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Hannah Rumball-Croft

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Abstract

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John Getty McGee (1816–1883) invented the “Ulster” in the 1860s from his shop in Belfast, Ireland, as a men’s waterproof woolen overcoat for country pursuits such as hunting and traveling. By the 1870s, its popularity had exploded, becoming universally accepted as a fashionable urban daywear item for both sexes, owned even by HRH The Prince of Wales (later

Edward VII) (*The Belfast Morning News* November 4, 1868). Despite this, McGee has fallen to obscurity. This article traces the unusual professional rise of this renowned Belfast “tailor”: from apprenticed to a hatter, to opening a merchant tailoring department, the building of his tailoring brand, his invention of the Ulster overcoat, and its patronization by the upper classes and royalty.

Keywords: tailors; nineteenth century; the Ulster; merchant tailoring; textile design; Irish fashion

HANNAH RUMBALL-CROFT 

Hannah Rumball-Croft is a Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Westminster. Her specialisms are nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dress and material culture, with a specialist focus on two key areas: tailored garments for women, as well as Quaker Plain dress and its fashionable adaptation. She sits on the committees of two international research networks, Nineteenth Century Dress and Textiles Reframed, interested in challenging myths and misinterpretations around historic garments, and ACORSO Tailoring for Women 1750–1930 where they are working on a material culture, comparative study of the design, manufacture, retailing and consumption of tailored garments for and by women, at all market levels in the 1750–1930 period.

H.Rumballcroft@westminster.ac.uk

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The Ulster Tailor 1828–1883: From Shop Boy to Royal Clothier

Introduction

John Getty McGee (1816–1883) is best known as the inventor of the distinct style of overcoat named “the Ulster.” An Irish waterproof tailored overcoat, originating in menswear in the 1860s (Figure 1) and disseminated to womenswear by 1871, the Ulster was originally sold from McGee’s Belfast shop and was an instant success (Rumball 2023, 303). Within a decade of its invention, the Ulster not only regularly graced men’s and women’s fashion advertising, fashion magazines, and tailoring journals but had also crossed the Atlantic. It was consistently produced by tailors and ready-made fashion producers across the Western world well into the twentieth century. With McGee advertising in 1868 that the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, owned an Ulster, its ubiquity was nigh on unparalleled and yet its inventor remains poorly acknowledged and unrepresented in dress history, fashion history, social history, and manufacturing history (*The Belfast Morning News* November 4). While many readers will remember McGee from my article “The Ladies Ulster in the 1870s and 1880s: From “Eccentric-Looking” to “Beau ideal”” (Rumball 2023), to date, academic literature dedicated to McGee is entirely absent.

McGee consistently preferred the moniker of “inventor” of the Ulster overcoat (*The Field, The Country Gentleman’s Newspaper* January 19, 1878). This article investigates the weight of this term as representative

of his vital role in the Ulster overcoats conceptualization, marketing, dissemination, and ultimately its international acclaim, despite being usefully emblematic of his distance from its hand production, which further research has now made clear. As this article will illustrate, McGee was not trained as a tailor. Instead, McGee entered fashion retailing as a teenager with no tailoring background, worked his way into the merchant tailoring business, built his brand, and elevated that brand to be patronized by the upper classes, aristocracy, and even the royal family. Fundamentally, therefore, through the wealth of detail on his diverse career before the innovation of the Ulster overcoat this article identifies McGee as a businessman, salesman, coordinator, master marketer, and so-called “inventor” of tailored fashions.

Born in 1816, McGee would have entered the workplace as a teenager during an incredible period of evolution for tailoring, and the clothing and textile industries, as well as for Irish society, Belfast culture, politics, and religious identity. While McCoy’s “The Ulster Coat” (1985) usefully situates McGee in the history of Irish tailoring through the Ulster, this article will explore the professional biography of McGee by extricating and expanding on threads of his career to achieve several outcomes. Firstly, to cement McGee’s importance and legacy as a thinker, organizer, and director of tailored fashions. Secondly, to foreground Ireland’s overlooked role in

THE "ULSTER,"
A NEW OVERCOAT
MADE OF IRISH FRIEZE, PERFECTLY WATERPROOF,
 INVALUABLE TO GENTLEMEN FOR TRAVELLING OR DRIVING TO THE COVERT SIDE.

PRICE: THREE GUINEAS AND A HALF; WITH WINDERMERE LINING, FIVE GUINEAS.

Only Measure required is the Width round the Breast, and Height.

JOHN G. M'GEE AND CO., BELFAST, IRELAND,
 WHO WILL FORWARD PATTERNS AND ORDERS TO ANY PART OF THE KINGDOM.



WITH HOOD, 10s. EXTRA.

Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Watling-street, London, E.C., November 4th, 1868.

Sir,—I never gave a testimonial about anything in my life before, but I cannot refuse your request. The "Ulster" Coat is, without any exception, the best driving Coat I ever possessed. It is quite impervious to wind and rain; and even in the present weather I come home warm and comfortable every day, although I drive some four or five hours at least almost every time I go out. Congratulating you on your success, I am, Sir, yours truly,

(Signed) **W. EYRE M. SHAW.**

Messrs J. G. M'GEE AND CO.

Figure 1

John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. "The "Ulster" a New Overcoat" advertisement, *the Field, the Country Gentleman's Newspaper*, November 20, 1869. Newspaper image © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).

nineteenth-century fashion and specifically tailoring, a gap Farrell and McKee note remains "in its infancy" (2022, 126), as evidenced by the continued primacy of Dunlevy's *Dress in Ireland* (1999). Thirdly, to continue to carve a place specifically for the Ulster in the academic dress history narrative of nineteenth century fashion. Fourthly, to legitimize the rise of merchant tailoring's ready-made business model over the traditional master-tailor system. Finally, to add voice to the growing literature piercing the persistent bubble of myth around the development of the ready-made clothing industry.

Contemporarily, and even historically, literature on the nineteenth century ready-made merchant tailor has been decidedly unflattering, with emphasis placed on deriding those who offered the earliest iterations of ready-made tailored garments to the masses at cut-price rates as "clumsy," poor quality (Zakim 1998, 42) and "trash" (Johnson 1846). Furthermore, the practices of ready-made and merchant tailors have long been overshadowed by the tendency to fold diverse tailoring traditions into the mythology of London's Savile Row, which has cast itself as the defining authority on nineteenth-

century tailoring as bespoke, master-made, and elite, at the expense of alternative narratives. This master-tailor focus excludes tailored clothing entrepreneurs whose working practices, seen in a contemporary light, could be thought of as highly ambitious and even visionary in their provision of tailoring for the majority of the population. Indeed, despite numerous articles showing evidence of the development of the ready-made clothing industry in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, specifically via the field of tailoring, from writers including Zakim (1999), Lambert (2010), Chapman (2004), and Rose

(2022), and more than twenty years after Winifred Aldrich’s comment that ready-made tailored clothing and its development “have not gained the recognition they deserve” the statement remains true (2000, 163). Ready-made clothing narratives remain stubbornly fixed on the mistaken assertion that it developed from the mid-nineteenth century with the mechanization of production via technology, and in the twentieth century through the standardization of sizing in womenswear. As Chapman has argued, this persistent eclipsing of the reality of access to ready-made men’s and children’s tailored clothing in the early nineteenth century, and to ready-made tailored womenswear by the late-nineteenth century, may be partially explained by our technologically-mediated social sensibilities. These contemporary sensibilities baulk at the idea that an industry still reliant on hand-sewn garments could have undergone a manufacturing revolution (Chapman 2004, 44).

While pages have previously been spent extolling the skills of master tailors of elite bespoke clothing during this period, this article does quite the opposite. Here, McGee is used as a case study to illustrate how many tailoring establishments that made the earliest iterations of men’s and women’s ready-made tailored clothing had been successfully run by ambitious and visionary entrepreneurs with a sophisticated understanding of marketing nous and tailoring fashion’s dissemination, and in McGee’s case an understanding of the design of clothing and textiles, and thus deserve far greater time and attention in dress history narratives than they have formerly been afforded.

As no published biography of McGee has previously been

attempted, and as no McGee archive exists, diverse primary research sources have been essential in piecing together this picture of the man, his trade, his training, and his life. Newspaper advertisements of the nineteenth century evidence his experiences, changing branding, shop locations, designs, and rising confidence as a businessman. Maps and town plans illustrate the central location of his shop in Belfast, the Ulster region’s largest conurbation, located at the head of Belfast Lough. Belfast was only granted city status in 1888, however, after McGee’s death, thus it will be referred to as a town, while Irish and Ireland will be used over Northern Ireland or Northern Irish in recognition that the partition of the island of Ireland into two separate states—Northern Ireland and a southern state (the Irish Free State, later, Eire, later the Republic of Ireland)—had not yet occurred during McGee’s lifetime. As such, core facets of Irish history which intersect with distinctive points of McGee’s business career will be introduced and discussed to consider the idiosyncratic developmental path of the Ulster region as compared to the rest of Ireland, and the consumer who would have frequented his Belfast shop. Surviving examples of his Ulster overcoats make tangible his vision, while ships logs clarify his final overseas voyage. Such documents have enabled the weaving together in this article of what may best be described as threads of a professional life—sporadic details of a man previously poorly documented, interlaced to illustrate a rich and vibrant career. It does not lay claim to completeness but instead pieces together details and considers McGee as a businessman and inventor of a fashionable

style of tailored overcoat and what his journey might tell us about the development of the role of merchant tailors as organizers, marketers, and thinkers of ready-made fashions in the tailoring trade between 1828 and 1883, while also furthering the importance of the Ulster in nineteenth century fashion and textile history.

