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THE BRITISH LINEN TRADE WITH THE UNITED STATES IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND  
NINETEENTH CENTURIES

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In the eighteenth century, a great deal of linen was produced in the American colonies. Virtually every farming family spun and wove linen cloth for its own consumption. The production of linen was the most widespread industrial activity in America during the colonial period. Yet at the same time, large amounts of linen were imported from across the Atlantic into the American colonies. Linen was the most important commodity entering into the American trade. This apparently paradoxical situation reflects the importance in pre-industrial society of the production and consumption of the extensive range of types of fabrics grouped together as 'linen'.

The range of uses of 'linen' is greater than for any other type of fabric. Clothing, bedding, the table and other domestic needs required various sorts of linen, and the transport and packaging industries required others - sailcloth, sacking and bagging of all sorts. The range of quality was considerable, from the finest cambrics and lawns and damasks to the coarsest sackcloths. In colonial America there was a sort of dual economy: basic linen needs were provided outside the market by the widespread domestic production of homespun coarse linen, while the market was dominated by a range of better-quality (though still low-priced) linens imported from England, Scotland and Ireland, and imported too from the continent of Europe (especially Germany) via London.

The point was well made by Thomas Fitch, a Boston upholsterer, writing in 1726. 'Very coarse  $\frac{3}{4}$  Garlets [i.e. linen from Gulik, or Jülich] not being serviceable won't sute our people', he wrote, 'though we certainly have enough that are poor. Yet they won't wear Garlets but homespun linens, or rather cotton and linnen cloth that is very durable though not so white. Those that buy Garlets therefore are for a sort that will wear and look pretty and so decline buying coarser than [pattern] No.1772'. (Quoted in Montgomery, 1984, p.345.) The rapid population growth in the American colonies - from little over a quarter of a million in 1700 to nearly a million and a quarter in 1750, 2.2M in 1770 and 5.3M by 1800 - resulted in an expanding and buoyant market for British and European linen. Linen became the most important single commodity shipped across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century.

1. Linen Production in England, Scotland and Ireland.

The production of linen in England, Scotland and Ireland was transformed in the early eighteenth century. From a situation in which the market had long been dominated by continental producers, especially in France and in the low countries, a new economic



context emerged which made possible the development of significant linen industries in different parts of the British Isles. In both Ireland and in Scotland, it was official policy to encourage the linen industry, especially after the establishment of what were in effect industrial development corporations for those countries - the Board of Trustees for the Linen and Hempen Manufactures in Ireland in 1711, and the Board of Trustees for Manufactures in Scotland in 1727. In England, official encouragement of the linen industry was lower key. The industry grew by a process of import-substitution as tariff levels were raised against foreign producers.

Up to 1690, the English duty on imported linen was at the level of 7½% - the 'old subsidy' of 'poundage', i.e. 1s in the £, plus the 'one full moiety over and above' charged in the Tonnage and Poundage Act of 1660. This apparently *ad valorem* 7½% was in reality charged on the fixed valuations laid down in the Book of Rates appended to the 1660 Act which identified about fifty types of linen, differentiated by type, use, size or place of origin. In each of the great periods of warfare which punctuated the eighteenth century, the government's fiscal needs resulted in sharply increasing customs duties. The War of the Grand Alliance (1689-97) produced a 2½% increase in the duty on linens generally in 1690, and many types of linen received a 5% increase in 1697. The War of the Spanish Succession (1701-13) led to a further 5% increase in 1704-5, reduced by two-thirds in 1707 after much complaining by the linen merchants and Dutch producers. But in 1712 the duty on chequered and striped linen was increased by 15%, and by a further 15% in 1714. Certain types of linen after 1714 bore customs duties totalling over half their value. The War of the Austrian Succession produced an additional general 5% increase in 1748, the Seven Years War produced another 5% in 1759, and in 1779 the War of American Independence led to yet another 5% increase. Thus the level of customs duty on linen imported into England doubled between 1690 and 1704, and doubled again between 1748 and 1779. (Harte, 1973, pp.75-84.)

