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Linen Production as a Cottage Industry: a Family Affair

The Weavers and their Way of Life

The linen industry flourished in people's homes during the eighteenth century. Most weavers were 'cottier-weavers'. Many grew their own flax but they often had to buy more from a market or a travelling **yarn jobber**.

A weaver's cottage was typically long and low – long because it needed space to accommodate at least one large loom. In the photograph below, the first door in the cottage leads into the family living space, and the second into the room where the loom was kept. If the cottage had a small patch of land the family grew potatoes, oats and vegetables with which to feed themselves. Oatmeal husks soaked in boiling water and left for several days to turn sour were often eaten; this mix was known as **sowan** in Ulster-Scots.



David Lyons / Alamy Stock Photo

Bacon and herring provided variety in the diet, if the family could afford them, as they were tasty. Champ – potatoes mashed with vegetables, including onions, cabbage and peas – was also a popular dish. The better-off may have had a few cows for milk and butter-making. The butter produced could also be sold. These crops fed the weavers and their families, while the linen they produced gave them a small income. If the weaver was renting his cottage, the rent was likely to be higher if it was near a market where he could sell his cloth.

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Poorer weavers rented their cottages from a wealthy and successful weaver known as a **manufacturer** whom they paid directly in linen which they wove, or by working for him at the loom.

Markets

The weaver could take his lengths – **webs** – of brown linen to market where drapers bought them. They usually bargained with the drapers to try to get the best price. The brown linen was bleached on a linen green and sold in the **White Linen Halls** of Belfast, Newry or Dublin, but eventually the linen drapers started marketing their white linen directly to buyers in Britain.

Gender Roles and Politics

Weavers were normally male, probably because of the heavy machinery of the loom. Spinners were female.

In its cottage industry phase, the whole family contributed to the household income by being involved in the production of linen. Children could wind the spun yarn onto bobbins (cones or cylinders). The daughters learned to spin while they were still very young, from their mothers; the sons were taught to weave by their fathers. If more yarn was required than the females in the home could produce then it was bought at a local market. A girl who had a reputation as a talented spinner was likely to be considered a potentially good wife.

Setting the loom – attaching the many threads to its parts in preparation for weaving – was a long and intricate process. It could take up to a week or even longer and required care and thought, as well as deft hands. As W H Crawford explains:

The weaver's first task was to tackle the loom: to set it up for weaving. Each warp had to be tied separately to the warp beam and then wound on it. Then each individual warp thread had to be brought forward on the loom and fed first through the small eyes of the mails on the heddles and then between the teeth of the comb known as the reed before being tied to the cloth beam. Since the warp of a web could contain as many as several thousand threads, tackling the loom was a very tedious job which would take a week's work, and often much longer. (The Handloom Weavers and the Ulster Linen Industry, Belfast, Ulster Historical Foundation, pp.31-2)

Often weavers were intelligent men, keen readers and debaters, interested in reforming and radical politics. Many were involved in the 1798 Rebellion in Ulster, including Jemmy Hope, a friend of the Belfast United Irish leader, Henry Joy McCracken and James Orr, a poet from the Co. Antrim village of Ballycarry. Some of them also had a reputation for hard drinking and for enjoying rough 'sports' such as cock fighting.

Orr wrote a long poem about a tough but kind-hearted weaver called Christy Blair. The poem, *The Penitent*, includes a few lines which describe a typical weaver's family with everyone, even the children, all at work in the trade:

*He weav'd himsel', an keepet twathree gaun,
Wha prais'd him ay for hale weel-handled yarn;
His thrifty wife an' wise wee lasses span,
While warps and queels employ'd anither bairn*

Translation

He wove himself and supplied two or three,
Who praised him for fine well-crafted yarn;
His thrifty wife and clever wee daughters spun,
While another child was busy with threads (warp) and bobbins.

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Education

School was not compulsory, but in the Ulster-Scots communities established by seventeenth-century Scots migrants to Ulster, most people were Presbyterians. They believed it was very important for boys and girls to be able to read the Bible for themselves, and to understand the Church's teaching as expressed in the *Shorter Catechism*. For that reason, the Scots quickly established schools when they came to Ulster, though there was some resistance to attempts by teachers to go beyond the very basic, Bible-based curriculum, as the weaver poet James Orr (1770–1816) recalled in one of his poems, *Elegy* (written in the ruins of a country schoolhouse):

*For ne'er to teach them elocution's grace,
Or grammar's art, their parents would agree:
'Our sires,' they cried, 'such trifles scorn'd to trace,
And in our race we'll ne'er their equals see.*

*'Our tasks were bounded by the Catechism,
The Youth's Companion, and the Holy Word ...'*

Orr himself never attended school but was taught to read and write, and to weave, by his father at home.

In his poem *The Penitent*, quoted above, Orr tells us that the weaver Christy Blair's children had a very basic education. They got up early to do farm work and then were allowed a bit of free time to play, though some learned the 'question beuk', which was taught at an informal school set up in a barn close by:

*'Some stript ilk morn an' thresh'd, the time to
earn
To scamper wi' the houns frae hill to hill;
Some learn'd the question-beuk in nyb'ring
barn ...*

Translation

Some stripped to the waist every morning and threshed (grain), to earn time off
To run with the dogs (or their pals) from hill to hill;
Some learned to the catechism in a neighbouring barn ...

The 'question beuk' was the *Shorter Catechism*, which is a series of questions and answers designed to teach the basic doctrines of the Presbyterian faith to young people. The answers were learned off by heart. The best known of the questions and answers is:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.