“London Hat Warehouse”: The Early Years

While it would be tempting to begin with McGee’s most celebrated design, the tailored Ulster overcoat in the 1860s, there is a relevant and vibrant story in the training and business maneuvers he undertook in his formative years, as well as in the social, political, and religious context of his burgeoning hometown of Belfast. These secured his position as a clothier of regional importance long before his invention of the Ulster made him internationally renowned and enabled him to gain standing enough to make the coat a global success. McGee’s story as a merchant tailor begins not in a tailor, but in a hatters—located in the beating heart of a risingly prosperous Belfast.

Owned by John Holden, the “London Hat Warehouse” located at 48 High Street, Belfast was the business where a young McGee learned his trade and was a going concern, according to a later advertisement, from at least 1828 (*Belfast Commercial Chronicle* April 11, 1832). It is probable McGee would have started work with Holden as a young teenager as “business careers” were commonly begun by boys in Belfast aged between thirteen and fifteen years (Johnson 2016, 69). Holden’s supplied ready-made hats and embellishments to wholesale and for retail and appears to have (unusually) dealt

in both men's hats and women's bonnets and trimmings. Catering to both sexes may in part be explained by the relative smallness of Belfast in 1831—less than a twentieth of the population size of London (Belfast 1831-275 | PRONI [n.d.](#)). One advertisement from 1832 illustrates their stock as “London Beaver and silk hats,” “best waterproof,” “Ladies and Children's Beaver Bonnets,” “cloth and fur caps,” whilst offering a “wholesale wareroom for hatters trimmings,” as well as other accessories such as umbrellas and fur pelerines (*Belfast Commercial Chronicle* October 23). While many of these accessories were bought ready-made from third party producers (as is made clear in advertisements) it is feasible that Holden had hat-making workshops above the shop or in some satellite location. Holden's was thus more generalist than strictly a hatters or a milliner's, illustrating the opportunities of augmenting one's fashion business with other wares during the 1830s.

Indeed, diversification was a common feature in the evolution of small fashion shops in the early nineteenth century as they sought to increase profits and court customer convenience by expanding into different types of retailing (Whitlock 2005, 28). Correspondingly, by 1838 the London Hat Warehouse had expanded beyond hats and accessories into the territory of the larger fabric dealers, the drapers, by supplying wool—that most essential of raw material of the tailor—and likewise expanded its address to include 46 High Street, and its name, to the “London Woollen and Hat Warehouses” (*Belfast Commercial Chronicle* March 17). Cloth, during this time, was expensive, and its cost was an enormous proportion of the outlay of a

garment's production. As John Greene and Elizabeth McCrum state “it was the suppliers of fabric, the wholesale and retail merchants, who actually made the greater impact on sartorial matters (and the greater profit)” (1990, 162). Thus, for many traders the profit, and some of the sartorial influence at this period, tended to reside in the supply of cloth and textiles. We can imagine how under Holden's guidance a young McGee would have become skilled at identifying, handling, and selling a variety of wool cloths and fashionable accessories to middle and upper-class customers. However, McGee's tenure indicates that he was never apprenticed as a tailor meaning his training and expertise was not in cutting, basting, pressing, steam molding, nor in any of the traditional skills associated with the production of tailored garments. Indeed, these simple advertisements speak volumes by their absence of associations with the tailoring trade at all. We can confidently conclude that McGee was, by training, an expert in wool cloth and accessories, and an organizer, buyer, salesman, and coordinator, and even an identifier of fashions in these areas, but not a tailor.

The London Woollen and Hat Warehouse's expansion into the textile trade proved formative for McGee, as nineteenth century leather-bound tomes at the National Archives make clear. Entitled “Office of Registrar of Designs” these books are bursting with surviving swatches of original materials sent to the Designs Registry, part of the Board of Trade, to be registered for copyright protection. Registration safeguarded the decorative elements of the design from being copied and manufactured without permission (*Intellectual property:*

registered designs 1839–1991, 2025). These records reveal that in the decades after his work at Holden's, between 1847 and 1870, multiple designs were registered by McGee for an array of textiles. These designs illustrate the creativity in McGee's merchant tailoring practice and bely the emphasis usually placed on the merchant tailoring trade as being run by men with business acumen but an absence of artistry (Zakim 1998, 42).

McGee's textile designs were varied. Surviving swatches include a printed cotton featuring a white ground and a tiny figurative repeat pattern of masonic symbols in blue dated 1847 (Figure 2); two ribbed silk lining fabrics in a variety of colorways in distinctive block stripes often of highly-saturated purple, blue, and brown hues dated 1868; as well as thick woven felts, again in striking colors—one with a grey, white and red stripe dated 1870. While these records registered the manufacturer's or retailer's name rather than the designer's, the consistency across McGee's working life underscores the importance that original and distinctive textiles held for his business. They reveal his awareness of the commercial value of novelty in his clothing offerings and demonstrate his grasp of the economic and sartorial advantages that textiles conferred in the production of fashionable garments during this period, as Green and McCrum remind us. His original textiles may have been used to vary and personalize made-to-measure tailoring which McGee ultimately came to offer in the decades ahead.

McGee was by no means an unusual case in the nineteenth century in the dissonance between the trade of his apprenticeship and his transition to the merchant tailoring

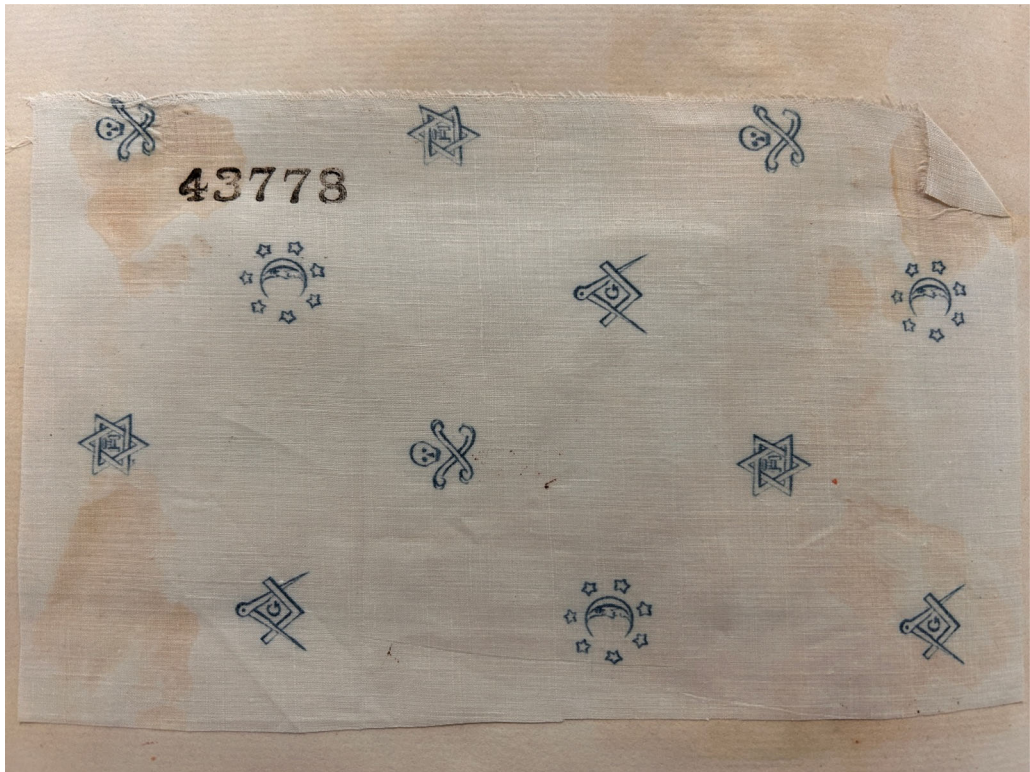


Figure 2

John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. 1847. © The National Archives, ref. BT 43/222 Class 10: Designs, number 43778.

business. Zakim has detailed how in the United States by the mid-nineteenth century the majority of the production of ready-made tailored garments “was, in general, organized by merchants—‘clothiers’ in the contemporary vernacular—many of whom had themselves never made a suit and whose artistry was manifest, instead, in the profitable coordination of a transatlantic cloth market, an urban labor market, and a Continental credit market” (1998, 42). Zakim’s descriptions of ready-made tailoring manufacturers in the United States show that an understanding of the tailoring craft was not a prerequisite to entering merchant tailoring; rather, a deftness in organizing a labor force, knowledge of wool cloth and the cloth

trade, and a confidence in marketing was. McGee’s time at the London Woolen and Hat Warehouse would have provided him with a wealth of education—sartorial, social, and visual—from which a business nous needed for the ready-made tailoring industry could develop, and furnished him with the essential skillset to transition to the merchant tailoring business over the following decade.

McGee prospered with Holden, and later in 1838 Holden proclaimed in a large advertisement that “two of his young men,” named as Colville and McGee, who had “had the management of his hat business for the last seven years, [...] now intend to carry on the same business” under the name of “Colville and M’Gee”

{sic} (*Belfast Commercial Chronicle* October 29). The business divided, with Holden continuing the “Woolen Establishment” at 46 High Street, and McGee and Colville taking over the “London Hat Warehouse” at 48 High Street. McGee and Colville continued the business, selling a range of hats, bonnets, tassels, feathers, and ribbons, courting clientele through advertisements featuring small, exquisitely detailed fashion illustrations. One such advertisement (Figure 3) depicted a delicately etched women’s leghorn bonnet, decorated with ruffles and flowers, its ribbons flowing loose as if caught in the wind (*The Northern Whig, Belfast* December 19, 1839). McGee’s self-assurance as a fashion businessman soon became



COLVILLE AND M'GEE

BEG leave to announce the arrival of 40 Dozen **BEAVER BONNETS**, in addition to their former large and varied Stock, comprising all the Newest Shapes and Colours, which are now so generally worn, and so very comfortable for the present season.

Cords, Tassels, Feathers, and Ribbons, to Match.