As a by-product of the government's fiscal needs rather than as a result of any 'mercantilist' master-plan, a protective environment was created for English linen producers. Duty-free access to the expanding English market - what has been called the largest free trade area in eighteenth-century Europe - was also granted to Irish and Scottish producers. From 1696 Irish linen could be imported duty-free into England, as part of the policy to reduce English dependence on foreign linen and to encourage 'foreign protestants' to settle in Ireland. The duty increases were initially applied to linen imported from Scotland, but the Act of Union of 1707 brought duty-free access to the English market for Scottish linen.

The subsequent growth of linen production in both Scotland and Ireland is well-known. Figure 1 shows the quantities of linen exported to Great Britain from Ireland, alongside the quantities of linen stamped for sale in Scotland. From a total for the two countries in 1730 of 7,577,000 yards of linen, by 1770 over 32,720,000 yards and by 1800 over 57,148,000 yards was being supplied to the English market by these two new major producing regions. By the middle of the century - with retained imports from the continent running at about 20M yards per year in 1752 and about 18M in 1760 - the continental dominance of the English market for linen had been radically transformed. Linen from Scotland and

FIG. 1

Table 4.2  
Irish and Scottish linen production for the English market ('000 yards)

Year	Irish exports to Great Britain	Stamped for sale in Scotland	Total
1700	299		
1710	1,528		
1720	2,560		
1730	3,821	3,756	7,577
1740	6,403	4,610	11,013
1750	10,857	7,572	18,429
1760	13,093	11,748	24,841
1770	19,671	13,049	32,720
1780	18,299	13,411	31,710
1790	33,361	18,092	51,453
1800	32,912	24,236	57,148

Note. The Scottish figures include a certain amount of linen destined for the Scottish domestic and export markets, but the greater part was for the English market.

Sources. The Irish figures are taken from L. M. Cullen, *Anglo-Irish Trade, 1660-1800* (Manchester, 1968), p. 60. The Scottish figures are given in H. Hamilton, *An Economic History of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 404-5.

Source: Harte (1973), p.93.

Ireland came to largely supplant - though not to eliminate - imports from continental Europe.

FIG. 2

Table 4.3  
English imports of flax and yarn and the approximate linen equivalent, 1700-90

Year	Flax imports (cut)	Approximate linen equivalent ('000 yards)	Yarn imports (cut)	Approximate linen equivalent ('000 yards)	Total approximate linen equivalent ('000 yards)
1700	62,701	7,885	17,921	5,048	12,933
1706	35,908	4,515	13,996	3,942	8,457
1710	43,024	5,410	15,984	4,503	9,913
1715	40,300	5,067	25,151	7,085	12,152
1720	37,310	4,692	27,458	7,735	12,427
1725	50,430	6,342	26,191	7,378	13,720
1730	61,397	7,721	23,660	6,665	14,386
1735	56,885	7,153	30,015	8,455	15,608
1740	69,572	8,749	27,071	7,626	16,375
1745	74,464	9,364	40,307	11,354	20,718
1750	124,694	15,681	40,672	11,457	27,138
1755	113,833	14,315	44,792	12,618	26,933
1760	73,059	9,187	62,537	17,616	26,803
1765	120,413	15,142	21,705	6,114	21,256
1770	121,683	15,302	95,349	26,859	42,761
1775	169,165	21,273	83,882	23,629	44,902
1780	146,734	18,452	91,914	25,891	44,343
1785	193,307	24,309	76,816	21,638	45,947
1790	145,056	18,241	79,855	22,494	40,735

Source. Flax and yarn imports are totalled from E. B. Schumpeter, *English Overseas Trade Statistics, 1697-1808* (Oxford, 1960), tables xvi and xvii. See text for the manner in which the approximate linen equivalent has been calculated.

Source: Harte (1973), p.104.



The linen industry itself in England is rather less well-known, but it is evident from the calculations in Figure 2 that enough flax and yarn was imported into England to make substantial quantities of linen, apart from that made from English-grown flax (which is difficult to quantify satisfactorily). Until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, it is likely that more linen was produced in England itself than was produced for the market in Ireland and Scotland put together. By the middle of the century, English production of linen was probably about 30M yards per year.

