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# Irish coarse linens and the American market: an analysis from an 18th-century perspective

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## Introduction

This paper examines coarse linen production in 18th-century Ireland. The Irish linen industry itself has been much discussed in prior studies, nevertheless, there are few that paid much attention to the coarse linens. It is true that Ulster was the centre of the Irish linen industry, and mechanisation occurring there in the early 19th century was a success story for Irish economic history, which has been the focus of the prior studies. When looking at the 18th century, their interests lie in: how Ulster developed its high quality linen production and what influences British (English) mercantile policies had on the Irish linen industry.

It is well known that England placed commercial restrictions on Ireland's overseas trade in the 17th century. One of the most discussed is the Woollen Act of 1699<sup>1</sup>, which prohibited the Irish woollen export to other countries, except for England. Opinions vary as to its effects.

In the 18th century, linen exports increased sharply from less than 500,000 yards in 1698 to more than 40,000,000 yards in the 1790s<sup>2</sup>. Currently prevailing views do not admit that the Woollen Act of 1699 had any negative impact on the development of the Irish linen industry. Instead, they argue that the 1696 Act<sup>3</sup>, which removed English

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<sup>1</sup> 10&11 Will.III, c.10: An Act to prevent the Exportation of Wool out of the Kingdom of Ireland and England into foreign Parts; and for the Encouragement of the Woollen Manufactures in the Kingdom of England.

<sup>2</sup> Cullen, L.M., *An Economic History of Ireland since 1660*, London: Batsford, 1976, pp50-53.

<sup>3</sup> 7 & 8 Will.III, c.39: An Act for encouraging the Linen Manufacture of Ireland, and bringing Flax and Hemp into, and the making of Sail Cloth in this Kingdom.

duties on Irish linens, worked in its favour<sup>4</sup>. On this understanding, there appears a clear trend within the 18th-century Irish linen industry towards the machine-driven production of high quality linens in Ulster.

This view is sharply criticized by D. O'Hearn, who wrote: "it has become fashionable among Irish economic historians to emphasise the new opportunities provided by British colonial policy"<sup>5</sup>. He argues that the exchange of woollen industry for linen industry was not an equivalent one, but a forced transition controlled by England. The 1699 Act not only virtually wiped out the Irish woollen industry, but also rendered the Irish linen industry subordinate to England. This view presents the implications that the Irish linen industry existed under the complex economic interests of its British counterpart<sup>6</sup>.

This paper, admitting the subordinate position of the Irish linen industry, attempts to show that Ireland pursued its development as independently as possible of British rule, while enjoying the advantages acquired as a result of the British protectionist policies. As discussed in my previous book, it was not so much the fine branch of linen production as the coarse branch that was closely connected with the development of the Lancashire cotton industry<sup>7</sup>. While the production of fine linens continued to grow into the 19th century, that of coarse linens shrank after the Lancashire cotton industry succeeded in the large-scale production of lower quality cotton cloth in the last quarter of the 18th century. Until then, however, the production of coarser linens had shown a certain presence, which deserves more than a passing notice<sup>8</sup>. Bearing in mind the fact

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<sup>4</sup> Crawford, W.H., 'Ulster Landowners and the Linen Industry' (in Ward, J.T. & Wilson, R.G. eds., *Land and Industry: the Landed Estate and the Industrial Revolution: a Symposium*, Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971) ; Crawford, *The Impact of the Domestic Linen Industry in Ulster*, Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2005, p.22; Cullen, 1976, pp.38ff.

<sup>5</sup> O'Hearn, D., *The Atlantic Economy: Britain, the US and Ireland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, p.75.

<sup>6</sup> Murray, A.E., *A History of the Commercial and Financial Relations between England and Ireland from the Period of the Restoration*, London: P.S.King, 1903, Chap.7; Matsuo, Taro, *Kindai Igrisu Kokusai Keizai Seisakushi Kenkyu*, Tokyo: Hosei University Press, 1973, pp.57, 103. O'Hearn, 2001, p.67.

<sup>7</sup> Takeda, Izumi, *Asa to Men ga tsumugu Igrisu Sangyo Kakumei*, Tokyo: Minerva Shobo, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Classic works such as Gill's and O'Brien's cover the whole history of the Irish linen industry. However, they are rather descriptive, being short of critical viewpoints. Gill, Conrad, *The Rise of the Irish Linen Industry*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925; O'Brien, George, *The Economic History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, Dublin: Maunsel, 1918.

that “Irish linen” consists of many different grades of linens of varying quality, colour, pattern and texture, we find that each had its own *global* concerns, which influenced its birth, rise, and in some cases eventual downfall. This idea will be developed below by addressing the following questions.

The first question is: what kinds of linens were “fit for the Use of the Servants and Negroes in the British Colonies and Plantations<sup>9</sup>”? In the process of finding the answer, we will find that only specific kinds of German linens were used for clothing of slaves and poor white people in America. The market situation there largely influenced the way in which the Irish linen industry had to pursue its development, and Ireland in fact adjusted its linen policy accordingly. As a result, the production of imitations of specific kinds of German linens (osnaburg and dowlas) began to be promoted rather independently of British rule. To prove this, the policies of the Linen Board of Ireland will be discussed in the last section, which will be the answer to the second question: how and in what way was the production of coarse linens promoted?

