

The British University in Egypt

BUE Scholar

Arts and Design

Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

2025

The Stained & Bloody Cloths of Ireland: a material culture view of Irish shame, oppression, morality and repression.

Catherine Harper Ph.D

The British University in Egypt, catherine.harper@bue.edu.eg

Follow this and additional works at: https://buescholar.bue.edu.eg/arts_design



Part of the [Celtic Studies Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harper, Catherine Ph.D, "The Stained & Bloody Cloths of Ireland: a material culture view of Irish shame, oppression, morality and repression." (2025). *Arts and Design*. 10.

https://buescholar.bue.edu.eg/arts_design/10

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at BUE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts and Design by an authorized administrator of BUE Scholar. For more information, please contact bue.scholar@gmail.com.

Catherine Harper, *The Stained and Bloody Cloths of Ireland: a material culture view of Irish shame, oppression, morality and repression*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025

Abstract

The *Stained and Bloody Cloths of Ireland* presents a textiles and material culture view of Irish shame, oppression, morality and repression.

Ireland – north and south – has sustained significant change in the last 100 years, since partial independence from Britain, accelerating at the end of the twentieth century with legalisation of contraception, divorce, gay marriage, the end – or at least reduction – of the ‘Troubles’ in the North, and freedom to choose abortion and reproductive autonomy.

In parallel to this, many instances of societal and ecclesiastical abuse, sexual repression, superstition and cruelty, have come to light through a series of scandals including the use of unmarried mothers as unpaid labour in laundries throughout Ireland until the mid-1990s, the deaths of women in hidden childbirth and babies in mishandled miscarriages, the unhealthy entanglement of Church (Catholic and Protestant) and State (Northern and Southern). This is compounded by sectarianism, the persistent prejudice experienced by Irish Travellers, Pavees or Mincéirs, the overt racism experienced in Ireland by the diaspora communities of other lands, and the poverty of care of direct provision for asylum seekers in the so-called ‘land of a thousand welcomes’.

This collection of specially commissioned essays tells the stories of cloth and clothing, textiles and materials that have been actually or symbolically stained by blood or other body fluids in Ireland. It is a meditation on national identity(ies) in the whole island of Ireland, and the operation in those contested, mythologised and traumatised identities in female (and other ‘feminine/feminised’, for which read marginalised or disempowered) bodies.

By focusing on the role of these across topics as diverse as witchcraft and folklore, relics of revolution, broken pelvises and medical cruelty, valorised virgins and women to blame, maternal craft and crafty mothers, white-as-snow cleanliness and the ‘race problem’ in Ireland, conflict and resistance, goodness and godliness, starvation and piety, families and the ties and bindings of blood, home, homo-erotics and homo-phobics, scabs that don’t heal, washing and activism – the book aims to ‘lance the boil’ of Irish social history, celebrating the movement of the island of Ireland into post-Church, post-conflict, post-nostalgia modernity that, while still a painful transition, is a vital part of a country coming to terms with its past and looking to its future.