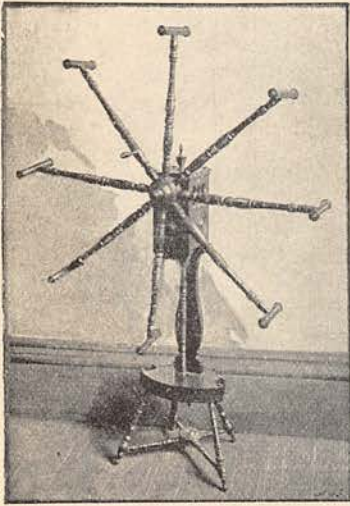


## THE WHITE FIELDS OF ULSTER.

(ILLUSTRATED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY MR. R. WELCH, BELFAST.)



OLD IRISH REEL, MADE ABOUT 1770.

near Barrow and Ulverston; and in Ireland, in the north, the "white fields" of Ulster give special character to landscapes near Lisburn and Lurgan. The story of the manufacture of flax goes back many generations.

It is a story that has its romance. There have been

many parts of the United Kingdom where special industries not only predominate, but where their presence is perceptible over wide areas. Coal-fields mark huge tracts of country; chemical fumes hang over parts of the Tyne and the Clyde; the iron ore of the Furness district makes ruddy many a field and stream

viceroy who have encouraged the industry, and others who have boasted that they have laid waste its chief centres. Lord Strafford is credited, for instance, with the spending of thousands of pounds of his own money in endeavours to promote the linen industry in Ireland, and with the bringing of looms of the best design from Amsterdam for distribution amongst the Irish weavers.

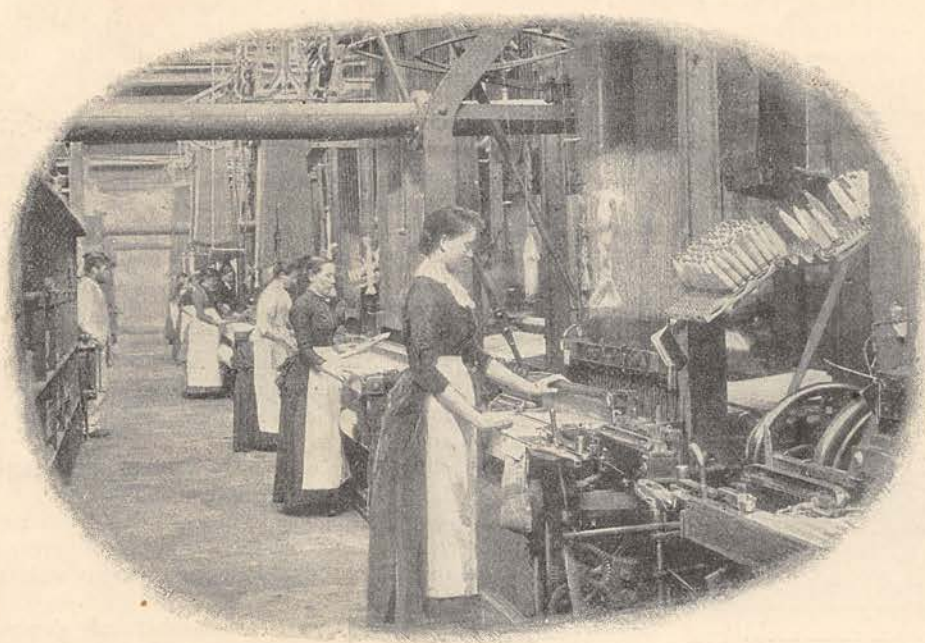
Huguenot refugees, banished by persecution from France, settled in the north of Ireland, and Louis Crommelin is one of those who are honoured for their industry, their love of their adopted country, and their endeavours to improve the condition of its people. In olden days we are told by Muggeridge's Report on the Linen Manufacture of Ireland:—

"The spinning of yarn by hand was the ordinary occupation of the females of almost every family in the province of Ulster connected with the linen weaving."