### **1. What kinds of linens were “fit for the Use of the Servants and Negroes, in the British Colonies and Plantations”?**

To find the answer to the above questions, let’s look at the report of the linen committee appointed under the British House of Commons in 1751<sup>10</sup>. This committee examined the existing state of the manufacture and trade of linens in several places within Lancashire. The descriptions such as “Striped and Chequered” or “coarse” give us some information about the kinds of linens, meaning that the committee was not assembled for the general British linen manufacture or trade, but for those of specific kinds of linens that were produced in certain places within Lancashire. We would also like to stress that “the Merchants and Dealers in Linens made in Ireland” appears here,

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<sup>9</sup> See the next section as to this wording.

<sup>10</sup> *Report from the Committee, appointed to examine and state to the House, the Matters of Fact in the several Petitions of the Manufacturers of, and Traders and Dealers in the Linen Manufactory: together with an Appendix* (Great Britain, House of Commons), 1751 (hereafter, 1751 Report).

suggesting that the Irish linen industry had something to do with the Lancashire linen industry.

Having confirmed this, we shall move on to the Ireland-related documents submitted to the committee. According to an appendix of the 1751 Report, The Linen Board of Ireland resolved to grant premiums in 1746. This is a policy to encourage the manufacture of linens “made of Flax or Hemp of the Value of 6d. per Yard, and not exceeding 12d. per Yard, that shall be exported out of Great Britain to the Plantations, &c.” and “as is fit for the Use of the Servants and Negroes, in the British Colonies and Plantations”. Claimants had to satisfy the cloths conditions on width (“26 Inches Breadth, or upwards”) and value (“not less in Value than 6d. per Yard”), and the yarn used (“made of cleansed Yarn” and “all cloths had to be made entirely of yarn spun in Ireland”). Additionally, if the yarn was made from Irish-grown flax, preference was given. Premium granting was continued after this “with some Alternations suited to the present State of that growing Manufacture”<sup>11</sup>.

Below is the list of recipients of Irish linen premiums (1747-48).

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PREMIUMS given by the Linen Board of Ireland, for manufacturing, or causing to be manufactured, great Quantities of coarse Linen, between the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1747 and the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1748 fit for the Use of Servants and Negroes, in the British Colonies and Plantations. <sup>12</sup>

	Yards.	£
Messrs. Jeb	275,643	500
Mr. Wm. Lefanu	253,606	400
Mr. Ellis Price	135,011	300
Mr. Lewis Laurent *	71,594	200
Mr. John Pemberton	53,882	100

<sup>11</sup> The term “not more than 10d.” was deleted and “or to any other Part of his Majesty’s Dominions in Europe or America” was added after “exported to Great Britain”. See Appendix of 1751 Report.

<sup>12</sup> 1751 Report, Appendix No.VIII.

Mr. Thomas Reed	37,475	50
Mr. Jonah Tanner	31,604	50
Mr. Daniel Dickenson	19,236	25
Mr. Wm. Willan	11,165	25
Mr. John Starkey *	9,271	25
Mr. Henry Dempsy	3,777	20
Mr. Thomas Gamble	2,146	20
Mr. John Cross	1,902	10
Mr. George Holmes	1,538	10
Mr. Richard Dillon	869	5
Mr. John Newett	621	5
total		1,745

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It is not clear here what specific fabrics were “fit for the Use of Servants and Negroes, in the British Colonies and Plantations”. However, it can be inferred from other sources that they were “osnaburg” and “dowlas”. Robert Stephenson’s journals provide some clues. He investigated the undertakings of Lewis Laurent (who’s listed 4th), and John Starkey (10th) in his tours around Ireland<sup>13</sup>. In 1755 Laurent employed many people and engaged in making linens called sheetings and dowlas in Tullamore, King’s County. He himself owned a bleaching green, and finished his linens there. This bleaching green was also mentioned in his journal of 1762. Thus he had been conducting business at least for 15 years since he was given premiums from the Linen Board in 1747. In the same journal, we find “John Starkey” in Edenderry, King’s County. He used 10 looms and had his neighbors make sheetings, dowlas, osnaburgs from yarn spun in the neighborhood.

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<sup>13</sup> Stephenson, Robert, *An Inquiry into the State and Progress of the Linen Manufacture of Ireland. In which will be introduced Remarks on the principal Transactions of the Trustees of the Linen Board, etc...*, Dublin, 1757, p.144; Stephenson, *The Reports and Observations of Robert Stephenson, made to...the Trustees of the Linen Manufacture, for the Years 1760, and 1761*, Dublin, 1762, pp.73-75.

Sheeting would be granted premiums a few years after those intended for linens “such as is fit for the Use of the Servants and Negroes, in the British Colonies and Plantations” was laid out. The extension of the premiums to Sheeting was resolved because the Linen Board recognised “the good Effect of the Premiums granted upon coarse Linens”, which means “such as is fit for the Use of the Servants and Negroes, in the British Colonies and Plantations”. Therefore, it could be inferred that osnaburg and(or) dowlas were(was) in fact the linens “such as is fit for the Use of the Servants and Negroes, in the British Colonies and Plantations”.

### Osnaburg

Let’s explore how osnaburg and dowlas should be defined. Fabrics in many cases are named after their place of origin. But as they come to be imitated elsewhere on a large scale, the names become indicators to describe their characteristics and qualities.

