Irish

Japanese

What The Irish Wore

Dyes and Dyeing

In early Ireland, dyeing was considered to be a somewhat magical process, and was strictly a women's craft, there being a taboo on dyeing fabric in the presence of men. The book of Lismore contains a passage in which St. Ciaran's mother tells him to go out of the house, since it is unlucky to have men in the house while dyeing cloth. He curses the cloth so that it dyes unevenly, then later recants. There were also rules about which days of the month or week were proper for dyeing -- the information not recorded in this source). (Bríd Mahon, *Traditional Dyestuffs in Ireland,* p. 116). Dyers also had a reputation for being herbal healers, since many dyestuffs were also used in folk medicine. (Mahon, p. 122)

Many Highland dye recipes involve steeping the wool for as long as several days or even weeks in order to achieve the proper depth of color and degree of fastness. This is sometimes attributed to the harsher quality of Highland wool. (Kok, p. 224)

Linen is particularly hard to dye; however, indigin (as contained in woad, and, later, in imported indigo dye) and the purple from Murex snails do dye linen, as they adhere to the surface of the fiber rather than penetrating the fiber as most other dyes do.

The word for dyestuffs in the Book of Leinster is 'ruaman'; the root word is 'ruam' or red -- which reinforces the idea that the Celts loved bright colors and wore them as much as possible (Joyce, vol. 2, p. 357). More information on dyes and dyeing can be found at: Natural Dyes Mailing List.
-- A link to 14th c. German dye recipes -- shows what was being done elsewhere in medieval Europe
-- Color in Lowerclass Elizabethan Clothing -- shows what was being done elsewhere in the British Isles
-- To make a Beautiful Colour -- Period Dyes in the 16th Century

A Note on 'Saffron'

The term 'saffron', as used to describe Irish and Scottish leinte, is used to describe the color of the linen. The color is actually derived from weld, a plant that yields a light, clear yellow:

> The truth is that the old English saffron does not mean crocus but any yellow colour, and generally distinguishes the weld, still retained in many parts of England and the very plant the Irish call Buídhe Mór, or Great Yellow. With this they dye their linen and fine woolen stuffs with different degrees of colour and fix the colour with urine. The yellow thus obtained is bright and lasting. (J. C. Walker, *Materials used by the Ancient Irish*, quoted in Brid Mahon, p. 118-119)

Other materials used to obtain a saffron-yellow include poplar bark and leaves, heather, Meadowsweet (Airgead Luachra; produces a pale yellow), sorrel, gorse blossoms, onion skins, a species of lichen (called *Féasóg Ghabair* or *Dath na gCloch*) and Mare's Tail (*Cáiti Collagan*). (Mahon, p. 119)

In a recent workshop on natural dyes, we got a yellow very similar to that yielded by weld using the leaves of the sweetgum tree, using alum as a mordant. The workshop was held in mid-May; I don't know if the results would be different using leaves gathered later in the year.

Mordants

A mordant (from a French word meaning 'to bite') is a substance applied to fibers before dyeing which helps the dye adhere to the fibers. The type of mordant used will usually affect the end color of the fabric. Mordants used in Ireland and Scotland included:

- Alum (potassium aluminum sulphate from stale urine, wood ash, oak galls; chips

of oak or alder wood; burnt seaweed or kelp) -- 'brightens' the color. Stale urine is called *fual*, or *graith* in Scotland. Probably used from the earliest times.

- **Iron (or copperas - ferrous sulphate) - 'saddens' colors (makes them grayer). Iron could be obtained from certain bogs or iron ore.**
- **Copper (or verdigris - copper sulphate)**
- **Fir-club moss (Lycopodium selago), used in place of alum.**
- **Oak-galls were sometimes used to dull the colour.**
- **Elecampane *(Inula helenium)* was sometimes used as a mordant for dyeing with blaeberries. (Kok, p. 225)**

Dyestuffs

Animal Dyes: Kermes (an insect related to Cochineal); Murex snail (*Murex; Purpura lapillus* -- known in Ireland in 7th c. CE, possibly earlier) (Mahon, pp.116-117)

Vegetable Dyes: The roots, leaves, flowers, or bark of plants; different parts of the plant sometimes yield different colors.

Lichens: usually require no mordant, as they are very 'fast' (permanent) dyes. They were usually gathered in July and August, dried in the sun, and used without mordants to dye wool in an iron dyepot. The lichens were fermented with *fual* (stale urine) for as long as three weeks over low heat. Ammonia can be used for modern dyeing instead. Dyeing time might be up to four hours, or even longer for deeper, more color-fast dyes. -- Article on Orchil Dye

List of Native Irish and Scottish Dyes

Some of these dyestuffs are listed several times; this might indicate some confusion on the part of the person gathering the information; but some plants can be used to obtain different colors, using different dyeing techniques and mordants.

