

COTTON PRINTING IN IRELAND IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by
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THE appearance of a chintz pattern in this country and its identification by a piece in the National Museum in Dublin has led to the discovery of a cotton printing industry in Ireland that, like its European contemporaries, had its beginnings as early as the seventeenth century. Its development as well followed closely along the lines of French and English manufactories, and it even preceded them upon occasion in the matter of technical improvements. That Ireland had such an industry at this time undoubtedly has been known to every reader of a chintz book, and various must have been the conjectures about the "excessively pretty" linens printed with copperplate, which were seen in 1752 at Drumcondra¹ by the celebrated Mrs. Delany.² But what these prints were has not been known, for Irish cotton printing has been shrouded in the same obscurity that surrounds the greater part of the manufactories that operated throughout Europe in the eighteenth century. The record, however, has always existed in the form of premiums, petitions, advertisements, and directories of the day, until now from these documents a narrative has been built up of an industry that numbered in all nearly a hundred concerns and that produced in its later phases the same type of work that was done at the great Jouy manufactory in France.³

Irish cotton printing—a slightly inaccurate term since its materials during the first half of the eighteenth century were mostly linens—dif-

¹ In the vicinity of Dublin. For this and other centers, see map.

² Mrs. Mary Granville Delany, whose letters and journals furnish a very complete picture of life in the eighteenth century. In a letter to her sister she wrote, "Burke made me go with her to *Drumcondra*, half a mile off, to see a new manufactory that is set up there of printed linens done by copperplates, they are excessively pretty."

³ Longfield, Ada K., M.A., LL.B., "History of the Irish Linen and Cotton Printing Industry in the 18th Century," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. LXVII, June, 1937.

ferred in one respect from that of its European contemporaries. Its market, owing to English restrictions, was almost wholly domestic, and shipments, when they could be made, were of necessity to distant countries, of which one was Spain, and another possibly Portugal. On the other hand, cotton printing in Ireland did not have to contend, as it did in France and England, with the powerful weaving trades, but on the contrary received every aid and encouragement from both local organizations and the Irish Parliament. The idea was generally held that an industry of this kind established at home would prevent the expenditure of large sums of money for the importation of the same type of material abroad. With all Europe busily engaged in the manufacture of chintzes, it was only logical that a demand for them would be created in Ireland.

The earliest reference to cotton printing in Ireland occurs in a Signet Office Paper, dated 1693, and preserved in the Record Office in London. It recommends the petition of John Ponsard and David Cossart to introduce their extraordinary invention of staining and printing in colors on linen, "never found out in our Kingdom of Ireland." But this novel enterprise apparently went no further than the suggestion. Cotton printing actually did not begin until about 1720, when an English printer named Grant settled at Palmerstown, near Dublin. Here, and at a time when Europe was only beginning to work out some of the Indian processes of dyeing, Grant started a small venture that was destined to become not only one of the earliest but one of the most important factories in Ireland, and which was to continue under the direction of this one family for nearly half a century. He also was a pioneer in a locality which later became a center for cotton printing, with the River Liffey and its tributaries for water supply and with Dublin for a market. At first this printer, as did others, used the resist method, or "wax work,"⁴ as it was termed in local parlance. Later he progressed to color processes and dyed his linens in imitation of what he termed "calicoes," indubitably the painted cottons of India. What these early prints were we do not know, but they could have been no more than a crude attempt to emulate by means of the few colors and methods available the brilliant and sophisticated fabrics from India that in the preceding century had so captured the fancy of Europe. This also applies to the printed cottons made throughout Europe prior to the establishment of the Jouy manufactory in 1760. During Grant's lifetime the work continued under his direction, after which, in 1776,

⁴ A coating of wax applied to parts of the fabric, which allows only the unprotected surfaces to take the dye.

it passed first to his wife and then in turn to his daughter. By means of one of these public petitions for Parliamentary aid that combine fortuitously business concerns with domestic affairs, we learn how Grant's daughter, Mrs. Mary Knabbs, came into possession of her property. This was not arrived at, it is clear, without dissension among the heirs; for one thing, Mrs. Knabbs and her husband resented the action of a brother in taking out secretly letters of administration. Finally the matter was turned over to an old acquaintance, Mr. Daniel Simpson, for settlement. Mr. Simpson, in his turn, consulted various of his colleagues and they agreed, one and all, that it was Mrs. Knabbs, competent and enterprising, who was best qualified to carry on the business. Their judgment was well founded, for the new owner, first purchasing equipment with the six hundred pounds from her mother's estate, set herself to increase the business. So successful was she that within eight years she was printing more material than any other two yards in Ireland, and in so superior a manner that linens were sent to her from as far away as Cork for this purpose. She made, according to a contemporary, the same kind of prints with wood blocks that were being done at Drumcondra by copper plates, and so skilfully, on the same evidence, that the two could not be distinguished the one from the other. Her business continued to grow until in 1765 her yearly output was valued at more than four thousand pounds. After this year all reference to her name ceases.

