

The Irish Linen Industry

The Irish Agricultural Department recently issued in pamphlet form the papers read at the Industrial Conference held in connection with the Cork Exhibition of 1902. Amongst the most interesting of these is a 'Sketch of the Flax and Linen Industry of Ireland' by Mr. R. Lloyd Patterson, who says that the manufacture of linen was known and carried out in Ireland from the very dawn of history is abundantly proved by the numerous references to it in the works that have come down to us. Mr. Patterson quotes the following authentic incident: It is on record that when the Danes took Bangor, County Down, and despoiled the monastery there in the 9th and 10th centuries, and, later, at the sacking of Armagh by the English towards the end of the 12th century, part of the spoils of the victors at both places consisted of 'much fine linen,' of which material the robes and vestments of the higher clergy were then composed, and at which period also the custom of wrapping the bodies of the dead in linen had already come into vogue in Ireland. This country may also have been an early exporter of linen, as it is recorded that at a robbery which took place at Winchester, in 1272, among the articles stolen was some

Cloth of Ireland,

presumably, linen. It is, of course, unquestioned that the Irish linen industry received a great impetus by the settlement of a number of French Huguenots in the country about the year 1699. A number of them made their home in Lisburn, and the modern development of the trade is supposed to date from that period. At an early stage of the industry there was specialisation here and there and certain districts acquired a celebrity for particular kinds of linen. Dublin was the headquarters of the white linen trade until 1783, when, after the establishment of the linen trade in Belfast, we began to dispute with the capital its claim to the premier position. The modern development of the trade may be traced to the following chief causes:—(1) The introduction of spinning by machinery, and the subsequent introduction of wet spinning; (2) the application of the power loom to linen weaving; and (3) improvements in bleaching. Coming to local history, Mr. Patterson says: The beginners of the industry, as we know it in the North of Ireland, were Messrs. Murland, of Castlewella, County Down, who commenced spinning in 1828, and the Messrs. Mulholland, of Belfast. In that year the cotton mill belonging to the latter firm was burned down, and, on its rebuilding, it was equipped and started as a flax mill. Some years after Messrs. Mulholland's rebuilding and new departure, Mr. Martin, of Killyleagh, followed their example in the erection of a flax mill in place of a burnt-down cotton mill, and other cotton mills were early converted to flax. So lucrative did mill spinning prove to its pioneers, and so rapidly did it 'catch on,' that by 1853, that is, 25 years from its commencement, there were no fewer than 80 flax mills, containing

Half a Million Spindles,

in the North of Ireland. Simultaneously with the rise of the new industry an old established one was dying out. About the time that flax spinning was commenced in Ulster there were some 50 cotton mills in the province, available water power having been frequently an inducement to commerce. Of these there is only one—that at Springfield, Belfast—now working. This decline in cotton spinning had an important bearing on the earlier history of flax spinning, as the skilled operatives that were losing their employment in the former found it again in the latter—an immense advantage to employers as well as operatives—as to have had to train all the skilled labor required out of completely untrained material

would have been a tedious and serious matter. The 500,000 spindles of 1853 showed a net increase at the end of the century of about 338,000, the total being then estimated at 838,582. Ten years after the close of the American War the maximum number of spindles at work in the North of Ireland was reached, and amounted to 921,817. Since then there has been a slightly downward tendency; so that the total net decline during the past twenty-seven years is placed at 86,235 spindles. In about forty-five years Mr. Patterson recalls some forty mills silenced in Ireland, a number which includes mills at Derry, Coleraine, Larne, Lurgan, Dublin (3), Limerick, Drogheda, Carrick-on-Suir, and other places. It is pointed out that in Scotland and some parts of the North of England there have been even greater fluctuations, the once important flax spinning industry of Yorkshire being now almost extinct. The verdict of Mr. Patterson, however, on the position of the linen trade as a whole is that, as compared with other countries, Ireland is more than holding her own.

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