C. & M'G. have, also, just received 12 Dozen Best Quality **LONDON BEAVER HATS**, of the Newest West-End Shapes.

Solid Leather Portmanteaus, Leather Hat Cases, &c. Servants' Livery Bands, Cockades, &c., &c. *16* 308

Figure 3

Colville and McGee. "Colville and M'Gee" {sic} advertisement, *the Northern Whig Belfast* 19 December 1839. Newspaper image © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).

evident. In an 1840 advertisement for a top hat from the London Hat Warehouse, the illustration bears only McGee's name and the address, 48 High Street, topped by a rippled banner proclaiming the "Albert Hat." Although this may appear unremarkable, it signals that McGee was now running the London Hat Warehouse independently, noting the firm as "successor to J. Holden and late Colville & McGee" (*The Northern Whig, Belfast* March 2, 1840). By 1842, any reference to his former partners or managers had disappeared entirely (*The Northern Whig, Belfast*, April 30). McGee was clearly intent on forging his own path and asserting his central role in the business's success. At twenty-four, he was already heading his first solo venture in the fashion industry, and doing so from a highly prestigious location.

"Richness and Taste Displayed by the Shops": Belfast

At 48 High Street, McGee's shop was well-located in the heart of Belfast on the town's "main commercial thoroughfare," an area of the city clustered with clothing shops (Connolly 2012b, 576; McKee 2021, 48). *Tours in Ulster* records that High Street could not "fail to impress the mind with a favorable idea of the richness and taste displayed by the shops on either side" (Doyle 1854, 28). Such a location would enable a businessman early in his career to read and act upon the population's sentiments and sartorial desires, and this vibrant urban environment was central, rather than incidental, to McGee's success. As Joanna Grabski explains, "fashion making is analogous to the creation of other art forms in that its production, circulation, and consumption are shaped by and

linked to the urban environment [... which] provide an information environment and artistic resource for both designers and tailors" (2009, 219). Using PRONI's OSNI Historical First Edition (1832–1846) map, the significance of 48 High Street's location is clear. High Street's wide boulevard swept into the southern heart of Belfast, away from the water's edge at Chichester Quay, joining the bustling thoroughfare of Castle Place. Located between the main ports of Lime Kiln Dock and May's Dock, High Street held court between the business of the two main ports and thus had easy access to textile and clothing imports from fashionable London and Paris, with records showing McGee imported woolen cloth, and later ready-made clothing, via the ports.

Central Belfast by the 1840s, as Ronnie Munck has explained, was a boom town which witnessed "the modernisation of the harbour, the extension of the railway system and the expansion of banking [... that] played an important role through their links with the cotton and linen industry" (1986, 77). Belfast's economic expansion, and the distinct development of the Ulster region, was primarily based around industrialization in trade, conversely to the then agricultural character of the rest of Ireland, and notably around the steam-powered industrialized spinning and the weaving of cotton, flax, and predominantly, linen in Belfast mills (Connolly 2012a, 211; Purdue 2017, 70). Workers flocked into "Linenopolis" (as it became known) from rural areas to work in these mills and factories (Beckett 1983, 42, 44, 55). These workers, mostly women, experienced poor working conditions resulting in industrial health problems

from a lack of ventilation and poor wages (Connolly 2012a, 213). Conversely, according to Johnson, during this period a prosperous Belfast elite emerged, socially and financially powerful, and of whom, "in Belfast, the textile industrialists were the wealthiest" (2016, 75). According to Beckett, the profits made by these Belfast textile lords in the 1860s and 1870s were vast, with exports exceeding imports by £900,000 per year, and the town retained its position as the largest linen producing center in the world until 1914 (1983, 48, 61). Their wealth came from exporting the bales of Irish linen and linen goods destined to grace the windows of the fashionable new large-scale shopping "emporiums" (precursors to the department store), such as Donovan's Irish Linen Company in Bloomsbury Square, London (Whitlock 2005, 34). McGee's shop was near to the White Linen Hall, built in 1785 as a site for the buying and selling of white linens for export, where these industrial textile elite would also socialize, share news, and discuss commercial business (Beckett 1983, 42). The prosperous Belfast textile industry would open the opportunity for a successful businessman, such as McGee would become, to similarly rise to a position of wealth, influence, and power (Johnson 2016, 66), and mix with the influential social elite. However, this was not the only civic arena in which authority was performed. Membership of the Freemasons, which had been present in Ireland since the 1720s, offered its members sociability at local Lodges (Fagan 1998, 67). According to The Grand Lodge of Freemasons of Ireland, McGee was registered as a member of Hiram's Lodge No. 97, Belfast in 1841 and went on to join Prince of Wales Lodge

No. 154, Belfast in 1845 and True Blues Lodge No. 272, Belfast in 1849. Membership in the Freemasons would have granted McGee access to a network of fellow members, including high-ranking businesspeople, united by a commitment to camaraderie and even financial support (Harland-Jacobs 2003, 449).

Modernization, improved transportation, and economic expansion converged to create an urban environment where money and mechanization were on the up in Belfast, and where men needed clothing to signify their standing, goods, and mastery, in the near-uniform of the socially-expected dark, tailored suit. According to Dunlevy, middle-class men of Ireland needed a minimum of four types of coat; the morning coat, frock coat, dress coat, and overcoat (1999, 148). Indeed, the next business partnership McGee entertained supplied just this, altering the course of his trade, and is the most important partnership in his story. With this reinvention, by May 1843, McGee's business had been renamed to the "Pantechnetheca"—a peculiar name indeed. To understand the significance of McGee's Grecian-inspired flourish, we must briefly venture across the Irish Sea to Birmingham, consider the business of one of his tailoring peers, Hyam & Co. during the 1840s, and look back even further to 1824.

"The Pantechnetheca": McGee and the Hyams

The original business that coined this nonsensical Grecian-inspired name "the Pantechnetheca" was a famous Regency store opened in New Street, Birmingham in 1824 by a businessman, Charles Jones. Jones's Pantechnetheca sold a selection of

manufactures and "works of art" across three floors, considered the best of Birmingham's wares, including "Vases, Candelabra, Medals &c. [...]" which can enable a visitor to judge of the power, the genius, and the skill of the town of Birmingham" (*The Morning Post* August 12, 1824). As Jenni Dixon has described, the grandness of its neo-classical façade and its fictitious name generated fascination and frustration at its pronunciation amongst patrons in equal measure (2019, 205–207). Jones fell on hard times and by 1839 he had ceased to be the proprietor, and the original Pantechnetheca went out of business. The distinctive name however, had by this time become a byword for showrooms claiming to stock large quantities of high-quality goods. The business was purchased by the tailor Samuel Hyam, who, retaining the name, turned the shop to the sale of men's and children's tailored clothing (*The Birmingham Journal* April 6, 1839). Indeed, Samuel Hyam was so taken with the unusual name that by 1842 newspaper advertisements were already applying it to Hyams' other outlets. One reads, "OBSERVE! ARRIVAL OF "SPRING FASHIONS," [...]" at the Branch of the Pantechnetheca Branches [sic], Gracechurch-street London, Market-Street Manchester, Lord-Street Liverpool, New-Street Birmingham, Wine-Street Bristol [...]" (*The Leeds Times* May 7).

As described by Pamela Sharpe, "the Hyams became one of the major producers of ready-made clothing in Britain and early exponents of mass production methods" (1995, 203). Sharpe explains that the Jewish-owned family firm was established around 1819 by Henry Hyam and that branches were overseen by his children, Moses, Samuel, Simon,

Lawrence, Rachel, and Benjamin. The Hyams were early innovators in the ready-made tailoring trade alongside other Jewish-owned firms such as Moses & Sons. The Hyams likely began as clothes dealers around 1830 and started producing their own clothing around 1838 (Sharpe 1995, 204). According to Clare Rose and Vivienne Richmond, the firm was an early adopter of the ready-to-wear trade in men's and boys tailored goods, alongside bespoke and made-to-measure (also called custom) offerings (2011, 2). This model tapped into a cross-class social appetite for self-refinement through affordable fashions, and by the 1840s they had ready-made-tailoring establishments, supplied through mass production, across the country, including London, Leeds, Manchester, and Bristol.

As Winifred Alrich explains the ready-made tailoring industry developed during the opening decades of the nineteenth-century due to the standardization of measurements, systems of size graduation, geometric patterns, and the pamphlets and publications being disseminated by tailors on such cutting systems which radically standardized production (2000, 164). The emergence and developments of cutting approaches and sizing systems, communicated *via* cutting books, pamphlets and papers, and not mechanization, played a significant role in the development of the ready-made tailored clothing trade during the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries. Tailors during the *first* half of the nineteenth century disseminated to the wider clothing industry the technical means for producing "systems for cutting, sizing and grading patterns" which enabled the mass-production of tailored clothing

(2000, 163), a practice taken up by businesses like the Hyams'. Meanwhile, Abigail Jubb (2025) also indicates how standard sizing systems were even being used by women's tailoring suppliers as early as the 1870s. These systems relied on the standardization of measurements, and thus the standardization of a series of their own sizing, and in consequence paved the way for ready-made tailored goods. Standardization opened the availability of tailored clothing to a larger proportion of the middle- and working-class population, firstly male and later female, than ever before. As such, this article does not seek to re-affirm these findings on sizing systems and cutting approaches and refers readers to these excellent writers for further details in these technical areas.

The Hyams are especially interesting for cultivating a middle-class male consumer base. S. Hyam's 1842 advert boasts how the clothing is "cut upon improved principles, by the most scientific artists, alike suitable for the elderly, mechanic or peasant; [...] combining economy with elegance, durability, and fashion, and every Article being marked in plain figures for security and despatch" (*The Leeds Times* May 7). While shopping for fashions, including goods, spaces, and advertising, has long been discussed as being historically coded as feminine, the Hyams were talented at advertising to male consumers in a way that made "their interest in fashion and shopping safe without violating existing taboos and norms of masculinity" (Shannon 2004, 600). Their advertising used traditionally masculine-coded language, emphasizing science, reason, economy, and

security of their business and the clothing, to appeal to male consumers. These same male consumers were courted in a May 1843 advertisement (Figure 4), illustrating that the name "Pantechnetheca" had crossed the Irish Sea to be used for a venture in Belfast—that of McGee.