Mill-spun yarn has almost entirely displaced hand-spun, but the linen trade is still the great and the most distinctive of the industries in the north of Ireland. And there was for that industry lordly patronage, and even royal patronage was accorded to Lisburn damask; whilst linen boards and flax societies had for years governmental grants. And though these have passed away, the "Flax Supply Association" has for more than a quarter of a century been one of



THE LINEN HALL, BELFAST.



DAMASK WEAVING AT ST. HELEN'S WORKS, BELFAST.

the most useful of the trade associations of the kingdom.

Over a wide area of the north of Ireland the signs of the linen trade in the webs of linen that are spread in whiteness over the green fields are visible from many a point on the railway from Belfast to Dublin; in the many mills that send up their tall chimneys towards the sky; and in the tender hues of the flax as it shows itself in fields in Ulster to an extent unseen in any other part of the kingdom. And thus it is that by the abundance of the raw material, of the facilities for manufacture, of the labour needed, and of the experience transmitted for generations, Ulster has from Larne to Lurgan so much of the linen manufacture located within its bounds; and nothing strikes the traveller more frequently than the sight of its fields whitened with the linen spread out to bleach. Here and there are long broad lines of white spread on the grass that is of the greenest, and the interlacing line of emerald and of white suggest huge ribbons stretching in parti-coloured beauty on the earth. And the predominant industry in Ulster has put its mark on country and on people.

In the great towns huge mills gather in their workers much in the same manner that the cotton mills of the Oldham district do—though the numbers for each are less, and there is more of Irish vivacity in the workpeople.

Of the many processes in the mills, from "roughing" the flax and "heckling" to the "calendering" of the webs, it is not needful to write in detail; machines varied, costly, and complicated do very much of the work—machines for combing, cleaning,

preparing, spinning, washing, beetling, and many another process are at work; and by them the brown-hued flax is pulled, sorted, straightened, wound, conducted, woven as warp or weft, and so improved that it finally emerges as pure white linen or damask. But away from the towns, in little valleys and on rugged hill-sides, there is still the working of the hand-loom.

Here is such an example of Irish industry: In a little hamlet not far from Armagh a main road runs unevenly over the hills, by comfortable farmsteads, owned by descendants of Scotsmen who long ago settled in one part of Cromwell's "plantation," and past one-storeyed thatched cottages, whose white-washed fronts are partially covered with climbing plants.

Just off from this—not a stone's throw—are two little dwellings, one occupied by a weaver and his family, the chief room of the adjoining dwelling being given up to the loom. And here the weaver meets you, and with frank Irish courtesy shows you his method of work, and the shuttle flies from his busy hands as the web is woven.

It is a form of the linen industry that is being decreased from year to year, for the mills are made more perfect in machinery and larger in production; and in Ireland, as in other countries, the extent of the work of the hands is being reduced by the application of steel and steam.

In some of its aspects the alteration is not an improvement; it is the removal of the small industries that gave work to the hamlets into the towns; but in Ulster—apart from Belfast—there is not the aggregation of population in towns that there is in, say, the

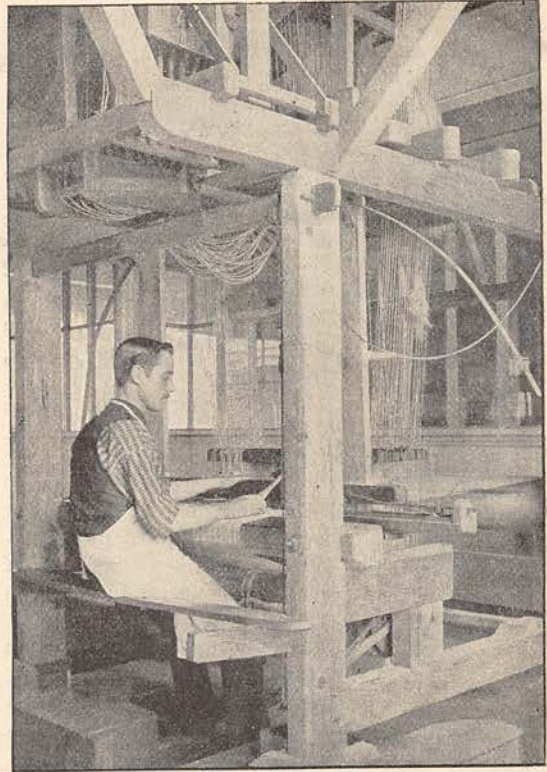
cotton district of England ; and the necessities of the linen trade enforce the provision of green areas near the mills, so that the white fields of Ulster minister alike to the purity of the linen and of the air of the towns near.