Osnaburg was originally made in Osnabrück, Germany. Oxford English Dictionary defines osnaburg as “a kind of coarse linen (and later cotton) cloth originally made at Osnabrück, used esp. for making rough hard-wearing clothing, or for furnishings, sacks, tents, etc. ...(formerly) clothing given to servants or slaves”. Montgomery, an American textile historian, says “Coarse, unbleached linen or hempen cloth first made in Osnabrück, Germany. It was commonly used for trousers, sacking, and bagging. Made of cotton in the nineteenth century in blue and white or brown and white, stripes, checks, or solid colors, it was used for overalls and farmers’ clothing in the United States<sup>14</sup>”.

To put the two definitions together, we can conclude that osnaburg of the 18th century was an unfinished fabric. “Unfinished” here means no treatment (bleaching, colouring in whatever way, etc.) was applied after woven. Besides, it was coarse in quality and was used to make clothes for slaves and servants in America. Osnaburg was also used for furnishings, sacking, and other uses that needed strength for

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<sup>14</sup> Montgomery, F.M., *Textiles in America 1650-1870: A Dictionary based on Original Documents, Prints and Paintings, Commercial Records, American Merchants’ Papers, Shopkeepers’ Advertisements, and Pattern Books with Original Swatches of Cloth*, New York: Norton, 1984, pp.312-313

enduring harsh conditions. It was a simple plain-weave fabric and could be made from tow yarn.

We would like to note here that where flax or hemp was grown, even the poorest people could, with relative ease, enter into the production of osnaburgs. A large demand for Osnaburgs could be expected from 18th-century America, which had a growing number of populations of slaves and servants,

### Dowlas

Dowlas was also a coarse fabric, which originated from Dollens in Picardy, France. In the 18th century, however, it was mainly German-made ones that were sent to America. On the history of dowlas, William Beck wrote, "A coarse linen, very commonly worn by the lower classes...This, with the kindred fabric of lockram, was once imported from Brittany in large quantities". In the nineteenth century, the name was applied to a "strong calico made in imitation of the linen fabric"<sup>15</sup>.

In Stephenson's journals, we often find the description: "dowlas, white from the loom", which suggests that dowlas was made of bleached yarn. On the other hand, there are some cases that the adjective "unbleached" is attached to "dowlas". However it would seem reasonable to assume that it does not mean that all the materials used to make dowlas was not bleached at all. Bleached yarn was in fact used, and this is an important factor when defining "dowlas". Therefore, "unbleached" here means that it did not go through the bleaching process *after* the fabric was woven.

What complicates our understanding is that there were other cases that dowlas seemed to be bleached *after* woven. This mixed-up situation might demonstrate that dowlas was bleached because the yarn used was not white enough, or that some transition was occurring in that osnaburg production was merging into that of dowlas<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Beck, William, *Draper's Dictionary*, London: The Warehousemen and Drapers' Journal Office, 1886, p.100, and also see Montgomery, 1984, p.22.

<sup>16</sup> Stephenson, 1757; 1762; Stephenson, *The Reports and Observations of Robert Stephenson, made to...the Trustees of the Linen Manufacture, for the Years 1762 and 1763*, Dublin, 1764; Stephenson, *The Reports and Observations of Robert Stephenson, made to...the Trustees of the Linen Manufacture, for the Years 1764 and 1765*, Dublin, 1766, *passim*.

Considering that sheeting was completely bleached after woven and that osnaburg was not bleached in the form of yarn or cloth, dowlas comes in the middle after sheeting, with osnaburg being at the bottom if the three are ranked according to the quality. But they all were coarse kinds of fabrics if compared to the linens being made in Ulster during the same period.

Let's explore further into the subdivisions of dowlas. We have to be aware that there were many grades of dowlas at that time and each had their own characteristics that could make them different from one another.

A kind of Dowlas that was imported from Hamburg (Hamburgh Dowlas) to England was called "seven-eighth Sleek and Loom Dowlas"<sup>17</sup> According to Jepson Oddy, there were a wide variety of dowlas were made in Germany, and "loom dowlas" was "an uncommon fine and dense kind of linen"<sup>18</sup>. Stephenson said that this kinds of German dowlas competed with "Drogheda's" or "Drogheda Linen" on the British market<sup>19</sup>.

It is fair to say that "Drogheda's" or "Drogheda Linen" were named so not so much because they were manufactured in Drogheda, but because they were sent to Drogheda and traded there. Another contemporary, Mr. Penrose also said that Drogheda linen was made of purged yarn and not bleached after weaving, which is the same feature as that of dowlas<sup>20</sup>. He continued that the price range of dowlas was wide, from 5d. to 13.5d, which suggests that Ireland were then engaged in the manufacture of various grades of dowlas.

Let's go back to Oddy. While the high(est) quality dowlas were exclusively intended for the English market, some of the lower quality were exported to Spain or Portugal, and others were sent directly to America<sup>21</sup>. Therefore the answer to the question: What

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<sup>17</sup> *Journals of the House of Commons, of the Kingdom of Ireland*, 25/Dec./1781.

<sup>18</sup> Oddy, Jepson J., *European Commerce, shewing New and Secure Channels of Trade with the Continent of Europe: detailing the Produce, Manufactures, and Commerce, of Russia, Prussia, Sweden, Denmark, and Germany...*, vol. 2, Philadelphia, 1807, pp.129-130.