The lower classes were most likely to wear saffron and black. Trews and cloaks were also frequently dyed black. (Mahon, p. 121)

In Uibh Ráthach, Contae Chiarra they never let children wear white underclothes lest they be swept away by the *puca* and as a safeguard they picked *sceochan na gcloch*, to dye the garment a yellowish brown. (Mahon, p. 122)

George Buchanan, in his History of Scotland (1580), writes that the favorite colors of Highlanders were blue and purple. The blue was most likely obtained using woad (Isatis tinctoria), which contains the dye *indigotin*. In later periods, blue indigo dye was imported from India, where it is derived from the indigo plant. It is easier to get indigin out of the indigo plant than it is from woad, since indigo contains a higher level of indigin pigment than woad does, so it takes less plant material to get the desired dye. The procedure for getting the indigotin out of the plant material (used either for woad or for indigo) is a lengthy and finicky process involving the fermentation of the plant material and several other steps too complex to go into here (see the link to The Woad Page for further information). Indigo dye, either synthetic or natural, can be obtained from several sources, including Earthguild, along with instructions for making an indigo dye vat using modern powdered chemicals rather than the traditional stale urine, lime water or wood ash lye from which these chemicals were originally derived.

Dye Material:	Mordant:	Latin Name:	Gaelic Name:
Blue: (glas, gorm)			
Bilberry, Whortleberry	iron	*Vaccinium myrtillus*	Fraochán
Devil's Bit	leaves prepared like woad	*Succisa praetensis, Scabiosa Succisa*	Úrach bhallach; Greim an diabhail
Elder (berries)	alum	*Sambucus nigra*	Trom
Privet (berries, leaves)	alum & salt	Ligustrum vulgare	Tor luathfás
Red Bearberry		*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*	Lus na stalóg
Sloe (Blackthorn)		*Prunis spinosa*	Draighean

Woad (leaves, fermented)	ammonia	*satis tinctoria*	Glaisín
Wild (or Mountain) Pansy (leaves, stem)			Goirmín sléibhe
Yellow Iris (roots)	iron	*Iris pseudacorus*	Feileastram
Elecampane		*Inula helenium*	
Black: (dubh)			
Alder (bark with copperas)		*Alnus glutinosa*	Fearnóg
Blackberry (young shoots w/ salts of iron)		*Rubus fruticosus*	Smearna dubha Driseog
bog mire (mud), boiled in iron pot; described as very color-fast dull black; to make glossy black, add oak twigs or chips	alumina (from urine)		Dubh an Phortaigh; dubh-poill
Dock (roots)		*Rumex obtusifolius*	Copóg
Elder (bark)	copperas	*Sambucus nigra*	Trom
various lichens			
Oak (bark and acorns)		*Quercus petraea* and *robur*	Dair
Yellow Iris (roots)		*iris pseudacorus*	Feileastram
Meadowsweet - whole plant		*Filipendula ulmaria*	Airgead luachra
Waterlily (roots)		*Nymphea alba*	
crotal (lichen)			
Brown:			
Alder		*Alnus glutinosa*	Fearnóg
Bilberry or Whortleberry		*Vaccinium myrtillus*	Fraochán
Birch		*Betula pubescens*	Beith
Bogbean		*Menyanthes trifoliata*	Bearnán lachan, Bóchrán
Briar/bramble roots			
Dulse (seaweed)			
Hops		*humulus lupulus*	Lus an leanna
Larch (needles collected in autumn)			
Lichens	iron (dyepot)		Crotal
Oak (bark)		*Quercus petraea* and *robur*	Dair
Onion (skins)			
Sloe (Blackthorn)		*Prunis spinosa*	Draighne·n Donn
Veronica - Speedwell		*Veronica beccubunga*	Lus na banaltra, Seamar chré
White waterlily (roots)		*Nymphaea alba*	Duilleog bháute
Green:			
Bracken (crumpled buds of leaf fronds)		*Pteridium aquilinum*	Raithneach
Bedstraw (yellow), overdyed with Woad			
Dock Sorrel		*Rumex acestosa*	Samhadh bó
Elder		*Sambucus nigra*	Trom

Flowering Rush		*Juncus* sp.	Luachair Bogbhuinne
Foxglove		*Digitalis purpurea*	Méarcán na mban sí
Heath, boiled (dark green)			
Horsetail		*Equisetum telemateia*	Eireaball capaill
Lichens			
Nettles (dark green)		*Urtica dioica*	Neantóg
Privet (berries and leaves)	alum	*Ligustrum vulgare*	Tor luathfás
Weld, overdyed with woad	ammonia		
Weld, mixed with sheep's feces (dark green)			
Yellow Flag			seileastram or feileastram
Pink:			
wild madder (root)		*Rubia peregrina*	
field madder (root)		*Sherardia arvensis*	
Crimson:			
Ladies Bedstraw	alum	*Galium verum*	rud; rú Mhuire, baladh cnise or bindean
Cudbear lichen (Mahon, p. 117)	ammonia		Corcair; Sraith na gCloch
Red: *(ruadh)*			
Alder	red		ruam (the dye); fearn, fearno/g (the plant)
Blackthorn	*bright red; w/alum produces orange*	*Prunus spinosa*	
Kermes (insects; related to cochineal)			
Lichens and mosses			Sraith na gCloch
Field madder (roots)		*Sherardia arvensis*	Baladh cnis Chon Chulainn, Dearg faille
Sorrel (root)		*Rumex acetosa*	
Meadowsweet (roots)		*Filipendula ulmaria*	
Tormentil (roots)		*Potentilla erecta*	Néaltartach, Beinidín
Wild madder (roots)		*Rubia peregrina*	Madar
Purple: (corcur)			
Bilberry or Whortleberry	alum	*Vaccinium myrtillus*	Fraochán
Cloudberry		*Rubus europaeus*	
Crotal Lichen (corcur dye)	fermentation w/ stale urine (fuar)	*Ochrolechia tartarea; O. parella; Pertusaria dealbata; Aspicilia calcarea; Parmelia omphalodes; P. saxatilis; and others*	corcra; crotal ban, crotal geal, white crotal, or scurf
Crowberry		*Empetrum nigrum*	
Dandelion (roots dye magenta)	alum	*Taraxacum officinale*	Caisearbhán Caol dearg
Danesweed (Dwarf Elder)		*Sambucus ebulus*	Lus na nDanar; Péith bhog