## 2. Linen Exports from the British Isles.

Linen production flowered in the different economies of England, Scotland and Ireland in the eighteenth century. The bulk of the output was bought by the burgeoning consumers of England itself, with their rising disposable incomes as a genuinely mass market for consumption goods was being created. But an increasing amount of linen was being exported, particularly to the American colonies. English linen exports are almost as difficult to quantify adequately as English linen imports. The masses of figures in the ledgers of the Inspector-General of Imports and Exports defeated the energy of Mrs. Schumpeter in the case of linen. The figures in Figure 3 are a partial representation of levels of export of linen from England in the eighteenth century. They suggest that at least 9M yards of linen was being exported in the peak linen export period between 1760 and 1790. Figure 4 is reproduced from Mrs. Schumpeter; it too appears incomplete.

FIG. 3

Table 4.5  
Exports of English linen ('000 yards)

1700	181	1735	1,048	1765	8,495
1706	153	1740	1,703	1770	8,761
1710	309	1745	1,533	1775	9,239
1715	382	1750	4,633	1780	8,226
1720	430	1755	3,798	1785	7,315
1725	699	1760	9,555	1790	9,223
1730	814				

Source. Totalled from E. B. Schumpeter, *English Overseas Trade Statistics, 1697-1808* (Oxford, 1960), tables xiv and xi, with British linens exported with the bounty between 1745 and 1760 added from D. Macpherson, *Annals of Commerce* (1805), III, pp. 515-6. (These figures differ somewhat from those given in B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 201, largely because sailcloth is inexplicably excluded from their figures.)

Source: Harte (1973), p.108.

FIG. 4

TABLE XXXIV  
Exports of Linen by Geographical Divisions, 1700 to 1800  
(Quantity figures in Pieces. Figures for England and Wales, 1700-90. Figures for Great Britain, 1795-1800)

Year	Africa + East Indies	Northern Europe	Central Europe	Southern Europe	British Europe	United States	Brit. Colonies	British West Indies	Misc.	Total
1700	229	3	5	6	274	2,550	96	14 18		4,581
1706	1			6	103	2,753	56	699		3,619
1710	231		4	133	73	4,775	72	2,935		8,223
1715	12	3	8	111	51	6,635	28	3,236	15	10,099
1720	289	11	69	103	170	5,465		5,229		11,329
1725	109	11	158	1,191	174	9,700	26	6,649	220	18,238
1730	629	3	139	918	319	7,886	98	10,741	12	20,745
1735	1,348	5	162	532	466	12,345	14	12,179		27,051
1740	806	9	173	434	651	21,991	10	19,000		43,074
1745	1,158	23	21	1,576	643	13,535	20	22,013		38,989
1750	5,584	132	1,251	9,445	1,391	56,784	397	23,106		98,090
1755	5,180	281	194	5,324	144	51,846	1,836	27,340		92,146
1760	19,922	368	146	4,168	4,441	116,499	3,361	58,163	3,974	211,040
1765	24,108	162	2,666	2,093	4,292	59,925	7,771	50,353	988	152,358
1770	14,731	50	721	4,356	1,003	40,113	9,605	38,354	2,323	111,256
1775	5,721	21	274	1,729	1,630	5,984	19,216	16,933	1,102	52,609
1780		125	334	104	523	6,106	7,169	9,403	1,302	25,066
1785										
1790										
1795										
1800										

Source: Schumpeter (1960), p.66.