<sup>19</sup> *Journals of the House of Commons, of the Kingdom of Ireland*, 25/Dec./1781. On the Textile industry in Drogheda, see Fitzgerald, John, 'The Drogheda Textile Industry, 1780-1820', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society*, 20-1, 1981, p.36.

<sup>20</sup> *Journals of the House of Commons, of the Kingdom of Ireland*, 25/Dec./1781.

<sup>21</sup> Oddy, 1807, pp.120-130.

it is that" was fit for the Use of the Servants and Negroes, in the British Colonies and Plantations"? would be low quality dowlas and osnaburg.

British market and upper class of people in America.			<b>Sheeting</b>	bleached after woven
	"sleeked dowlas" and "loom dowlas"	Drogheda Linen (Drogheda's)	<b>Dowlas</b>	using bleached yarn, and not bleached after woven
"for the Use of the Servants and Negroes, in the British Colonies and Plantations"	made of cleansed yarn, 26 inches breadth and upwards, not less than 6d. per yard			<b>osnaburg</b>

## 2. The Use of Osnaburg and dowlas in the colonies<sup>22</sup>

As discussed previously, osnaburg and lower sorts of dowlas were the kinds of linens that could be used as clothing for servants and slaves in America. We would like to show here that actual usage pattern of osnaburg. Let's analyse the run-away and captured slave advertisements on the Virginia Gazette from the 1730s to the 1770s<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> This section is largely based on the chapter 4 of my book (Takeda, Izumi, *Asa to Men ga tsumugu Igrisu Sangyo Kakumei*, Tokyo: Minerva Shobo, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> I used a database offered by the Virginia Center for Digital History (VCDH, hereafter). The Windley's work of 1983 (Windley, L.A., *Runaway Slave Advertisements: a Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983) is one of the landmarks in the studies on the runaway slaves. While Windley only deals with runaway slaves, the VCDH's database covers runaway servants, soldiers, and sailors as well as slaves. And it also includes not only the runaways but also the captured. Searchers sometimes put their advertisements simultaneously on two or more different Virginia Gazettes. The numbers here are totals.

The Use of Osnaburg<sup>24</sup> by Slaves and Servants in Virginia.

	Slaves					
	number of people	shirt	trousers	breeches	others	total
1730s	15	14	1	0	1	16
1740s	10	9	2	0	1	12
1750s	17	13	1	3	2	19
1760s	74	64	12	3	7	86
1770s	229	189	41	17	47	294
total	345	289 (67.68%)	57 (13.35%)	23 (5.39%)	58 (13.58%)	427

	Servants					
	number of people	shirt	trousers	breeches	others	total
1730s	31	21	23	0	2	46
1740s	13	10	5	1	3	19
1750s	24	17	14	1	2	34
1760s	39	41	20	3	2	66
1770s	159	131	69	8	26	234
total	266	220 (55.14%)	131 (32.83%)	13 (3.26%)	35 (8.77%)	399

There are 2,533 advertisements in total from 1736 to 1780 and “osnaburg(s)” appears

<sup>24</sup> Osnaburg appears in various spellings. The respective appearing numbers are as follows. The spelling “osnabrug(s)” appears most, in 241 advertisements. Next, “ozenbrig(s)” in 235. The others are far below. “osnabrig(s)” in 19, “oznabrug(s)” in 4, “ozenbrig(s)” in 3, “oznaburg(s)” in 1, and “Oz-brig(s)” in 1. Turning to the 1780s and after, we can find other spellings such as osnaburg(s), osnaburgh(s), and oznaburgh(s). In more recent years, spellings became more English. This might indicate the growth of the use or the manufacture of this kind of fabric in the English-speaking sphere. I will not make distinctions among these different spellings and use the word “osnaburg(s)” hereafter to describe this kind of fabric.

in 504 of those, which is about 20%. The number of slaves who wore or had osnaburg is 345, and that of servants is 266. Because some advertisements dealt with more than one slave or servant, the total number of slaves and servants (611) exceeds the number of advertisements (504)<sup>25</sup>. Besides, slaves and servants in many cases wore or had more than one osnaburg when running away or captured. Thus the number of osnaburgs (826: 427 of slaves, 399 of servants) further exceeds the number of advertisements. 289 cases indicates osnaburg shirts worn or had by slaves, which is about 68% of the total number of osnaburg-use by slaves. In the case of servants, the rate of shirts is 55%, a little lower than that of slaves, but a distinctly high ratio of trousers. To sum up, osnaburgs were in good demand for shirts both by slaves and servants in the Colonies.<sup>26</sup>

Then, what about dowlas? We have to admit that appearances were few in comparison, nevertheless, there are other sources showing that dowlas was used as common clothing of white labourers and prisoners<sup>27</sup>. Considering that slaves were at the bottom rung of the Colonial societies, it is only natural that osnaburgs were chosen as slave clothes, and for the white labourers, wearing dowlas instead of osnaburgs was an important means of differentiating themselves from slaves. In the colonies, only the cheapest fabrics were allowed for slaves by law.

