



Scottish Linen and the Caribbean Economy

Source A

Source:



In 1734, a bounty on certain British and Irish linens exported to the plantations came into operation under the 1742 Act, effectively cheapening the price of Osnaburgs in the colonies. “Increased in 1745 so that even the cheapest cloths received the bounty... its effect was transformational”. Dundee’s output of linen “rose from 817,416 yards in 1747 to 1,275,689 yards in 1759”. As Professor Christopher Whatley explains, “over the course of the next half century, roughly nine-tenths of the linen exported from Scotland, most supported by the bounty system, was destined for use in the plantations”. That is, mainly to clothe the enslaved peoples.

Production of linen in Scotland increased from “£835,081 in value in 1784-5 to £1,047,598 in 1799-1800” mainly because of coarse linen production, the centre of which was Dundee. In 1818, Dundee, Forfar and Kirriemuir manufactured “over 8 million yards of this linen, four fifths of the total yardage of Osnaburg manufactured in Scotland”. Undeniably, the prosperity of the linen trade in Scotland and more specifically Dundee, was hinged on the exploitative tobacco and sugar industries of the US, Caribbean and South America and the enslaved people forced to toil in those regions. For a time, Edinburgh was more successful in its output of Osnaburgs but Dundee came to dominate in its production of Osnaburg. As stated in the 1782 Dundee Register of Merchants and Trades: “Dundee is in a very flourishing state; manufacturers go on briskly, and there are near one hundred sail of shipping belonging to the place. He several manufactures consist of linen (especially osnaburgs), sailcloth, cordage, thread, stockings, buckrams, tanned leather, shoes, and hats...The osnaburg trade is the staple, of which there has been above four millions of yards annually stamped of late”. Dundee linens was described in the Gentleman’s Magazine in 1742 as being “the poorest and meanest” of all linens.

Indeed, its coarseness and inexpensiveness meant that Dundee Osnaburgs was in high demand by enslavers who sought to reduce labour costs by buying the cheapest clothing for the enslaved. In 1764, Dundee exported “4,242,653 yards of Osnaburg, besides 165,000 yards of bagging for cotton wool”. With Britain adding to its empire through the Treaty of Paris, the transatlantic colonial market became exponentially expanded and “Dundee’s inhabitants were amongst the winners”. The European market gaze of disdain towards Dundee linen did nothing to deter the industry as its main markets lay overseas in the transatlantic colonies. Plantations in the Caribbean, Brazil and southern states of America proved to be a profitable market for Dundee linens. Writing on the markets for Scottish linen from 1730 to 1755, Durie calculated that “Ninety per cent of all linen exported from Scottish ports went to America or the West Indies” with the largest share going to Virginia and Jamaica. The linens which served as clothing for both the enslaved people and enslavers comprised a major part of the tobacco and sugar ships export cargoes that ultimately supported and thrived on slave societies and the plantation system.



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Source B

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This quote from Molly Lambourne describes Edinburgh's linen industry.

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During the 18th century, linen manufacturing was the largest industry in terms of employee figures, with 90 per cent of all Scottish linen exported to North America or the West Indies. While Scotland was also involved in the manufacture of higher quality fine lawn cambric linens, its primary production focused on the cheap, coarser fabric, known as slave cloth, which was exported in vast amounts across the Atlantic to clothe the enslaved workers on the Scottish-owned plantations. The British Linen Bank, whose roots lay in the Scottish linen industry, stood on St Andrews Square; now the Royal Bank of Scotland”.

Molly Lambourne, Edinburgh's historical association with the transatlantic slave trade,
January 2019

Source C

Source:



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“In 18th-century Edinburgh, banks developed rapidly. This was aided by a strong credit system, which resulted from Leith's position as a trading port. Scotland's import and export trade as well as much of its industrial development had many links to the Transatlantic slave system. The Leith Banking Company was established in 1793 by 18 partners, many of whom were colonial merchants. The British Linen Bank grew out of the Edinburgh Linen Co-Partnery, an association of linen traders, to become the biggest single firm in the entire Scottish economy.”

Lisa Williams, National Museums Scotland, Scotland and the Transatlantic slave system