Deadly nightshade		*Atropa belladonna*	Miotóg bhuí; Lus mór coilleadh
Elder (berries)	alum	*Sambucus nigra*	Trom
Murex (whelks -- shellfish)		*Murex* or *Purpura lapillus* shellfish	This is the 'royal purple' or crimson used in Europe. Because it's very expensive to produce, fabrics dyed with *murex* are very costly and are worn mostly by chiefs.
Orchil or Cudbear lichen	alum		Sraith na gCloch
Purple Loosestrife		*Lythrum salicaria*	Eireaball caitÌn; Créachtach
sea slugs			
Spindle		*Euonymus europaeus*	
St. John's Wort (flower heads)	none	*Hypericum perforatum*	
Sundew		*Drosera rotundifolia*	Drúichtín móna, Rós an tsolais
Yellow: (buidhe)	most of these use an alum mordant.		
Agrimony		*Agrimonia eupatoria*	Airgeadéan, Méirín na máighe
Ash (fresh inner bark)		*Fraxinus excelsior*	Fuinseog
Birch		*Betula pubescens*; *B. alba*	Beith
Bog asphodel		*Narthecium ossifragum*	Bliocáin
Bog myrtle (or sweet gale)		*Myrica gale*	Raidóg, Railleog
Bracken (roots, young tops)		*Pteridium aquilinum*	Raithneach
Bramble		*Rubus fruticosus*	Driseog
Broom		*Cytisus scoparius*	Giolach
Buckthorn (berries and bark)		*Rhamnus catharticus*	Ramh Draighin, Maide bréan
Common dock (roots)		*Rumex obtusifolius*	Copóg
Crab apple (fresh inner bark)		*Malus sylvestris*	Úll fiain
Dogwood		*Cornus sanguinea*	Crann cornéil, Crann muchóra
Gorse (bark, flowers, young shoots)		*Ulex europaeus*	Aiteann
Heather	alum	*Erica tetralix*; *E. vulgaris; Calluna vulgaris*	Fraoch
Kidney vetch		*Anthyllis vulneraria*	Meoir Mhuire, Cosán uain
Lichens (various) (brownish yellow)			Féasóg Ghabhair; others
Marigold		*Caltha palustris*	
Marestail		*Hippuris vulgaris*	Snáithe báite, Cáiti collagan
Marsh marigold		*Caltha palustris*	Lus buí Bealtaine

Marsh ragwort		*Senecio aquaticus*	Buachalán buÌ
Marsh-woundwort		*Stachys palustris*	Duilleog na saor
Meadow Rue		*Talictrum flavum*	Riascbhláth órdha
Meadowsweet (light yellow)			Airgead Luachra
Moss			
Nettle	alum	*Urtica dioica*	Neantóg
Onion skins			
Pennywort		*Umbilicus rupestris*	Carnán caisil, Lus na pingine
Poplar bark, wood and leaves (saffron color)	ammonia (material soaks several days in ammonia) [Mahon, p. 118]		
Privet (leaves)		*Ligustrum vulgare*	Tor luathfás
Red shank		*Polygonum persicaria*	Gluineach dhearg
Saffron (probably introduced early 1400s) (Mahon, p. 118)		*Crocus sativus*	Cróch an fhómhair
Sorrel Sahmadh			Dath na gCloch
St. John's Wort	alum	*Hypericum* sp.	Luibh Eoin Bhaiste
Sundew		*Drosera rotundifolia*	Drúichtín móna
Teasel		*Dipsacus fullonum*	Lus an fhúcadóra
Tormentil (roots)		*Potentilla erecta*	Néaltartach, Beinidín
Water pepper		*Polygonum hydropiper*	Glúineach
Weld (strong yellow) aka Dyer's Weed		*Reseda luteola*	Buídhe mór, Ruachan buí
Yellow Fumitory		*Corydalis lutea*	Dearg thalún
Yellow Wort		*Blackstonia perfoliata*	Dréimire buí

Thoughts or questions?

email the Historian!