William Beckford, a considerable planter in Jamaica, said "all the Negroes and the poor White people were generally cloathed with German Linens, from 6d. to 9d..an Ell, called Osnaburghs". John Yeomans, a planter in Antigua, and John Ashley, who was very familiar with Barbados, made similar comments about slave clothing<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> If there are some cases that a specific number is not written such as "some" or "several", we here count them as 1.

<sup>26</sup> For studies on the clothes of slaves and servants using runaway advertisements, see Prude, Jonathan, 'To Look upon the "Lower Sort": Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800', *The Journal of American History*, 78-1, 1991, and Hamada, Masako, 'A Social and Historical Study on Virginia Cloth: Based on Runaway Slave Advertisements and Historical Remains of Clothes', *Journal of the International Association of Costume (Kokusai Hukushoku Gakkai shi)*, 17, 2000. Hamada, *A Social Study of the Clothing of Virginian Slaves in Revolutoinary America*, Tokyo: Tokyodo Shuppan, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Eden, Frederick Morton, *The State of the Poor, or an History of the Labouring Classes in England...*, London, 1797, pp.556-557. Buxton, Thomas Fowell, *An Enquiry, whether Crime and Misery, are produced or prevented, by our present System of Prison Discipline*, London, 1818, p.157.

<sup>28</sup> *Report from the Committee, on the Petition of the Dealers in, and Manufacturers of, Linens, &c. ...*

However, around 1740, it seems that Irish imitations began to be exported. We find some merchants dealing Irish linens in the export trade to America. James Huey, a London merchant dealing in Irish linens, who had been concerned in the linen business for 25 years in 1737, seemingly knowing very well about German linens, said “several Species of Cloths are made in Ireland to answer the Purposes of all the Foreign Linens, except Siliesias, and as good, or better in Quality... there are Linens made at Drogheda to a considerable annual Amount, of the same Width and Fabrick of the Narrow Germany and Osnaburghs”<sup>29</sup>.

Patrick Adair, one of the biggest importers of Irish linens, also pointed out that the manufacture of the imitations of German linens had grown to a large degree in Ireland.

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The Linen Manufacture was considerably increased in that kingdom of late Years... Linens to a greater Value come to Market from thence now, than heretofore... in July last, he sent over Samples of Foreign coarse Linens, Particularly Osnaburghs, to a Manufacturer his correspondent in Dublin; who hath since manufactured and sent him to London, above 20,000 Yards of that Sort of Lines... there is a considerable Increase of the Manufacture of coarse Dowlas in Ireland... he hath received above 8,000 Yards from one Manufacturer made since July last... the Osnaburghs are chiefly vented for Exportation... if the Manufacturers knew there was a Demand for them for Exportation, he thinks, they would be able to supply the whole Demand.<sup>30</sup>

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Beckford “went lately into Mr Adair and Mr. Jackson’s Linen Warehouses in London, and found Assortments of all Sorts of Home-made Linens proper for Jamaica, particularly Osnaburghs”, and “purchased 4,000 Yards of Osnaburghs as same and

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*Reported by Lord Limerick, 11th March, 1744 (hereafter 1744 Report), pp.71-72.*

<sup>29</sup> *The Journals of the House of Commons (Great Britain), 9/March/1737; 1744Report, p.68*

<sup>30</sup> *1744Report, p.69*

near as cheap as the Foreign. and had since purchased several other Parcels”<sup>31</sup>. The information about the quality and price of the Irish-made linens was shared among London merchants and planters.

The point here is that when the Irish dowlas and osnaburg began trickling into the American market in the 1730s, merchants and planters found that the Irish imitations were as good in quality as German originals. They were ready to sell or use Irish linens if they were sufficiently provided from Ireland, because “there was a Demand for them”. This sort of tendency was particularly noticeable among merchants based in the west part of the British Isle like Liverpool. The problem here is that the manufacturers and weavers on the supply side did not know the market situation at this point. However, the remarks of merchants and planters must have reached Ireland. The Linen board began shifting their focus towards the coarser branch of the industry in the 1740s and more intensively in the 50s.

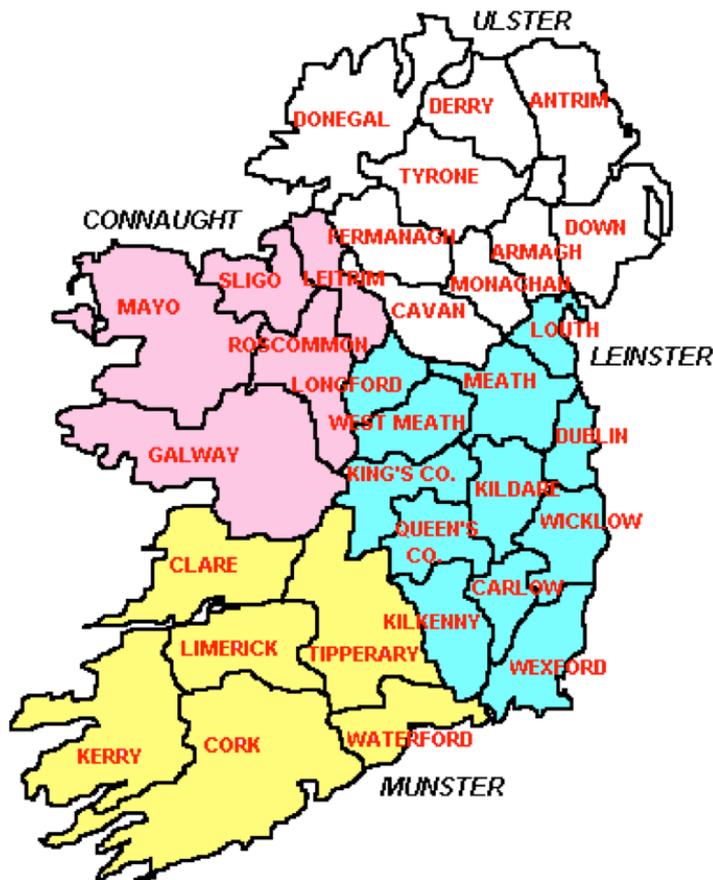
### **3. How and in what way was the production of coarse linens (osnaburg and dowlas) promoted in Ireland?**