Proclaiming the arrival of the "Pantechnetheca Clothing Establishment and B. Hyam & Co.," this advertisement shows the paths of McGee and Hyam & Co had firmly crossed, explaining that:

The Nobility, Gentry and Public of Belfast, and the North of Ireland, are respectfully informed that Messrs. JOHN G MCGEE & CO. 48, HIGH STREET BELFAST, have been appointed Sole Agent in Ireland for the above establishment [B. Hyam & Co], where Patterns may be seen and Orders received (Belfast Commercial Chronicle May 24, 1843).

Clearly, McGee was now working as a fashion agent, meaning the Hyams' ready-made tailored designs could be perused and ordered inside McGee's newly renamed shop, also called the Pantechnetheca. Such an offering included B. Hyam & Co.'s men's dress coats, frock coats, riding coats, trousers, waistcoats, and suits, as well as hussar suits and child's tunics alongside McGee's own millinery, hats, and accessories. While period advertisements illustrate that agenting for others to augment one's own shop's offerings was commonplace, McGee's role as B. Hyam & Co.'s "Sole Agent in Ireland" in 1843 was unique. Therefore, he had a monopoly on Irish customers seeking the Hyams' ready-made tailored wares.

The advertisement finishes with the reassurance that, "it is presumed the well-known character of the house will be a sufficient guarantee that the quality and style of the garments will give satisfaction."

The perception of ready-made tailoring at this time, in Belfast, however, was not providential. In a newspaper article transcribing an address to the tailors employed by John G. McGee & Co., McGee's brother and then-business-partner, James, recounted how the affiliation with B. Hyam & Co. originally entailed the importing of large quantities of their goods from London. He stated how, "the tide of public opinion [in Belfast] ran very high against us; for the people here, not having been in the habit of purchasing ready-made clothing, imagined it to be mere trash" (James McGee as quoted in Johnson 1846). Despite this, by borrowing an established British brand's footfall and prominence, John G. McGee quickly became associated with ready-made tailoring and, by a mere 27 years of age, he became affiliated with tailored goods over a minimal duration and with minimal disruption. Clearly, it meant a steady trade of customers entered McGee's premises, arguably drawn by the name and reputation of "B. Hyam & Co." Reputation and credibility are, in many ways, the hardest fought and slowest won components of a successful business. This venture affiliated 48 High Street with the procurement of ready-made tailored menswear, despite it formerly only being associated with hats and wools. This is where McGee's story as a renowned "tailor" begins, in 1843,

WEDNESDAY, MAY 24, 1843.

PANTECHNETHECA

CLOTHING ESTABLISHMENT,

GRACECHURCH-STREET, LONDON ;

AND AT BIRMINGHAM, LEEDS, MANCHESTER, LIVERPOOL, AND BRISTOL,

B. HYAM & CO. Proprietors.

THE Nobility, Gentry, and Public of BELFAST, and the NORTH OF IRELAND, are respectfully informed, that

Messrs. JOHN G. M'GEE & CO. 48, High-Street, BELFAST,

Have been appointed Sole Agents in Ireland, for the above Establishments, where Patterns may be seen, and Orders received. The following list of prices is respectfully submitted :—

	First Quality.	Medium.	Second Quality.
Dress Coat, any Colour,	£2 18 0	£2 8 0	£1 16 0
Frock Coats.	3 8 0	2 18 0	2 5 0
Riding Coats,	3 0 0	2 10 0	1 18 0
Black Dress Trousers,	1 8 0	1 4 0	1 1 0
Coloured Ditto,	1 6 0	1 3 0	0 18 0
Waistcoats,	0 11 0	0 12 6	0 8 6

Contracts by the Year were originally introduced by B. HYAM & CO. which have gained for them unequalled fame (their prices being the lowest ever offered for a first-rate article), they recommend the system to every Gentleman to whom Fashion, Economy, and Regularity, is an object.

	First Quality.	Medium.	Second Quality.
2 Suits in the Year,	£8 4 0	£6 15 0	£5 10 0
3 Ditto ditto,	12 0 0	9 15 0	8 10 0
4 Ditto ditto,	15 12 0	12 12 0	10 10 0

It is presumed the well-known character of the House will be a sufficient guarantee that the quality and style of the Garments will give satisfaction, a perfect fit being always engaged.

CHILDREN'S TUNIC and HUSSAR SUITS, in all Sizes, Ready Made. LIVERIES, to order, got up in first-rate style.

Terms—Nett Cash on delivery.

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Figure 4 John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. "PANTECHNETHECA CLOTHING ESTABLISHMENT, GRACECHURCH-STREET, LONDON; AND AT BIRMINGHAM, LEEDS, MANCHESTER, LIVERPOOL, AND BRISTOL" advertisement, *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* May 24, 1843. Newspaper image © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).

despite having never made a stitch of tailoring in his life.

“Fashionable Well-Made Clothes, Which, in Belfast, They Found so Difficult to Obtain”: McGee’s Tailoring Department

A mere three months after advertising his link with B. Hyam & Co., however,

McGee ceased promoting his role as their agent and instead advertised *his own* “Tailoring Department.” The Belfast Pantechnetheca is advertised in association with McGee alone (Figure 5), bearing no mention of the Hyams. In culmination of McGee’s leveraging their reputation to build his own brand, the advertisement explains how the “Pantechnetheca

Tailoring, Woollendrapery [sic], Ready-Made Clothing and London Hat Warehouse, 48 High Street Belfast” (note the extension of the name) featured a “Tailoring Department” headed by “a Foreman from one of the first West-end houses in London, whose capabilities only require a trial.” The advertisement, worth quoting at length, describes how:

PANTECHNETHECA.
TAILORING, WOOLLENDRAPERY,
READY-MADE CLOTHING,
 AND
LONDON HAT WAREHOUSE,
48, HIGH-STREET, BELFAST.

JOHN G. M'GEE & CO. respectfully announce, that, in addition to their Extensive Hat Trade, they have been induced to open the spacious Warerooms over their Shop, in the above business, from their knowledge of the fact, that a great many Gentlemen, in this town and neighbourhood, who, although anxious to encourage trade at home, have been obliged to send to London, Edinburgh, and elsewhere, in order to get fashionable, well-made Clothes, which, in Belfast, they found so difficult to obtain. The Proprietors have spared neither expense nor trouble to make their Establishment commensurate with the wants of the public, and worthy of that support which their exertions may merit.

For this purpose, one of the Partners has, during the last ten days, been engaged in London, and the Manufacturing Districts of England, in the selection of a beautiful Stock of West of England Proof-Dyed **BLACK** and **MEDLEY** CLOTHS and CASSIMERES, of the most fashionable shades and textures, for the approaching Season, and of the very finest qualities Manufacturers can produce. In Vestings, every thing rich and unique in British and Foreign Manufacture has been added, in order to please the most fastidious taste.

TAILORING DEPARTMENT.

The Proprietors are aware, that, in this branch of the business, the greater onus of the labour rests, and that success or defeat depends almost, if not altogether, on the talent engaged in it, and have, therefore, after a great deal of expense and perseverance, secured the services of a Foreman from one of the first West-end Houses in London, whose capabilities only require a trial to ensure perfect satisfaction.

Although it is the practice, in all Merchant Tailoring Establishments, to make up no cloth but their own, J. M'G. & Co. will not act on such exclusive principles, but will exert themselves to merit, and shall feel grateful for, the support of all who shall in any manner favour them by their patronage.

LIST OF PRICES.

The articles may be selected out of Stock, or Made to Measure.

First-Rate Qualities. (Warranted the best that can be produced.)		Second Rate Qualities. (Recommended for business wear.)	
Dress Coat, any colour,	£2 15 0	Dress Coats, any colour,	£1 15 0
Surtout, including silk facings,	3 5 0	Surtouts, including silk facings,	2 4 0
Riding Coats, any colour,	2 18 0	Riding Coats, any colour,	1 17 0
Black Dress Trousers,	1 8 0	Black Trousers,	1 0 0
Black Riding or Walking do,	1 6 0	Coloured Doeskin or Kerseymer Trousers, ...	0 17 0
Coloured do,	1 4 0	Waistcoats,	0 8 0
Waistcoats,	0 13 0	CONTRACTS BY THE YEAR.	
Medium Qualities. (These are very little inferior to the best.)		For the Best Qualities.	
Dress Coats, any colour,	£2 6 0	Two Suits of very best West of England,	£8 4 0
Surtouts, including silk facings,	2 16 0	Three do, do,	12 0 0
Riding Coats, any colour,	2 8 0	Four do, do,	15 12 0
Black Trousers,	1 2 0	Medium Qualities.	
Coloured do,	1 0 0	Two Suits,	£6 15 0
Waistcoats,	0 11 6	Three do,	9 15 0
		Four do,	12 12 0

READY FOR USE, FIFTY FULL-DRESS SUITS,

Consisting of *Superfine Dress Coat and Trousers, and White or Fancy Vest, for £3 10s per Suit.*
 A pamphlet, containing a general list of prices, may be had, on application.

HAT DEPARTMENT.

In this department, the Proprietors need only say, that they have, at present, the largest STOCK OF HATS they ever had on hands, being manufactured expressly in order to meet the anticipated demand during the next week; the price for **BEST BEAVER HAT** being reduced to **TWENTY SHILLINGS.**

TERMS, CASH ON DELIVERY, WITHOUT DISCOUNT.