The predominant industry is not a very highly-paid one ; but the workers in Lisburn and Lurgan exercise thrift as well as industry, and in the villages where hand weaving still survives it is part of the occupation of the household ; and the care of the patch of land, of the cow, and of the pig give employment that is at least as much conducive to health as to economy of expenditure.

In the same way that handloom weaving has generally lost ground, so has also the special work of handkerchief weaving, and of hem-stitching by hand, but they cannot be considered extinct, though decaying.

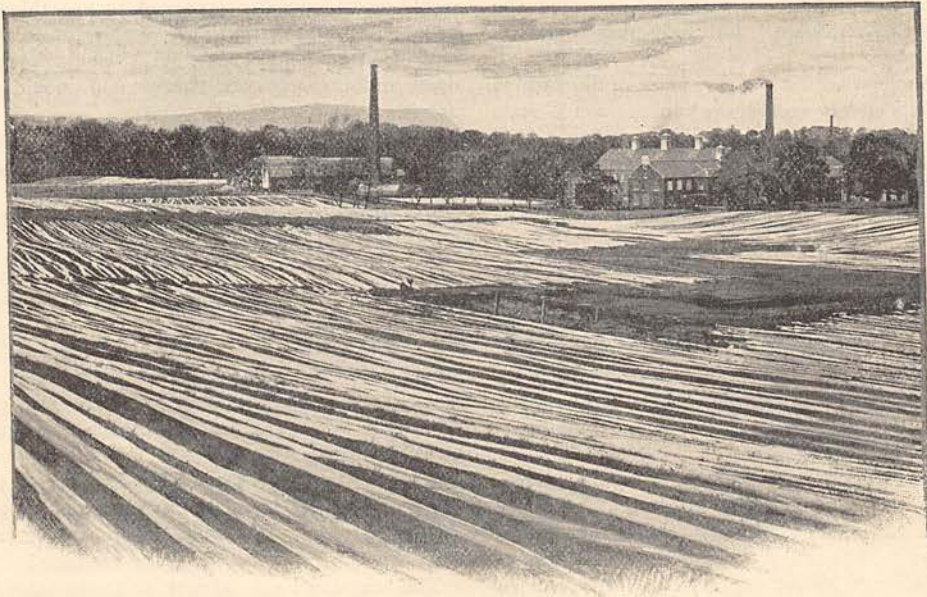
If in towns like Lisburn, in model establishments like Bessbrook, and in the villages down into the county of Armagh, the linen manufacture has its centres, it is in Belfast that the linen trade has its great seat. There are not only the huge warehouses and offices of the makers and merchants, but there also in the retail establishments are some of the finest of the buildings that the great capital of the north of Ireland boasts.

It is an industry that employs its thousands of hands, as is the case at the shipbuilding yards near, it is one of the most distinct and most ancient of the trades that centre there ; and the vastness of the capital it employs, the large employment it gives to labour, and the picturesqueness of its surroundings make one of the special features of the north of Ireland



A HAND-LOOM WEAVER AT WORK (CO. ANTRIM).

those bleaching fields which we have called the White Fields of Ulster.  
J. W. S.



GLENMORE BLEACH GREEN.