In the meanwhile, Samuel Grant, the brother in question, at about the time that his sister entered into the possession of the family works, and probably actuated thereby, went to Ballsbridge, also near Dublin. Here he took over buildings which the Trustees of the Linen Hall⁵ in 1727 had leased trustingly for an earlier but incompetent cotton printer named Daniel Chappell, whose efforts by 1735 had come to naught. Upon these buildings, which he was allowed to hold for years rent-free, and upon their equipment, Samuel expended more than five thousand pounds. Here he began what proved to be a sound and well-established business, for the proprietor, like his sister, had been brought up in the printing business and had increased his knowledge by visits to foreign manufactories. Furthermore, with wide and intelligent vision, he had at times taken some of his workmen abroad with him and allowed them to remain for a time for their own improvement. Like so many of his contemporaries, Grant also copied the familiar Indian chintzes, and his work, he

⁵ An association, which together with the Dublin Society, was interested in the promotion of cotton printing.

estimated, was as good as any imported from abroad, not only as regards design but also in excellence of dye—the goal of all cotton printers. He also introduced the printing of silk handkerchiefs in India designs. These apparently met with great favor, for by 1763 he estimated that they were being sold in and about Dublin to the amount of twenty thousand pounds yearly. Along with handkerchiefs, he printed linens, cotton, muslins, and cambrics, in the course of which he employed more than a hundred persons, besides millwrights, carpenters, and smiths. He carried on the business until 1776, when he died intestate and his daughter was entrusted with the administration of his property.

In addition to these two early and well-established factories there were others in the same general locality whose history runs concurrently. One, and it was ranked as important as that of Grant's, belonged to Jonathan Sisson of Lucan, north of Dublin. This printer, as probably was the case with many others, copied his designs from imported materials.⁶ The fact is quite evident since in 1758 he was advertising for two good cutters of prints, capable of drawing and altering patterns from foreign originals. The firm existed until 1800 and received during its existence many a premium from the Dublin Society for its chintzes.

There was also John Fisher, an Englishman, and Joseph Chappell, kin perhaps to the unfortunate at Ballsbridge, who in 1742 had a printing house at Rathfarnham where they printed in china blue, reds and purples. Another worker was Thomas Ashworth, at Donnybrook, who printed in 1753 his wallpapers to match his chintz patterns for hangings. He was succeeded in business by his widow, who continued the work on the same lines; in 1763 she proclaimed herself also ready to match any pattern or color in furniture hangings.

As may be seen, block printing was the method employed by the greater part of these early eighteenth century printers. But in 1752 we come to the copperplate prints of Drumcondra, so much admired by Mrs. Delany. This manufactory, although its early history is somewhat obscure, seems to have been founded by Theophilus Thompson and Francis Nixon, and certainly by 1755, since in that year they issued a petition for aid in carrying on this new business. The two partners deemed themselves the innovators of the copperplate process; they described it as "a Method never practised in any country, nor yet known to any Person, except the *Peti-*

⁶ In 1862 Edward Braughall, a dealer in cotton prints in Ireland, stated that 35 years before, when he was an apprentice, the dealers imported all their printed goods from Holland.

tioners.” In reality Holland ⁷ is credited with the invention of copperplate impressions, but the statement, at least in a circumscribed locality, was not unreasonable, for it was not until six years later that Benjamin Franklin was to send home to his wife from London cotton printed “curiously” (as he termed it) from copperplate, and the invention was not introduced at Jouy until 1770. These copperplate linens from Drumcondra were printed in a single color and sold at the factory’s warehouse in Dublin. By 1754 the firm was advertising not only linens but cottons, lawns, and cambrics, printed in what they termed the most elegant patterns and lasting colors and from plates engraved by the best artist that could be procured at Paris. They turned out materials for dresses, for men’s waistcoats, for furniture coverings and for hangings, and to identify their fabrics beyond all chance of error they stamped them at each end with the manufactory’s mark: His Majesty’s Arms in the centre, Hibernia with the Attributes on one side, a Cypher on the other, and underneath the name DRUMCONDRA in large letters. These Drumcondra prints attained an enormous success, so much so that their fame reached the outside world. As a result, about 1757 the industry was transferred to “another Kingdom,” generally considered to have been England, and all the remaining goods, dress materials, hangings, chair covers, and window curtains, as noted in the *Universal Advertiser* of that year, were sold at a reduction of 15 shillings in the pound.