Belfast, August 23, 1843.

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Figure 5

John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. "PANTECHNETHECA, TAILORING, WOOLLENDRAPERY, READY-MADE CLOTHING AND LONDON HAT WAREHOUSE, 48 HIGH-STREET, BELFAST" advertisement, *the Northern Whig*, August 29, 1843. Newspaper image © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).

[...] in addition to their Extensive Hat Trade, they [McGee & Co.] have been induced to open the spacious Warerooms over their Shop, in the

above business, from their knowledge of the fact, that a great many Gentlemen, in this town and neighborhood, who, although anxious

to encourage trade at home, have been obliged to send to London, Edinburgh, and elsewhere, in order to get fashionable well-made Clothes,

which, in Belfast, they found so difficult to obtain (The Northern Whig Belfast August 29, 1843).

The advertisement shows that McGee was mirroring the successful approach of the Hyams, utilizing standardized measurements and sizing, and offering a range of qualities and thus prices of ready-made suiting. Garments, including dress coats, riding coats, trousers, suits, and waistcoats, were available in “First-rate Qualities,” “Medium Qualities,” and “Second Rate Qualities,” each diminishing in price alongside the descending promise of quality. Such an approach would predictably generate a range of clothing to suit multiple class strata of budget, democratizing and standardizing the tailored goods offering, with an emphasis on quantity and speed, over individuality and personalization. Buoyed by the success of his agenting work and mindful of the demand from fashion-conscious Belfast gentlemen shoppers, McGee saw, and speedily grasped, this ready market. For a salesman adept at handling wools and ready-made accessories, and likely organizing ready-made labor forces in the millinery trade, the leap to coordinating the production and supply of ready-made tailored wool clothing may have seemed a logical development.

Clearly, McGee’s 1843 advertisement also illustrates his discernment of three key factors for success. Firstly, his tailored clothing focus was, like the Hyams, on men’s apparel recognizing the middle-class male as a growing fashion consumer. As Shannon describes, tailoring shops were considered “hermetically masculine domains” (2000, 610) and thus tailored goods too were already coded

as masculine and the domain of men, despite common knowledge since the eighteenth century that male tailors also made women’s habits and coats (Aldrich 2000, 165). Advertorial language meant McGee placed fashion shopping for men into the domain of being logical, focused, and masculine by postulating the buying of McGee’s goods as not only an endeavor of acquiring fashionable well-made clothes, but also one which positioned shopping as a mechanism of manly capability and productivity in the economic support of their province. Secondly, McGee’s acknowledgement of the site-specificity of production illustrates that speed was a priority to consumers. They were no longer satisfied to wait longer than their British counterparts to procure ready-made tailored garments via shipping. Thirdly, it illustrates his discernment and leveraging of a growing confidence among his male customers who increasingly viewed Belfast as a place of shopping and consumption, with a distinctive identity, and infused with a sense of patriotic regionalism among those “anxious to encourage trade at home.” Here, McGee links Belfast to London and Edinburgh; wealthy, urban metropolises at the heart of the British empire, the loci of the new and the modern. Belfast was booming, and a strong sense of civic pride emerged at this time. These sentiments appear more than mere bluster or local convenience. Illustrated in McGee’s language is an encouragement that men purchasing his tailored fashions will materialize shared values; menswear shopping is presented as a collective bonding around the practice of buying local goods as a means to bolster the very presence of Belfast itself.

Clearly, in three short months, McGee had branched out into his own ready-made tailoring enterprise. No longer satisfied with taking orders for another firm’s goods, he hired a foreman and journeymen tailors to produce ready-made tailored clothing in Belfast. The name journeyman, used since the medieval trade guilds, derived from the French *ournée* and indicates a tailor not affiliated with one fixed premises but who could work for any master, and was generally paid a (low) day-rate for their labor. According to McKee, itinerant tailors were common across Ulster and were “variously known as traveling tailors, journeymen tailors, jobbing tailors, “tramp” tailors or needlers” (2021, 146). Indeed, the local nature of production appears to have been a defining concern for McGee & Co., rather than merely convenience. James McGee acknowledged the consternation that the agenting undertaken in 1843 had aroused, as the Hyams’ garments were “brought ready-made from London, thereby depriving the Belfast artisans of the wages paid for the making, which ought to have been laid out at home” (as quoted in Johnson 1846). In alleviation, the business quickly adapted to focus on the production of ready-made clothing either on-site or at least in the surrounding local area (as piecemeal work undertaken in the home was also increasingly common at this time), and thus the employment of local journeymen tailors. Indeed, James McGee described how, in less than three years, they built their employment of journeymen tailors “from first employing none, we commenced with one, then two or three; then ten, twenty, thirty, fifty—until [...] there are about 150 almost in constant employment” (as quoted

in Johnson 1846). As Aldrich has described, such journeymen tailors were the sewers of the tailoring trade, while the responsibility and craft of the pattern cutting rested on a gifted foreman (2000, 165). The scale of McGee's tailoring venture would only increase over the years, and by 1854, John G. McGee & Co. were seeking "TWO HUNDRED GOOD JOURNEMEN TAILORS TO WHOM TWELVE MONTHS WORK WILL BE GIVEN" (*The Belfast News-Letter* November 10). Clearly, local journeymen tailors fueled the success of this enterprise, and this high figure signals the vast scale of the McGee's tailoring venture after a decade. Altruistic motivations were likely secondary, however, as James McGee explained how, before the opening of the Pantechnethca in Belfast, "the Gentry and a great number of respectable people being obliged to have recourse to London, Edinburgh, &c., for their clothing, which they could not get so elegantly made at home. This practice has almost ceased" (as quoted in Johnson 1846). Such a comment may seem unlikely, given that McGee's Tailoring Department initially specialized in affordable ready-made clothing, and was thus unlikely to be purchased by the gentry and upper-classes who were accustomed to a costly but personalized bespoke service. However, it points to the success McGee's next business maneuver was enjoying by 1846: the establishment of a "Bespoke" tailoring department.

In 1844, McGee's business address, alongside his ambitions, expanded. During October and November, he purchased the next-door shop, 46 High Street, once the "Woolen Establishment" of his former employer, J. Holden, doubling the Pantechnethca's size. In a near full-

page advertisement, McGee uses this renovation to introduce a "BESPOKE DEPARTMENT," explaining that, "the entire of the first floor has been fitted up and set apart exclusively to this department. The STOCK consists of every shade and quality of SUPERFINE WEST OF ENGLAND CLOTHS, CASSIMERES, FRENCH VELVETS AND SATIN VESTINGS &c. which are made to measure in the first style of fashion" (*The Vindicator, Belfast* December 28, 1844). Interestingly, the advertisement conflates the terms "Bespoke" and "Made to Measure" tailoring, despite the differences between the two. Bespoke tailoring, considered the most elite and artisanal approach, meant an entirely personalized, and therefore more costly, service. It focused on the construction of tailored clothing custom-fitted to the individual wearer's body. The tailor had usually measured the wearer themselves by laying their hands on the form to mold the suit to, and it was produced using mercer or draper-supplied cloth (Lambert 2010, 56). Made-to-measure, on the other hand, meant taking only basic measurements, for a form of "customized mass-production" to create an approximate fit to the client, but still a fit that was superior to ready-made tailored clothing (Aldrich 2003, 143). Such a conflation between Bespoke and Made to Measure may indicate either an unfamiliarity with these subtleties or, more likely, an aspirational overselling of the service actually on offer by McGee. Either way, the opening of the new department offering a reputedly finer quality tailored garment than ready-made indicates a transformation in the aspirations of the business. While ready-made tailoring continued to form the heart of the

enterprise alongside hats, bonnets, accessories, and drapers offerings, the introduction of a bespoke department suggests a greater confidence in supplying more personalized, complex, tailored clothing, and that a more discerning or aspirational customer, one who could afford the greater cost, was being courted.

Lambert reminds us that male consumers of most classes, and not merely the working or middle classes, often undertook complex arrangements of consumption based on economic necessity, frugality, and pragmatism, mixing cheap and costly, bespoke and ready-made. Furthermore, since the eighteenth century, bespoke tailors themselves had diversified their offerings into some ready-made accessories and undergarments to increase profits and court customer convenience (Lambert 2010, 56–57). While McGee's introduction of a bespoke department did not shift the barometer of class transcendence overnight, it did cultivate a sense of sartorial refinement and artisanal craftsmanship among the aspirational classes, even as it sought to court the monied Ulster gentry who may have turned to McGee in Belfast for the occasional tailored garment out of expediency or pragmatism. Such an elevation in class association by a clothier—one began as a merchant tailor which then elevated itself up the class strata to be patronized by upper-class customers—was unusual and difficult, but by no means unheard of.

Michael Zakim has described the same ascent achieved by the New York-based tailors Brookes Brothers. Begun as a Manhattan merchant tailors in 1818, by the mid-nineteenth century, through re-branding and an embellished history, it was reinvented

as a bespoke tailors and laid “claim to a craft status otherwise refuted by the real nature of their lumpen origins selling low-priced ready-mades along the wharves of the East River” (Zakim 1998, 43). McGee’s revision and class ascent ultimately proved similarly successful. By 1868, McGee reported that HRH The Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) had ordered “A Suit of Hillsborough Tweed, A Suit of Blarney Tweed, and A Suit of Waterford Frieze” from the firm in “support of Irish manufacture” (*The Belfast Morning News* November 4). By 1876, a pamphlet produced to promote “The ‘Ulster’ Coat” in the United States contained recommendations and expressions of admiration from the great and the good, including proclamations on the comfort of McGee’s men’s Ulster from Prince Edward of Saxe-Weimar, Capt. the Hon. Robert Neville Lawley, and the Hon. D. Astley, alongside a host of doctors and military men. The section on “The Ladies Ulster Coat” includes receipts of receipt alongside assurances of its fit and quality from Lady Churchill, Lady Bailey, the Hon. Mrs. Alfred Thesiger, alongside a plethora of Mrs. and Misses from houses with grand names like Bamburgh Hall (John G. McGee & Co. 1876, 4–30). *The Tailor and Cutter* asserted by 1889 (May 2, 179) that “McGee, of Belfast” was one of the “great firms” of tailoring—and so had thoroughly shed its meager ready-made merchant tailor associations.