We saw in the first section that in the latter half of the 1740s through to the 1750s, premiums were granted on a national level to several persons who *manufactured* a great number of yards of coarse linens. Similar types of encouragement were continued after that. In the 1760s however, new premiums began on a *county* basis. According to Stephenson’s journals, the Linen Board of Ireland resolved to give money to linen *purchasers* in all counties except six counties of Ulster. The counties of Antrim, Down, Armagh, Monaghan, Tyrone, and Derry were excluded because the linen industry in those counties had already been well developed. The county premiums started in January of 1761, and were continued for another decade<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> 1744Report, p.72

<sup>32</sup> Stephenson, 1762, p.2-3.



(Map: Counties in the 18th century)

Flax-used fabric, called “Bandle Cloth” had been widely produced all over Ireland since old times. This fabric was coarse, very narrow in width, and only for domestic use. Until around the middle of the century, the Linen Board had been trying to promote the production of fine linens. In the meantime, Stephenson and others argued repeatedly that it was the coarse branch that should be promoted<sup>33</sup>. The people in the south were pretty accustomed to making bandle-cloth from flax fibre, nevertheless, it was unrealistic to make them suddenly engage in the manufacture of fine linens. There was a large gap between making bandle-cloth in a pastoral way for their own use and

<sup>33</sup> Prior, Thomas, *An Essay to encourage and extend the Linen-Manufacture in Ireland, by premiums and other means*, Dublin, 1749, pp.12-13; Stephenson, 1757, pp.137-140, 196-197; and also refer to Stephenson, Robert, *Observations upon the present state of the Linen Trade of Ireland: in a series of letters addressed to ... the Trustees of the Linen Manufacture in which the Reports, Libel, and British examination of Mr. J. Arbuthnot ... are considered and refuted*, Dublin, 1784.

the commercial-based production of such high-quality fabrics as had been made in France<sup>34</sup>. They had no skill at all of making the latter kind of linens. It was more practical and easier to put them into the production of coarse fabrics. As regards to yarn, the spinning of coarse yarn had traditionally been conducted at home, embarking on the coarse linen industry would require no further skills for spinners too.

There was another positive reason for promoting the coarse linen industry. As discussed in the previous section, a sound demand for coarse linens could be expected in the American market because they served the use of slaves, servants and plebeians, while the consumption of high-quality linens was limited to upper class of people. Considering that the 18th century was the time when Britain was largely expanding its power in America, the propositions by Stephenson helped bring the market possibilities into perspective. Around the middle of the century the Linen Board began to recognise the importance of coarse linens in such a global situation that a growing number of German-made coarse linens were sent to the expanding American market.

Then, how was the production of coarse linens promoted in Ireland? We would firstly like to focus on the conditions for claiming premiums. To promote the commercially based linen industry, Ireland had to make linens that the consumers wanted. Bandle-cloth did not fulfill the purpose. Those who intended to claim premiums, had to buy linens in public markets, and “export or cause to the same to be exported”. Those linens should be “not less than 27 Inches wide”<sup>35</sup>. We have already seen above that the state-level premiums had required 26 inches and upwards. The point here is not one-inch difference, but that there had to be about double the width of bandle-cloth.

Now let’s look into the contents of Stephenson’s journals. He was directed by the Linen Board to travel around the south of Ireland, examine in each county “the State of

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<sup>34</sup> Since Louis Crommelin migrated into Ulster, his way of manufacturing linens had been a model Ireland should pursue. There remains a debate on how Crommelin affected the subsequent history of the Irish linen industry. See Mackey, B., 'Overseeing the Foundation of the Irish Industry: the Rise and Fall of the Crommelin Legend' (in Collins, B. & Ollerenshaw, P., eds., *The European Linen Industry in Historical Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

<sup>35</sup> Stephenson, 1762, p.2.

spinning, and weaving in every of them”, and give instructions to people “as shall appear to him best for improving and extending the LINEN MANUFACTURE”. When giving instructions, specimens of foreign linens must have been used, because he showed his satisfaction that the Linen Board, responding to his request, had ordered linen samples from abroad, which he said would “facilitate my explaining to Manufacturers and Weavers, the Nature and Quality of the different Branch I encourage them to pursue”<sup>36</sup>.

Below is a brief summery of the buyers and the details of bought linens for four years from 1761<sup>37</sup>.

