

Crowley, (Mary) Patricia

by Linde Lunney

Crowley, (Mary) Patricia (1933–2013), fashion designer, was born on 17 May 1933, in Taylor's Hill, Galway, the daughter of Hubert Vernon, who worked in a local branch of the Bank of Ireland, and Margaret ('Netta') Vernon (née Morrissey), daughter of a prosperous family of grain and seed merchants from Charleville, Co. Cork. Pat (as she was often known) was the eldest among three daughters and four sons. She attended several convent schools, including the Faithful Companions of Jesus convent in Bunclody, Wexford, but either ran away or was asked to leave when she complained about inappropriate attentions from priests.

By then family circumstances had altered, partly perhaps as a result of her father's gambling, and there was no money for further education. In 1954 she was awarded £1250 damages after the car in which she was travelling in July 1953, driven by a young veterinary surgeon, overturned, but she recovered from her injuries. Like many young women of the time, Crowley took a post as a housekeeper in America, but came back to Ireland in 1955 to study in the Brendan Smith Academy of Acting, and in the Grafton Academy of Fashion, while working part-time as a waitress in one of Dublin's first coffee shops. She tried working in a clothing factory, and in a bank, but neither suited her. Crowley was one of the first women to take up a job as an Aer Lingus air hostess. In the 1950s air hostesses were akin to celebrities; in March 1956 she even appeared on the well-known BBC television programme, *What's my line*.

She met her husband-to-be (Vincent) Conor Crowley, son of businessman Vincent Crowley (qv), at a rugby match, and the couple married in the Church of the Sacred Heart in Donnybrook in June 1956. Her husband was an accountant, who along with his brothers established one of the country's biggest accountancy firms, Kennedy, Crowley and Co., later known as Stokes Kennedy Crowley and then as KPMG. He also became a successful financial consultant and corporate financier.

As was obligatory at the time, the new Mrs Crowley gave up her job in Aer Lingus, but unusually for the 1950s, delayed having a family and went to work in the fashion industry. For ten years until 1967, Pat worked for Irene Gilbert (qv) in her Dublin salon, frequently travelling to the United States to represent her employer, who was ill at ease dealing with clients. In 1968 Crowley launched her own business, helped by a gifted craftswoman, Sheila Bradshaw, designing avant-garde knitwear based on Irish traditions. Her crochet and knitted garments, using all natural fibres, were made by handknitters scattered all over the country. Crowley's first Celtic-themed collection of tops, skirts and evening gowns was well received, but when one outfit featured on the front page of an influential American magazine, the sudden rise in orders and re-orders from the United States caused the infant enterprise serious difficulties.

For a time, while Irish handknits were in vogue, the business employed over six hundred handknitters, and lace wedding dresses in particular sold well. From 1970, Crowley had a shop in Molesworth Street, Dublin, but in 1971 it was damaged by fire. Added to this, the business was faltering, and Crowley had to re-think her business model. She started designing other garments as well, often using Irish linen from McNutts of Donegal or specially sourced Italian fabrics. From about 1976, when she opened a shop in Duke Street, Dublin, the firm made all the couture garments there, and she also stocked exclusive designerwear from continental designers not otherwise readily available in Ireland at the time.

Crowley's expensive outfits and glamorous evening dresses were sold to women who wanted to make an impression at society events. When she herself attended glamorous functions, she wore her own clothes superbly well. Her clientele grew among her husband's wealthy business contacts, and among the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and gentry that the couple met through their shared interest in horses and eventing. America was still an important market; through the 1980s, Crowley frequently put on shows in New York, and visited Dallas and Palm Beach, selling to women who appreciated the cachet of Dublin couture and the quality of the finish on the garments. She learned to design for individuals, to take into account changing lifestyles among the rich, and the need to produce garments that would travel well.

Over the years, Crowley dressed some of the world's most elegant and prominent socialites and female politicians; among them film and stage stars, and society figures such as Miranda Guinness, countess of Iveagh, and Eileen, Lady Mountcharles. Important American clients included Mary Lou Whitney, a wealthy member of a banking family, as well as some of the Kennedys and Vanderbilts. President Mary Robinson several times chose Pat Crowley dresses and coats for significant occasions such as her visit to the Vatican.

In the 1990s fashion houses were having to adapt quickly to the new casual styles, as the traditional 'season' and 'resort wear' and individually fitted couture gowns became dated. In her early sixties Crowley was possibly already contemplating a graceful retirement, but in 1999 was thrown from her horse and broke her hip. Her family (husband, two daughters and a son) noticed a decline in her cognitive abilities afterwards, and after her husband's sudden death on 20 September 1999, she rapidly deteriorated, as Alzheimer's disease claimed her. She retired in 1999; her shop was sold in 2000 and the stud farm and Georgian house at Dolly's Grove, Dunboyne, were sold a year later for £3,350,000. Increasingly helpless and disorientated, Pat Crowley lived for another thirteen years, until her death in Highfield Healthcare, Dublin, on 18 December 2013. Her funeral took place in Star of the Sea church, Sandymount, Dublin, and she was buried in Rooske cemetery, Dunboyne, Co. Meath.

Maureen Cairnduff, *Who's who in Ireland* (1991); Elizabeth McCrum, *Fabric and form. Irish fashion since 1950* (1996), 38–41; Robert O'Byrne, *After a fashion* (2000), *passim*; articles in the *Ir. Times*, especially 21 Dec. 2013; *Ir. Press*, 2 July 1971; *Evening Herald*, 25 Jan. 1975; *Sunday Independent*, 30 July 2000; 10 Oct. 2004; *Meath Chronicle*, 1 Dec. 2001; 28 Dec. 2013; *Connaught Chronicle*, 31 Dec. 2013

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