With Drumcondra leading the way, other printers were quick to follow their example. An establishment of note was the factory at Leixlip, to the north, where Samuel Dickson and Company in 1758 were printing with copperplates, linens, cambrics, lawn, and cottons, in what they designated as an entirely new manner. They specialized, it would seem, in flower patterns, copied as closely as possible from nature. This was doubtless the idea of Samuel Dickson, for he painted in watercolors and had made for himself quite a reputation with his flowers and birds. Later the firm extended its patterns to include animals, fruit, landscapes and architectural designs. All of these, as it was stated in public notices, were portrayed in their natural colors and all were warranted to bleach and wash without harm. Notwithstanding the variety of design and the

⁷Jenny-Trümpy, *Handel und Industrie des Cantons Glarus und Schweizerische Baumwollindustrie*, p. 43. Romeyn de Hooghe of Amsterdam in 1658 engraved copperplates and invented a machine to adapt them to printing. As this reference is included in a work which deals with cotton printing, it would seem logical to believe that the passage refers to printing on materials.

excellence of their goods, the undertaking failed. Dickson gave it up about 1764 and went to London to keep a picture shop. The manufactory continued, but under other owners, until the year 1786, when it was put up at auction; its building, its copperplate machines, its block printing tables and engraved metal plates, all to be let for the sum of eighty pounds a year. There was also a factory at Temple-Oge in 1758 where linens and lawns were printed, again "very Curiously" from copper plates. This firm did excellent work apparently, for it pleased very highly the members of the Dublin Society. These latter considered the Temple-Oge prints not only quite as good as the linens stamped at Drumcondra and Leixlip, but were of the opinion that the work of this later concern was perhaps rather better.⁸

But the manufactory that is of the greatest interest, since here was printed the "Volunteer Furniture"⁹ which is illustrated (Plate I), was that of Edward Clarke at the same Palmerstown where, many years before, Grant had started his printing. Not only did he have a factory for turning out his prints, but he had a warehouse in Dublin where he disposed of them. He stocked both his own materials and those of other printing yards, in order to have a good choice from which country dealers and upholsterers might choose. He specialized in purple, red and copperplate cottons and linens for hangings and covers, though he sold also a wide range of chintzes made in Ireland for dress wear. By 1787 he increased his business by uniting with Messrs. O'Brien and Comfords, who had a cotton factory at Balbriggan.¹⁰ The new firm now combined both manufacturing and printing and turned out prints of the same type as were sold in London and Manchester. Again Irish enterprise made use of a new and advanced process, for by 1787 the manufactory was printing with copper cylinders, not long after the invention had been introduced into English work, and some years before it was to be adopted at Jouy. The business was continued, and successfully it is hoped, up until 1793.

The chintz with the military subject appears, starred, as it might be said, in one of Clarke's advertisements:

⁸ Cotton printing was also done, both by copperplate and woodblock, by Hugh Holmes at Richardstown, Co. Louth, in 1764; by Anderson and Willisson, who also marked their fabrics, at Blarney near Cork, in 1771. There are also records of industries of this kind in Belfast, toward the end of the century.

⁹ The word furniture in this connection refers to hangings and upholstery material.

¹⁰ Cotton manufacturing began in Ireland, in the south, about the year 1750. Gill, Conrad; *The Rise of the Irish Linen Industry*, p. 227, Oxford, 1925.