■Chart “Candidates for the county premiums” to be inserted here

The answer to the question “how and in what way was the manufacture of coarse linens (osnaburg and dowlas) promoted?”will be summarised as follows. Firstly, Stephenson directed bundle-cloth weavers to make broader cloths not less than 27 inches wide. The direction included showing them samples of German linens. Secondly, he taught weavers and (or) manufacturers the way best fit for their skills and their circumstances. He often pointed out an imbalance between the quality of yarn produced in the neighbourhood and the quality of fabric the weavers were making. If he found that weavers were already making broad linens such as 7/8 or 3/4 wide, then he advised them to improve the quality to meet more the demand abroad. In the areas where the production of imitations of Ulster linens was being conducted, he advised them to abandon it and pursue the coarser branch of manufacture that was more suited to their skills.

It appears from Stephenson journals that the manufacture of coarse broad cloth permeated widely through non-Ulster Ireland. The premiums had some effect by taking advantage of the tradition of bundle-cloth production at least during the first half of the 1760s. There were many who followed the instructions Stephenson had

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<sup>36</sup> Stephenson, 1762, pp.5-7.

<sup>37</sup> Stephenson, 1764; 1766.

given. Some landlords encouraged their local people to make dowlas or osnaburg by granting their own premiums, developing infrastructures, and building weavers' colonies. Some large undertakers not only bought up linens from small weavers, but were themselves engaged in manufacturing or bleaching linens on a large scale. All these undertakings started with pursuing the production of imitations of German linens (osnaburg and dowlas) not Ulster linens and the influence came from the American market that consumed a large amount of German linens.

The following points are worth noting when positioning dowlas in relation to the similar kinds of fabrics. Firstly, appearances of "osnaburg" largely decreased in the journal of 1762 and after<sup>38</sup>, in comparison to that of the previous years. In the journal of 1760-61<sup>39</sup>, Stephenson witnessed thriving osnaburg production in several places, to take some examples of which, Clara in King's Co., Stroakstown in the county of Roscommon, and the southern part of the county of Cork<sup>40</sup>. In 1762, however, he left no account of osnaburg in those locations. Judging from Stephenson's remarks such as "Doulass and other Manufactures resembling Ozenbrigs"<sup>41</sup>, it is possible to infer that the production of osnaburg was being assimilated to that of dowlas around 1760. It might be evidence that the overall quality of osnaburg was improving into the level of dowlas, as those who were involved in the production of osnaburg acquired higher skills and techniques. However, this point, being a matter of speculation, requires further investigation.

Secondly, the price range of dowlas purchased by candidates for county premiums was fairly wide from around 9d. to 13d. per yard. As Stephenson's descriptions of fabric names were not always consistent, it is not clear whether those of "7/8", "3/4", or "yard wide linens" could be categorised as "dowlas" or not. A linen called "Caleraine" which was widely made in the counties of Derry and Donegal was a 7/8 yard-wide fabric, and its price varied approximately between 14d. and 16d. per yard. Considering that both were used for shirting, it might be concluded that the higher

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<sup>38</sup> Stephenson, 1764; 1766.

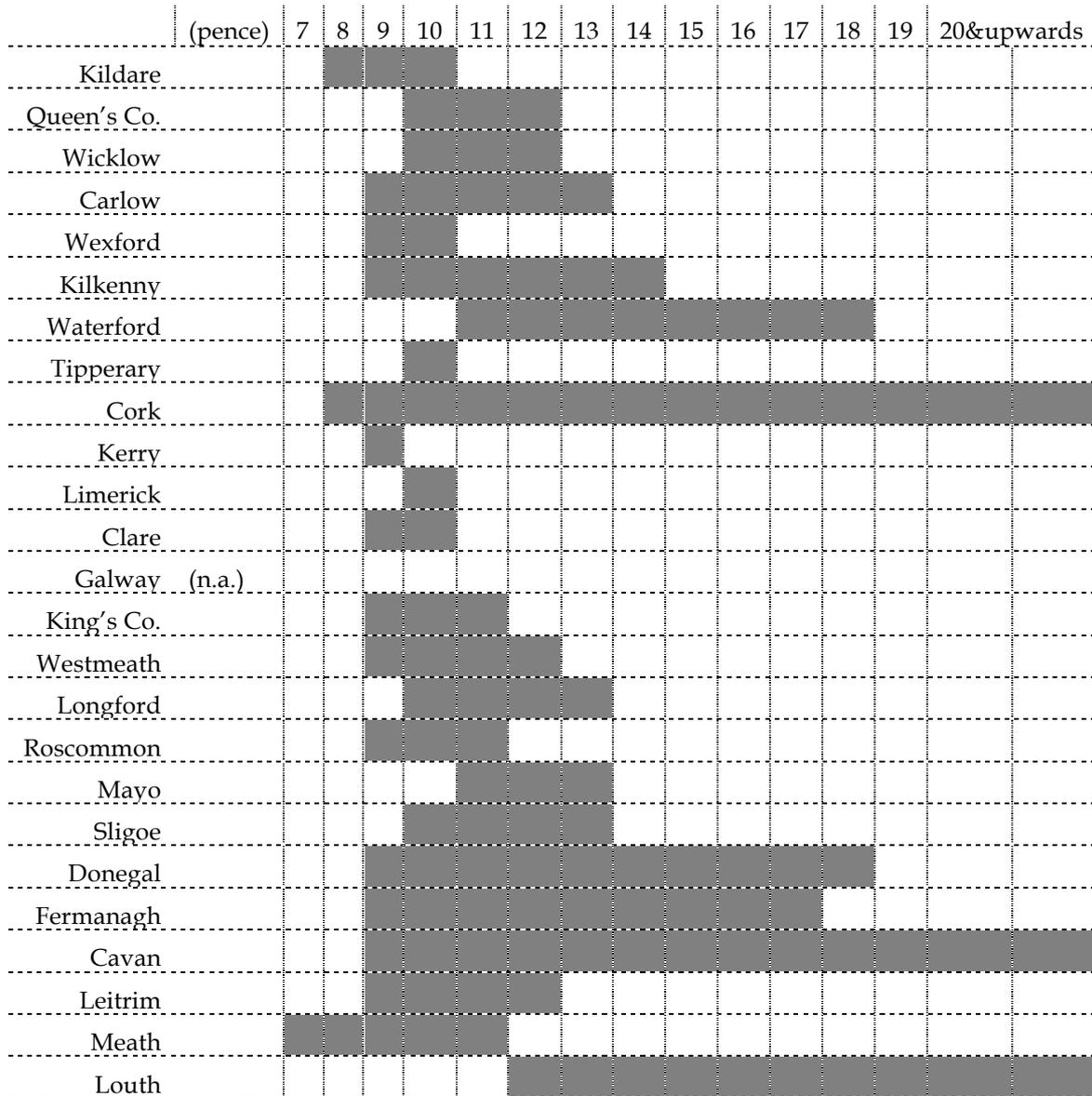
<sup>39</sup> Stephenson, 1762.

<sup>40</sup> Stephenson, 1762, pp.37, 60, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Stephenson, 1762, p.19.

grade of dowlas and the lower grade of Caleraine overlapped with each other in quality. However, this remains to be seen.

Approximate price range of linens that were purchased by candidates for county premiums



## Conclusion

It is true that Ireland increased its linen exports by taking advantage of government assistance from Britain (England). In addition to the 1696 Act, British export bounties

had subsidised the export of Irish linens especially since the 1740s<sup>42</sup>. However, it is also true that British policies put the Irish linen industry in a subordinate position to that of Britain.

In this paper I have discussed a much-neglected facet of the 18th-century Irish linen industry, by shedding light on coarse linens such as osnaburg and dowlas. Ireland pursued the development of its linen production rather *independently*, even if it was under British rule. Responding to market conditions, the Linen Board chose the best way possible to utilize its labour and technology skills which varied considerably within Ireland by region and encouraged the production of linens that sold well on the export market, at a time when there was stiff competition among German and British linens and Indian calicos. In the middle of the 18th century, Lancashire began to receive powerful support from the British government at the expense of Ireland, and rapidly became a strong rival to its Irish counterpart in terms of not only the production of similar linens but also the consumption of Irish flax yarn<sup>43</sup>. Though this

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<sup>42</sup> 15&16 Geo.II, c.29: An Act for granting to his Majesty an additional Duty on foreign Cambricks, imported into Great Britain; and for allowing thereout a Bounty upon certain Species of British and Irish Linens exported, 18 Geo.II, c.25: An Act for allowing certain additional Bounties on the Exportation of British and Irish Linens, 29 Geo.II, c.15: An Act for granting a Bounty upon certain Species of British and Irish Linens exported; and taking off the Duties on the Importation of Foreign Raw Linen Yarns made of Flax.

<sup>43</sup> As the 1771 Bounty Act extended the export premiums only to *British* checks and stripes excluding the Irish ones, Ireland strongly criticised it, saying that it was “the first Act since the Year 1696, whereby any Linen Manufacture whatever has received a direct Preference before that of Ireland”, as being contrary to the spirit of the agreement between England and Ireland. However, Ireland had in fact suffered indirect disadvantages as a result of English (British) policies. Irish coloured linens were always restricted in the English market. The 1705 Act which allowed free export of Irish linens to the English colonies in America, excluded any coloured linens. In the next decade, Britain imposed prohibitive duties on “foreign” printed linens, which was often interpreted to include Irish linens. As to the flax yarn import, Britain reduced its import duties in 1752, and abolished them four years later, which accelerated the drain of yarn from Ireland, and became a serious issue for those who had a stake in the production of Irish linens. The relevant acts are as follows: 3 & 4 Anne, c.8: An Act to permit the Exportation of Irish Linen Cloth to the Plantations, and to prohibit the Importation of Scotch Linen into Ireland, 10 Anne, c.19: An Act for laying several Duties upon all Sope and Paper made in Great Britain, or imported into the Same; and upon chequered and striped Linens imported; and upon certain Silks, Callicoes, Linens, and Stuffs, printed, painted, or stained..., 12 Anne,(stat.2,) c.9: An Act for laying additional Duties on Sope and Paper, and upon certain Linens, Silks, Callicoes and Stuffs...24 Geo.II, c.46: An Act for repealing the Duties now payable upon Foreign Linen Yarns, and for granting other Duties in lieu thereof, 29 Geo.II, c.15: An Act for granting a Bounty upon certain Species of British and Irish Linens exported; and taking off the Duties on the Importation of Foreign Raw Linen Yarns made of Flax.

theme merits special attention, it is somewhat beyond the scope of this paper.