Through the 1850s and 1860s McGee’s business evolved, with advertisements charting the increasing diversification and ambition of his venture. John G. McGee & Co by this period was located at 40, 46, and 48 High Street—a significant premises (McKee 2021, 48). His core offering, even before the introduction of the

Ulster, were wool and often waterproof overcoats. While all classes required protection from inclement weather, many of these styles were marketed to the aspirational classes through names such as the “Hunting Spencer” or the “Canadian Wrapper,” evoking sport or international travel, activities associated with the leisured elite. Initially, McGee’s adverts phrased his offerings in relatively generic terms, such as “a Good Strong Pilot Over-Coat {sic} ... 14s to 17s 6d [...] The Fashionable Double-Milled Waterproof Waterford Cape ... 50s to 84s” (*The Londonderry Standard* 1847). By 1849, however, he was promoting long lists of woollen and waterproof overcoats, each item preceded by his name and followed by its price in pounds, shillings, and pence, such as “McGee’s Winter Wrapper, at ... 0 12 6, McGee’s Winter Envelope, at ... 0 15 0” (Figure 6, *The Downpatrick Recorder* December 1). This approach asserted his authorship over particular styles and fused his brand with the garments themselves, informing his branding of the Ulster coat in the following decades. It is significant that he emphasized that his tailored offerings were “Designed and Fashioned by Talented Cutters, and Made Upon the Premises by Experienced Workmen” (*The Belfast News-Letter* November 24, 1848) as the claim suggested a high level of craftsmanship but may have concealed the extent to which his wider offerings were actually ready-made. While illustrations and details of the variations in these overcoat styles are absent, tailored menswear offerings during the mid-nineteenth century were typically conservatively homogenous. These coats were designed to comply with expected stylistic conventions, with differences being

subtle rather than flamboyant. Naming devices were useful in demarcating subtle stylistic differences between similar coats, and would have become familiar to consumers, but also were used to obfuscate and exoticize ultimately fairly generic designs. Where a McGee customer’s fancy dictated otherwise, this could be accommodated through tailored adaptations in the bespoke department and through the choice of textile or colorful linings, an area in which McGee’s draper’s department and his exclusive registered textile designs would have offered clear advantages.

Since his work with Holden, McGee had learned the value of diversification and he continued to pursue every conceivable opportunity to expand the business and publicize that expansion. Whilst the Pantechnetheca had always sold women’s bonnets, trimmings and accessories, in 1853 McGee trumpeted a further expansion of the premises—“The New Emporium, No.50. High Street, Belfast”—to include womenswear. The advert explains that “in consequence of the great increase in this Department of their business” the Pantechnetheca would now offer “Ladies Mantles, Cloaks, Pelisses, Jaquettes, Polkas, Vests, Riding Habits, Embroidered Cloth Dresses, &c” (*Belfast Commercial Chronicle* November 23). While the advert’s wording is oblique, it does state that the “stock” includes “a large assortment” of their own manufacture, although clarity of its exact status as ready-made, made to measure or bespoke is absent. Whilst by 1855 this department was sidelined due to the “increase in the Military Department of their Business” meaning they could not “spare the room at present” (*Newry Telegraph*

B E L F A S T.									
McGEE'S WINTER WRAPPER, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	£0	12	6
McGEE'S WINTER ENVELOPE, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	0	15	0
McGEE'S RUSSIAN SAC, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	0	17	6
McGEE'S IRISH FRIEZE OVERCOAT, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	1	0
McGEE'S BUFFALO COAT, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	1	0
McGEE'S PILOT CLOTH SPENCER, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	1	0
McGEE'S HUNTING SPENCER, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	1	0
McGEE'S ENGLISH FRIEZE OVERCOAT, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	5	0
McGEE'S MIXED WITNEY WRAPPER, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	10	0
McGEE'S CANADIAN WRAPPER, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	2	2	0
McGEE'S SUPERFINE PALETOT, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	2	2	0
McGEE'S WATERFORD WRAPPER, AT	...	...	...	...	...	...	2	10	0
PANTECHNETHECA, 46 and 48, HIGH-STREET, BELFAST.									

Figure 6
John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. “BELFAST MCGEE’S WINTER WRAPPER” advertisement, *the Downpatrick Recorder*, December 1, 1849. Newspaper image © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).

February 13), it does show McGee’s amenity in accommodating women’s tailored wear as early as 1853. By 1859, McGee’s boasts were back to menswear, advertising that a pair of men’s trousers would be “Made to Measure in a Few Hours,” for a mere 16s (*The Belfast Weekly News* April 23). Expansion went hand-in-hand with diversification. For instance, alongside, men’s and women’s tailored garments in ready-made and bespoke, J.G. McGee & Co. were appointed robe-makers to Queen’s college Belfast (*The Fermanagh Mail and Enniskillen Chronicle* December 6, 1849). At the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, John G. McGee & Co. showed embroidered waistcoats or “vests,” for which they won a prize medal (*The Belfast Mercury* March 11, 1852). According to Dunlevy, these

had been designed by the local school of art and then embroidered by the firm (1999, 151). Every business accomplishment, every twist-and-turn, was accompanied by confident, imperious advertisements announcing their achievements. It was, however, the invention of the Ulster overcoat which further elevated McGee’s renown to an international eminence.

“The Ulster A New Overcoat”
Importantly for our story, McGee was not all branding and bluster. He was, at heart, a merchant tailor, and his long and diverse career paved the way for his most notable success. In the 1860s he begun advertising the coat that would make his name—a new style of waterproof, tailored men’s overcoat, named the Ulster. It was an enveloping overcoat style,

intended to be worn as the outermost garment, advertised as waterproof active wear made from Irish Friezes, tweed, or wools such as Cheviot. From 1868, the firm promoted itself as not just a merchant tailors but “inventors and sole makers of the Ulster Coat” (*The Belfast Morning News* November 4). The coat was so popular that by 1871, McGee was producing the design for women as well as men (Rumball 2023). Whilst the Ulster’s ubiquity by the close of the nineteenth century may suggest its arrival was heralded with a fanfare, its introduction into McGee’s repertoire of tailored overcoats was surprisingly restrained—so restrained, in fact, that research has failed to corroborate the 1866 invention date confidently stated by Jack McCoy in “The Ulster Coat” (1985). Whilst McCoy may have had

documentation corroborating that date long since lost or out of the reach of this researcher, the absence of any mention of the Ulster before 1868 in McGee's frequent advertisements suggests otherwise. Further complicating the matter, McGee's registration of his designs appears to be incomplete. Records exist for multiple textile designs, alongside the design of envelopes, hats, as well as the design for a frock coat in 1846, at the National Archives (BT45/Vol 5 13434363). Despite this, neither a Design Registration nor a Patent for the Ulster overcoat in any form have been found, during any dates, in the British Library Patent Records, the National Archives Design Registrations nor PRONI, despite extensive research. As such, we can therefore only claim that the Ulster Coat, by name, was first advertised by McGee to the Irish market in 1868.

In 1868 advertisements, the garment appears as one offering buried in a long list of men's, ladies', and children's tailored clothing and accessories to be procured at John G McGee & Co. An early advert, typical of this subdued approach, states "THE ULSTER. This is the name of our NEW IRISH FRIEZE OVERCOAT; it is made extra long, and very warmly lined, and perfectly proof against any storm. Must be seen to be appreciated. Has been patronized largely by the Nobility and Gentry of Ulster" (*The Ulster Examiner* April 25, 1868). Little detail is provided as to its design, cost or appropriate wearing locations, and its placement within an inventory of wares belies the importance this overcoat would ultimately afford to McGee's renown. However, through a drip-feed of tantalizing textual suggestions, advertisements indicate its rapidly increasing popularity. Within

seven months, the Ulster warranted its own advertisements—in "The Ulster A New Overcoat," in *The Belfast Morning News* (November 4, 1868), McGee proudly and perhaps with slight exaggeration, claims that the garment has already been patronized by "HRH The Prince of Wales, Nearly all the Officers in the Guards, and a large number of the Nobility and Gentry of England and Ireland" with the cost of the garment a costly "THREE GUINEAS AND A HALF; or with Patent Lining FIVE GUINEAS." It is feasible that HRH The Prince of Wales did own an Ulster as he had purchased suits from the firm; and a decade later the satirist and illustrator George du Maurier depicted him and his sons, in the cartoon "Improving the Shining Hour," attired in matching coats strikingly similar to McGee's early Ulster design (*Punch* January 16, 1878. [Figure 7](#)).

Illustrations of the men's Ulster, however, do not appear in McGee's advertising until 1869. During that year, the business rebranded, introducing a medallion-style logo, standardizing its typography, and cementing the core phrases used for his Ulster overcoat advertisements for the following decade. These included "Invaluable to Gentlemen for Traveling or Driving to the Covert Side," indicating it was intended for leisured country pursuits of hunting, riding and driving; "Perfectly Waterproof" illustrating its appropriateness for inclement weather; and "Only Measure Required is the Width round the Breast, and Height" usefully indicating that the garment was either ready-made or made to measure, but not bespoke (*The Field, The Country Gentleman's Newspaper* November 20). These early illustrated advertisements use the same three images

repeatedly, one of the front, another the rear, and a third showing the rear of a different Ulster style, accommodating a hood and half belt, and illustrating the Ulster's distinctive design features. Here, the two-image Ulster is double breasted with eight buttons and notched lapels. Seamed up the back and sides it fell to full length, included a full button-closure belt, and featured multiple, large flap pockets on the hips and both breasts. Both versions are styled with the universal top-hat.