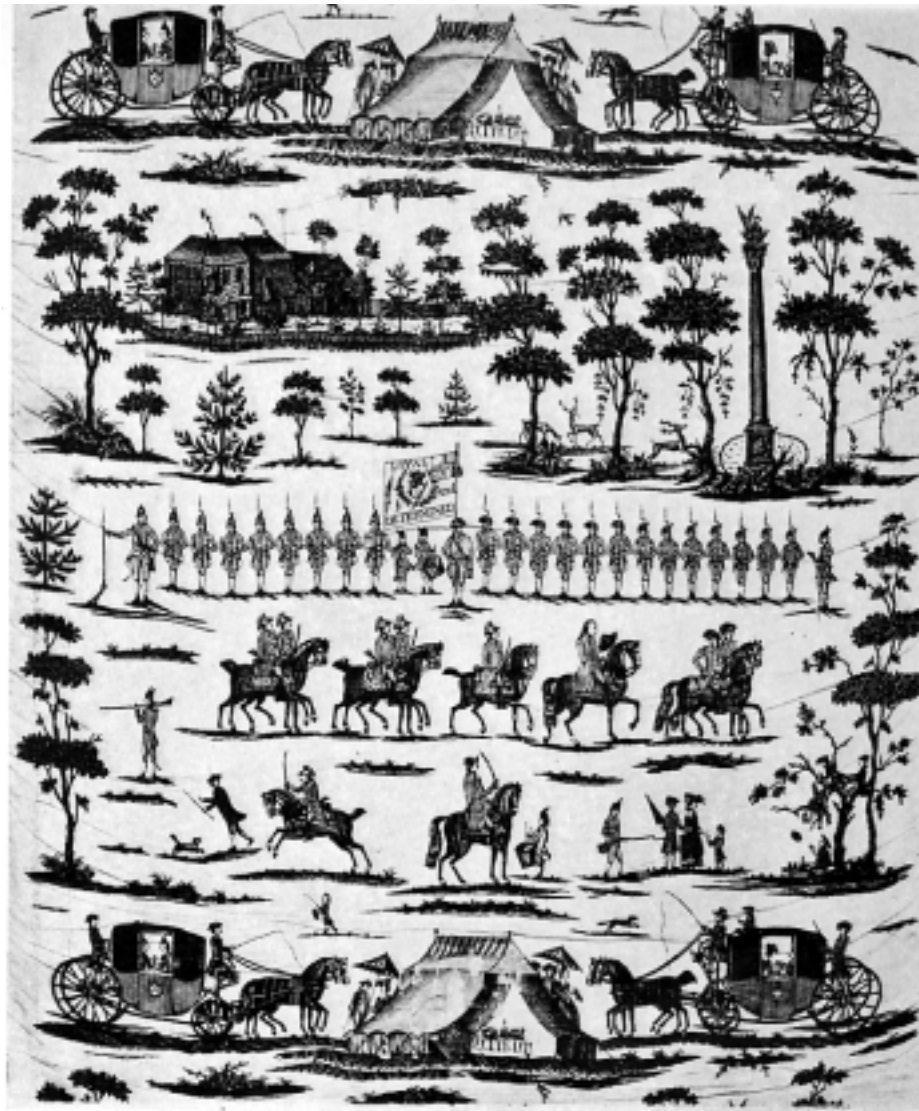


PLATE I

CHINTZ PRINTED FROM COPPERPLATES REPRESENTING THE LAST PROVINCIAL REVIEW BY LORD CHARLEMONT IN PHOENIX PARK, DUBLIN, 1783. NATIONAL MUSEUM, DUBLIN.

Dublin Evening Post, November 25th, 1783
Furniture, Cotton and Linen Warehouse, Werburgh St.

“Proper Encouragement for ready Money will be given to all persons furnishing of Houses, by Edward Clarke, Linen Draper, Proprietor of the Irish furniture, Cotton Linen Warehouse, No. 12 Werburgh St., Dublin; who has now ready for inspection the greatest Variety of Chintz and other new and elegant Furniture, Cotton Linens (finished from Copperplates) ever offered for sale in this kingdom; particularly a Volunteer Furniture, which is an exact representation of the last provincial Review in the Phoenix Park; with a striking likeness of Lord Charlemont, as reviewing General, and every other matter fully represented that was worth observation at that Review; and also every pleasing object in and about the Fifteen Acres (the Review ground.)

This military chintz (Plate I) apparently is the only authentic example located from all the quantities of printed cottons that were produced in Ireland during this period. It was found in 1840 in a house in Ireland where it might well have hung from the day when it left the loom and printing shed. It was part of a set of bedroom curtains which the new occupant of the house had made up into small quilts and sent to the descendants of the original owners. The pattern, printed on a mixed cotton and linen material, shows in the center Lord Charlemont,¹¹ hatless, and escorted by cavalry, riding down the lines before troops who are presenting arms. Below are scenes relative to the review, carriages with feminine occupants, a tent lends itself to entertaining speculation, a guard repressing a too-curious family group, and a soldier driving back a harmless spectator; also the perennial dog. On the door panel of each carriage is a letter, one a C and the other an M. The first refers in all probability to Lady Charlemont, and the second to Lady Moira, wife of the first earl of Moira. The large building at the left, near the top, is the Lodge of the Chief Secretary, and at the right is the Phoenix Column. It is an extremely sophisticated and decorative pattern and gives some indication of how excellent these lost Irish chintzes were.

Although the “Volunteer Furniture” is the only Irish chintz that has been identified with certainty,¹² many other examples must still exist. But it is doubtful, since they were patterned after a universal type of design, whether, without an identifying mark, they could be recognized. The subject, however, is one that captures the imagination and leads to enter-

¹¹ James Caulfield Charlemont, first Earl of Charlemont (1728-1799) was an Irish peer and statesman. In 1778 he was placed in command of the First Volunteers, an association formed during the war with America to protect the country against foreign invasion in the absence of regular forces.

¹² Two other pieces are preserved, one in the First Volunteer Masonic Lodge of Ireland and the other in the Royal Irish Society of Antiquaries.

taining speculation. What greater adventure, for example, could be vouchsafed to a lover of old chintzes than the discovery, unknown or forgotten, of one of these Drumcondra prints with “His Majesty’s Arms in the center, and Hibernia with the Attributes at one side.”



CHARLEMONT HOUSE, DUBLIN, 1793
BY JAMES MALTON. IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART