irish Traditional Music Archive)

    Figure 3: Aran knitwear displayed in souvenir shop (Belfast, 2013) (© Siún Carden) [↑](#endnote-ref-79)