While illustrations are flat, stylized, and open to artistic license, the accuracy of this depiction by the creators of the illustrations is evident when compared to a rare surviving example. Nineteenth century tailored garments, especially utilitarian or sporting all-weather wear, whilst originally made en masse, are rare survivors today: their hard-wearing nature meant they were worn to collapse, and were seldom carefully kept; moth larvae nibble the wool and decay the fabric; and early waterproof treatments are unstable, often cracking and shedding. Furthermore, as archival collections concentrate on expensive, lauded, designer and rarefied items, utilitarian and everyday garments such as these are seldom represented. Despite these hardships, Springhill National Trust, Northern Ireland, holds two surviving McGee men's Ulsters, and one strongly resembles the illustration appearing in McGee's advertisements from 1869—an enveloping, durable, "warm and comfortable" coat ([Figure 8](#)). Its remarkable condition is testament to beautiful production and helps us understand the decades-long appeal of McGee's invention. The coat is an enveloping full-length, double breasted overcoat style, featuring 10

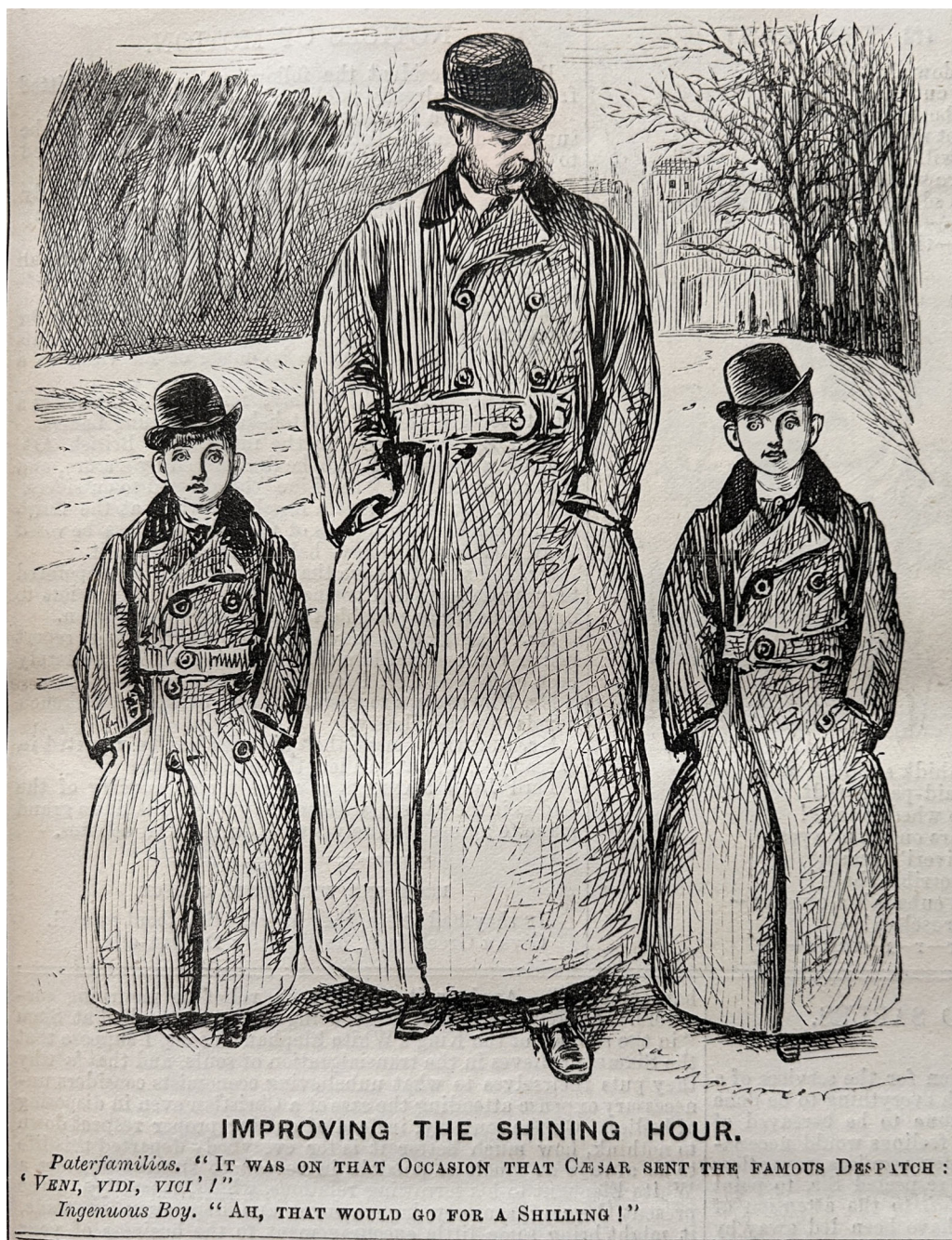


Figure 7

George du Maurier (1878) "Improving the Shining Hour," *Punch*. © Scan from Private Collection of Hannah Rumball-Croft.

matching brown buttons equally spaced the length of the front. It is made of a mid-brown thick-weave

wool material, possibly an Irish Frieze, with a brown silk velvet collar, which has begun to decay exposing the

canvas inner structure. The cut features drop shoulders and two side seams and a center seam cut as



Figure 8

John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. C.1870–1900. *Double-breasted wool Ulster* © Springhill National Trust, Northern Ireland. All rights reserved.

straight lines and vented, but no waist seam, providing a looseness to the shape. A closer fit is provided by a button-fastening waist belt in matching material. The silhouette of the coat has begun to slump—perhaps with age—but may suggest a deliberately roomy design. The coat features a series of large flap pockets, one at each hip and breast, and a very small semi-circular flap pocket on the outer left sleeve. Each feature chimes with those in the illustrated advertisement, suggesting this garment is a particularly early iteration of an Ulster, despite the collection having dated it as 1900. In the lining there is a manufacturer's label, featuring a black cotton

ground, golden yellow stitching stating “THE ULSTER COAT MCGEE & CO BELFAST INVENTORS & SOLE MAKERS,” and a stitched logo of a shield emblazoned with a red left hand (the Red Hand of Ulster) and a yellow crown (Figure 9). Internally, there is a further white cotton label, featuring a blue illustration of a belt and the words “McGee & Co. Belfast” and the number “17920”—likely a reference to a numbered design or model.

The coat is partially lined with a brown, cream, and bright red striped wool felt. No longer another example of nineteenth century menswear in a black and white sketch or hazy

photograph, but a real physical coat in a rich warm brown, with a vibrantly colored lining of brown, delicate cream, and luscious red. The distinctive lining resembles a grey, white, and bright red striped felt held in the Office of Registrar of Designs, patented by McGee in January 1870 and labeled “238051” (Figure 10). This preserved woven swatch appears to be a wool felt in a vertical stripe, a line of red thrust down its center. On examination, the swatch proved to be made of two layers of identical fabric sandwiched together, between them a zigzag of an unknown dark material and tiny black crumbs shedding from the swatch and collecting on the



Figure 9

John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. C.1870–1900. *Manufacturer's label, featuring a black cotton ground, golden yellow stitching stating "THE ULSTER COAT MCGEE & CO BELFAST INVENTORS & SOLE MAKERS," and a stitched logo of a shield emblazoned with a red left hand, and a yellow crown* © Springhill National Trust, Northern Ireland. All rights reserved.



Figure 10

John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. 1870. © The National Archives, ref. BT 43/399 Class 12 (i): Designs 234275–272795, number 238051.

paper. As discussed in detail in “The Ladies Ulster in the 1870s and 1880s: From “Eccentric-Looking” to “Beau ideal”” (Rumball 2023, 317), McGee advertised a waterproofing method used for his overcoats known as double-texture (*The Banner of Ulster* November 27, 1866) which entailed spreading a thin layer of rubber between two layers of fabric. Whilst the presence of rubber in this swatch cannot be corroborated without scientific testing, given its appearance and McGee’s advertised approach it is feasible that it is one such example. Waterproof fabrics were crucial to the

Ulster, allowing it to realize its potential as a practical overcoat for the wet weather of Ireland as well as for the Irish and British elite’s rural pursuits. Rubber transformed it from an item consumed for warmth and wind protection to one which could keep the wearer dry. This waterproof feature of the Ulster was especially lauded, featuring in a much-reprinted testimonial from a member of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade who praised it as “impervious to wind and rain” (*The Sporting Times* December 12, 1868).

The popularity of the Ulster exploded and made McGee’s name

internationally. By 1870, J.W. Wilson in Belfast, John Barron Clothier and Outfitter in Leeds, George J. Lake’s Tailor and Outfitter in Gloucestershire, and George Hobson in London were all offering their own versions of an “Ulster” overcoat, to name but a few (*Belfast Weekly News* November 5; *Leeds Evening Express* December 6; *Western Morning News* December 24; *Anglo-American Times* November 12). By 1871, Mr. Benjamin of Ulster House on Conduit Street in London, who would go on to become one of McGee’s prime competitors for the next two decades, was advertising



Figure 11

Duster. 1860–1865. Linen. Gift of Mrs. W. H. Chamberlain, 1939. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access under Creative Commons Zero (CC0).