The complicated valuations used in the Inspector-General's ledgers have been re-valued and standardised by the late Professor Ralph Davis. Figure 5 presents some of his valuations, from which

FIG. 5 ENGLISH EXPORTS, 1699-1856 (£000)

	Total Manufactured Exports	Manufactured Exports to USA	Linen Exports	Linen Exports to USA
1699-1701	3,583	475	-	-
1722-24	3,784	679	25	22
1752-54	6,350	1,571	211	189
1772-74	8,487	3,981	740	681
1784-86	11,189	2,757	743	281
1794-96	20,611	6,232	895	208
1804-06	36,326	9,962	756	207
1814-16	40,153	7,118	1,675	268
1824-26	35,764	5,543	1,879	476
1834-36	42,083	8,855	2,212	941
1844-46	51,434	6,421	2,765	769
1854-56	83,091	16,375	4,225	1,881

Source: Davis (1957); Davis (1962); Davis (1979)

it will be seen that the American colonies up to the Revolution provided the bulk of the export market for English linens. It is difficult to dis-entangle re-exports of Scottish and Irish linen through London and exports of English linen. Durie (1979) presents



some figures for the direct export from Scotland of Scottish linen, and Truxes (1988) gives some figures for Irish linen exports. Their calculations are reproduced in Figures 6, 7 and 8. On the eve of the Revolution, about 2M yards of linen was exported from

FIG. 6

TABLE 8.1

Exports of Plain, Striped, Checked and Printed Linen made in Scotland from Scottish ports, 1743-1800 ('000 yards per annum)\*

1743-47	572	1773-77	1,740
1748-52	1,206	1778-82	2,054
1753-57	1,426	1783-87	3,059
1758-62	1,815	1788-92	4,375
1763-67	1,874	1793-97	5,496
1768-72	2,390	1798-1800†	7,119

\*Sources: Scottish Port Books: Collectors' Quarterly Accounts E 504, 1743-1754; from 1755 the Inspector General's ledgers, RH 20/2, and 20/2 with 1763 and 1769 supplied from the Port books series. †3 years only.

Source: Durie (1979), p.145.

FIG. 7

Table 9.1. ESTIMATE OF IRISH LINEN EXPORTS TO BRITISH AMERICA WITH NORTH AMERICAN MAINLAND SHARE (in yards)

Avg. of 3 yrs. ending	Total to Brit. Amer. <sup>a</sup>	% of total Irish export	Mainland import	Mainland population	Per capita import
1751	1,179,400	11%	825,580	1,170,760	.71
1761	2,456,940	19	1,719,860	1,593,630	1.08
1771	4,388,000	21	3,507,000	2,148,080	1.63

<sup>a</sup>The sum of direct Irish exports, bounty exports sent from ports in England, and above-bounty exports sent from ports in England (estimated at 10 percent of Irish linen exports from England) to North America and the West Indies.

Sources: PRO, Customs 15; PRO, Customs 16/1; "Report from the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Present State of the Linen Trade in Great Britain and Ireland," Reports from Committees of the House of Commons . . . Not Inserted in the Journals, 1715-1801 (16 vols., London, 1803-6), III, 133; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970 (2 vols., Washington, D.C., 1975), II, 1168.

Source: Truxes (1988), p.171.

FIG. 8

Table 9.4. AVERAGE NORTH AMERICAN IMPORTS OF PLAIN LINEN (bounty and above-bounty combined) from Ireland and Great Britain for the three years ending 5 January 1772 (in yards)

	Irish linen	British linen	TOTAL	Irish share
Boston	256,450	160,650	417,100	61%
Rhode Island	81,710	50,840	132,550	62
New York	303,800	100,850	404,650	75
Philadelphia	873,140 <sup>a</sup>	70,190	943,330	93
New Castle	159,760		159,760	100
Patuxent	471,750	276,970	748,720	63
North Potomac	151,430	115,390	266,820	57
Rappahanock	144,390	298,790	443,180	33
York River	76,980	35,700	112,680	68
James River	604,360	916,980	1,521,340	40
Charleston	210,730	510,300	721,030	29
Savannah	52,050	94,610	146,660	55
Other markets	120,450	316,590	437,040	28
Total	3,507,000	2,947,860	6,454,860	54

<sup>a</sup>1769 and 1770 only

Source: PRO, Customs 16/1.

Source: Truxes (1988), p.188.

Scotland and about 3½M yards of Irish linen was directly imported by the American colonies. But as a Paisley merchant stated in evidence to a House of Lords committee in 1785: 'The great market for all the linen manufactures of Scotland is London; they send again, some to America, some to the West Indies; I don't know any other markets'. (Quoted in Durie (1979), p.146.) It is difficult from British sources to provide satisfactory figures for the English, Scottish and Irish linens sent to the American colonies.