“The Ulster Traveling Coat,” “The Ulster Protector,” as well as “Ulster Croquet Suits,” in a somewhat spurious, and merely linguistic, comparison to the famed overcoat (*The Field, The Country Gentlemen’s Newspaper* June 24). McGee profited from its admiration and quickly released new Ulster overcoat styles all employing the Ulster name. In 1871, *The Ladies Ulster* was released and that same year “at the suggestion of some of their leading patrons” McGee released the “Ulster Dust Coat,” a similarly cut linen or canvas lightweight version of the Ulster (Rumball 2023, 307; *The Field, The Country Gentleman’s Newspaper* June 10). Dusters were full length light overcoats intended to keep dust from riders clothing which had been around for at least a decade previously, for both sexes, as illustrated in a beautiful American women’s 1860–1865 example (Figure 11). By 1873, *The Ulster Deerstalker* had been released by McGee, intended “for the moors” in showery weather (*The Field, The Country Gentleman’s Newspaper* August 23). McGee offered patterns for all his designs, as well as orders dispatched to any part of the globe. Given how swiftly the Ulster design spread and how rapidly it achieved ubiquity, it seems entirely plausible that these patterns were taken up by professional tailors as well as ambitious home-makers, helping to secure the Ulster’s prevalence in their own offerings

McGee’s Ulster received international acclaim. In 1876, it won a Prize Medal at the Philadelphia Exhibition, for Originality of Design, Superior Quality of Material, and Excellence of Workmanship (*The Field, The Country Gentlemen’s Newspaper*

January 27, 1877). The Centennial Exhibition held in Philadelphia was to commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It was the first world exhibition held in America and was a huge undertaking. There were 35 participating nations, 200 pavilions, and reputedly over 10 million visitors between its opening on 10 May and the closing on 10 November. Exposure to the American market for the McGee’s Ulster overcoats during this exhibition would have been immense. In support of this marketing opportunity, McGee & Co. produced a sales pamphlet to promote the Ulster in the United States. The forty-two-page, black-and-white printed booklet featured detailed illustrations of “The Ulster,” “McGee’s Ulster Dust Coat” (Figure 12), and “The Ulster Deerstalker” ranging in price from \$30 to \$65, using their now familiar illustrations, as well as “The Ladies Ulster Coat for the Winter” and “The Ladies Ulster for Spring and Summer” at the same price ranges (Figure 13). These illustrations were joined by twenty-three pages of testimonies on the overcoats’ virtues. The pamphlet explains that McGee’s “Agents will be appointed throughout the United States, who will receive orders and give every information regarding these respected garments” (John G. McGee & Co. 1876, 2). Such commentary suggests McGee & Co. were utilizing the same international agenting system which had facilitated their break into the merchant tailoring business three decades prior. McGee & Co. Ulsters could be perused and ordered through licensed agents across the United States, with the finished garments dispatched from Belfast. This network broadened awareness of the

Ulster overcoat design, expanded the market for McGee’s goods, and opened new financial opportunities for the firm. It is clear that McGee was undertaking a logistically complex and financially ambitious enterprise.

The United States was an appropriate market for his Irish fashions, especially for a style which was linguistically entwined with the Irish landmass. Irish emigration to America during the nineteenth century was commonplace, made more acute in the wake of The Great Famine, and it is estimated that between 1845 and 1855, 1.8 million left Ireland for America (Janssen 2018, 200). By the time of McGee’s sartorial expansion, his Irish diasporic consumer was considered as “second generation” Irish Americans, who came of age between the Famine and 1875, aspiring to be part of America’s middle classes but whose sensibility was mingled with a cultural nostalgia for Ireland. As Janssen has argued Irish emigrants’ “nostalgic desire not only refers to the sense of being home but also to the (physical) landscape of that home” (2018, 202). As such, the appeal of The Ulster overcoat to Irish-Americans should not to be underestimated. Named after a distinctive portion of the homeland, it was produced in Belfast, from Irish Frieze, and fortified for the Moors and inclement weather of Ireland, fusing the garment with not merely Irish cultural sensibilities but its landscape. McGee’s campaign to ingratiate his design into the United States’ system of sartorial taste worked, as that year the American lady’s magazine *Harper’s Bazar* featured a large illustration and description of a “Lady’s Ulster with Russian Hood” (*Harper’s Bazar* December 9, 1876; Rumball

M'GEE'S
"ULSTER" DUST COAT,
 REGISTERED.



PRICES.

PLAIN LINING,
\$30.

SILK SLEEVES AND FACINGS,
\$40.

LINED THROUGHOUT WITH SILK,
\$65.

JOHN G. M'GEE & CO.,
BELFAST, IRELAND,

Inventors and Sole Makers of the celebrated "ULSTER" Coat, which has given so much satisfaction to all who have had them, have, at the suggestion of some of their leading Patrons, brought out

THE "ULSTER" DUST COAT,
 Which has only to be once worn to be appreciated.

PATTERNS AND ORDERS FORWARDED TO ANY PART OF THE GLOBE.

MEASURE.

The only measure required is the width round the chest, taken under the arms and over ordinary coat; also, the height of the wearer.

2

Figure 12

John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. 1876. Pamphlet for American promotion of the "Ulster" and the Ladies "Ulster."
 © Private Collection of Hannah Rumball-Croft.

THE LADIES "ULSTER,"

FOR SPRING AND SUMMER,

GUARANTEED PERFECTLY WATERPROOF AND ONLY 20 OUNCES WEIGHT.

INVALUABLE FOR LADIES TRAVELLING,

Being a Perfect Protection against Dust and Rain.

NEW MATERIALS SPECIALLY MANUFACTURED FOR THIS GARMENT.



DOUBLE BREASTED,



SINGLE BREASTED.

THE LIGHTEST WATERPROOF WOOLLEN FABRICS EVER PRODUCED

PRICE \$30.

*Patterns of Materials, and full Directions for Measurement, forwarded on application,
by the*

Inventors and Sole Makers,

JOHN G. M'GEE & COMPANY,

BELFAST, IRELAND.

Figure 13

John G. McGee and Co. Belfast, Ireland. 1876. Pamphlet for American promotion of the "Ulster" and the Ladies "Ulster."

© Private Collection of Hannah Rumball-Croft.

2023, 315) produced by the fashionable American department store Arnold, Constable & Co. Clearly, American producers had recognized the same opportunities which McGee himself had done via the agenting system; cutting out the middleman, to produce their own imitations of the Ulster overcoat design.

By now, control of the Ulster overcoat had slipped from McGee's fingers and into the hands of diverse tailors and clothing producers. They exulted the name of the Ulster overcoat while casting aside McGee's original iteration, and its hunting context. Producers' vagaries abounded, mixing characteristics of the Ulster with deerstalkers, chesterfields, and other overcoat styles, which increasingly made the garment "difficult to describe [...] for it admits of so many variations." This 1877 opinion piece, entitled "A Ridiculous Costume," grumbled that most tailors, in imitating the Ulster overcoat, had "succeeded in producing what is to all intents and purposes a dressing-gown [...] suggestive of loafing laziness and conscious swagger," and that these garments were being worn not on the moors or for hunting, but "for ordinary walking purposes of a town life" (*The Field, The Country Gentlemen's Newspaper* April 21). Despite this castigation, the popularity of McGee's Ulster overcoat by the 1880s led *The Tailor and Cutter* to commend Belfast as one of the "centers of fashion" saying that, "Belfast, though severed in a measure from the chief fashionable resorts across the Channel, is by no means regarded sluggish or behind the times. Even in the creation of new styles, it has stood more to the front than is generally credited" (September 14, 1882).

Conclusion

While the Ulster overcoat's popularity was flourishing, by 1883 McGee's health was declining and he was advised to undertake a health tour. In December he sailed to New York aboard the SS *Servia*, a "remarkable example of modern naval architecture" (*Times of India* September 17, 1881). McGee would have experienced the SS *Servia* as a floating hotel designed to be "made as comfortable and luxurious as possible, within certain limits" (Massey 2015, 173). Despite seeking restoration in the opulent surroundings however, on the return journey McGee succumbed to his ill health when the liner was mid-ocean. The register of death records his passing away on December 8th, 1883, aged 67, from "dropsy" (today termed oedema). Newspaper obituaries mourned his passing, offering a rare glimpse into public opinion of the renowned merchant tailor. The *Belfast Evening Telegraph* recorded how, "the wide circle of friends who enjoyed the friendship of Mr. John G McGee will learn with unfeigned regret of his rather unexpected death [...] Mr. McGee's amiability and kindliness of disposition and his generous and open manner gained him hosts of friends" (December 14, 1883).

Despite his apparent local popularity and his invention of one of the late nineteenth century's best-known overcoats, John Getty McGee's name has fallen to obscurity. Not a trained tailor, McGee's integration into the tailoring industry via diversification and agenting for B. Hyam & Co., and subsequently elevating his brand up the class strata, remains an extraordinary and compelling story. Whilst literature on the rise of the nineteenth century ready-made merchant tailor has been

unflattering, McGee ultimately had great success, thanks to three key tactics. Firstly, his focus was on men's apparel, recognizing the middle-class male as a growing fashion consumer. Secondly, his site-specific production acknowledged speed as a priority for consumers who were no longer satisfied waiting to procure ready-made tailored garments via shipping from Britain. Thirdly, his discernment and leveraging of both a growing confidence in Belfast as a place of shopping, with a distinctive identity, and a growing regional patriotism among his male customers.

McGee's introduction of a bespoke tailoring department illustrates his confidence in supplying more personalized, and therefore more complex, tailored offerings, and it both nurtured a sense of sartorial refinement and artisanal craftsmanship amongst the aspirational propertied classes, whilst seeking an opportunity to court Ulster gentry. By the time The Prince of Wales was shopping at McGee's, his star was on the ascent. The Ulster overcoat was imitated and co-opted by practically every tailor in the British Isles and beyond, becoming entirely universal for both sexes in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The stylistic tweaks that many tailors brought to their own Ulster variants meant that many styles were called "Ulsters" whether they held true to the design of McGee or not (Rumball 2023, 321). Despite this, McGee's Ulster overcoat clearly captured the zeitgeist of his era, and he and his designs deserve greater recognition in the annals of dress history.

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ORCID

Hannah Rumball-Croft  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5449-2384>

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