As the production of linen in the British Isles increased, it became a recurrent bone of contention between the domestic producers and the merchants and drapers importing linen from the continent that the bulk of the duties paid on imported continental linen could be 'drawn back' or refunded upon re-exportation. After 1743 the 'drawback' was counter-balanced by a system of 'bounties' on the export of certain types of British and Irish linen. The bounty was ½d. per yard on linen worth less than 6d. per yard and 1d. on that worth between 6d. and 1s. per yard - i.e. an export subsidy of between 8% and 16%. From 1745, there was an additional bounty of ½d. per yard for plain linen worth 5d.-1s. per yard, and 1½d. on that worth 1s.-1s.6d. per yard. The bounties lapsed between 1753 and 1756, but a concerted campaign by English and Scottish producers succeeded in having them re-established in 1756 and extended to other sorts of linen (including checked and striped linen) in 1771 and again in 1781. (Harte, 1973, pp.98-99.) The system continued in operation until 1832.

Irish linen exported from Great Britain was permitted to receive the bounty so long as it was 'the property of some person resident in Great Britain or America'. This was a great boost to British-Irish-American trade, and enabled Irish linens to substantially replace German linens in the American market. 'Formerly the planters used almost entirely the German Osnaburghs for their slaves, until the bounty', wrote Lord Sheffield in 1784. (Quoted in Truxes (1988), p.177.) The bounty system after 1743 linked the English, Scottish and Irish producing interests to the powerful West Indian sugar planters lobby, and began to give British linen producers some political clout. The marginal difference in the market prices of British-produced linen on the American market had a crucial effect in the low price range, and ensured an expanding market in America for English, Scottish and Irish linens, expanding at the expense of continental linen (and restricting, too, the development of market-production of linen in America, with its higher labour costs than provincial England, Ireland or Scotland).

### 3. Re-exports of Linen.

The English wars against France in the late seventeenth century led to the virtual exclusion of French linen from the English market, and the duty increases of the early eighteenth century hit the low countries exports which replaced the French. The linens of Germany were given low values in the 1660 Book of Rates, and their improving quality in the early eighteenth century meant that the English duties bore less heavily on them. The biggest single category of linen imported into England came to be what the Customs recognised as 'narrow Germany'. Imports of continental linen into England increased up to the 1730s, the increase in German linens - mainly from Saxony and Silesia - making up for the decline in imports from France and the low countries. The quantity



re-exported to the West Indies and America increased up to the 1750s, and thereafter formed an increasing proportion of a declining total.

Professor Davis's re-calculation of the re-exports is given in Figure 9. It is clear that up to the 1770s, the bulk of continental

FIG. 9 ENGLISH RE-EXPORTS, 1699-1856 (£000)

	Total Manufactured Re-exports	Manufactured Re-exports to USA	Linen Re-exports	Linen Re-exports to USA
1699-1701	746	252	182	157
1722-24	1,116	420	232	222
1752-54	1,145	432	331	301
1772-74	1,562	596	322	285
1784-86	660	148	182	92
1794-96	1,698	214	477	162
1804-06	1,407	258	562	214
1814-16	563	18	106	3
1824-26	491	35	15	5
1834-36	605	52	59	5
1844-46	854	57	20	9
1854-56	1,218	82	-	-

Source: Davis (1954); Davis (1962); Davis (1979)

(largely German) linen re-exported from England went to the American colonies. The Sugar Act of 1764 abolished the drawbacks on foreign linens sent to America, and thereafter foreign linens were squeezed out of the market. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the re-export trade in linen was a thing of the past. English, Scottish and Irish linen came to dominate the American market alongside substantial non-market production in America itself.

Such was the situation when it was transformed by the rise of a new cotton industry, based upon the mechanisation of cotton-spinning in England in the 1770s. The new technology spread in the 1790s to cotton in New England and also to linen in England, and then in Scotland and Ireland too.

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