

AYRSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

A COMMUNITY RENT ASUNDER

THE NEWMILNS LACEWEAVERS STRIKE OF 1897



69272. The Cross, Newmilns.

JAMES MAIR

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The Newmilns Laceweavers' Strike of 1897

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James Mair was the author of Ayrshire Monographs No. 18, *Cessnock: An Ayrshire Estate in the Age of Improvement*. He has had a lifelong interest in the social and industrial history of Ayrshire and spends much of his free time scouring the countryside for unrecorded archaeological features.

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Front cover illustration: Newmilns High Street in the 1890s

Introduction

The industrial revolution arrived late in the three towns of Galston, Newmilns and Darvel in the Irvine Valley, bringing with it the vicissitudes of factory production. By the mid-19th century this traditional handloom weaving district had still not fallen into the terminal decline experienced by the rest of the Scottish handloom trade. Factory production of cotton textiles, using the power loom, had overtaken and surpassed the output of the domestic handloom weavers in all but a few specialised fields. Even the superb Paisley shawl would fall to a change of fashion and printed substitutes. The three Valley towns had resisted serious encroachments.

Concentrating on fine muslin goods they produced chiefly leno and book muslin curtains and similar textile items with all-over designs. They had reached the peak in handloom technology and maintained a place in the market for their product. As early as 1838, Joseph Hood, a Newmilns loom maker and engineer, had copied the refinements of the jacquard machine and quickly extended his business in this line.¹ A decade earlier, James Mitchell, a local joiner, had invented the sewing frame which inserted extra weft figuring by a series of tiny bobbins, giving the impression of an embroidered spot on a plain ground.² This with the other main appliance of the handloom, the lappet wheel, which introduced extra warp figuring, helped the district to survive in the market into the 1870s, before a gradual and irreversible fall in prices undermined the economy and livelihood of the local weavers.

Skilled workmanship had long been developing in the woollen trade. Newmilns had been created a burgh of barony in 1490, incorporating various trades and by its charter granted "free liberty of buying and selling wines, wax woollen and linen cloths, broad and narrow."³ But it was only after the second charter of 1566 to the burgh by Sir Matthew Campbell of Loudoun that Newmilns, the first inland burgh in Ayrshire, began to grow and flourish with its complement of "bakers, brewers, fleshers and sellers as well of flesh as of fish and other craftsmen."⁴ Some of these craftsmen were later recorded: Johnne Browne, tailor in 1571; another Johnne Broune, walker in 1572 and Jame Meytchell, wabster in 1573.⁵ By the end of the 17th century Flemish and Huguenot immigrants had improved techniques with the draw-loom and with the introduction of linen weaving in the 1740s, silk in the 1780s and cotton by the end of the 18th century the trade of handloom weaving was thoroughly established.

The following table demonstrates the growth in the number of handloom weavers in the Irvine Valley:

Date	Newmilns	Darvel	Galston
1792	266	58	55
1828	880*		460
1838	1130*		423
1842	550	328	
1872	952	633	

* The figures for 1828 and 1838 are for the parish of Loudoun with no separate numbers for Newmilns and Darvel. From 1842 weavers in Galston quickly diminished as coalmining superseded weaving as the staple industry.⁶

The independent character of the weavers was fostered by the system of production. The vast majority were male, women and girls being employed in the subsidiary tasks of pirn-winding and clipping. They had their own handlooms in their own cottages, requiring only a supply of yarn and an order for a web from a weaving agent. A weaver might be heard claiming "A hae a munt," or another saying "A hae a twist." For after the introduction of the jacquard machine with its capacity for complex floral patterns a mount or munt meant the installation of a new design, while a twist was a continuation of the previous one. On these occasions specialised ancillary workers were needed, a cardcutter to provide cards for the jacquard machine and a mounter or a twister to prepare the loom. Carriers were also necessary to convey the clues of yarn and to carry the finished webs to Paisley, for a while the centre of the fine muslin trade, and to Glasgow. The cry would then be heard on the appointed days at every street corner of "ocht or nocht for Glesca?" Consequently a substantial number of occupations were dependent on the industry and a slump in the trade reverberated throughout the whole community.

The handloom weavers' occupation encouraged a contemplative turn of mind. Long hours at the loom, when the shuttle was swinging smoothly, allowed their thoughts to dwell on all manner of subjects. As a class they were noted for their search for knowledge discussing, in their leisure moments when they met, theology, philosophy and politics. The rhythmic movements and sound of the shuttle even seemed a source of inspiration to poesy and verse.⁷ By the end of the 18th century their intense interest in religion and theology had been replaced by a still greater absorption in the cause of parliamentary reform. The bible was replaced by many Valley weavers with Thomas Paine's momentous works *The*

Rights of Man and *The Age of Reason*, and the ideals of the French revolutionaries of 1789 had filtered down to every responsive mind.⁸

When the Rev. Norman Macleod first took up his charge in Newmilns he and his elders had to evict groups attempting to disrupt his evening services. He was a man of outstanding qualities who rose high in the echelons of the national church. He quickly recovered much of the ground lost by his inflexible predecessor, who had refused to baptise parishioners' children with the names of popular reformers.⁹ Macleod was soon invited to give a series of lectures on geology, but he was always aware during his stay between 1838 and 1843 that other influences were abroad subverting the traditional adherence to the kirk in an area with a strong Covenanting heritage:¹⁰

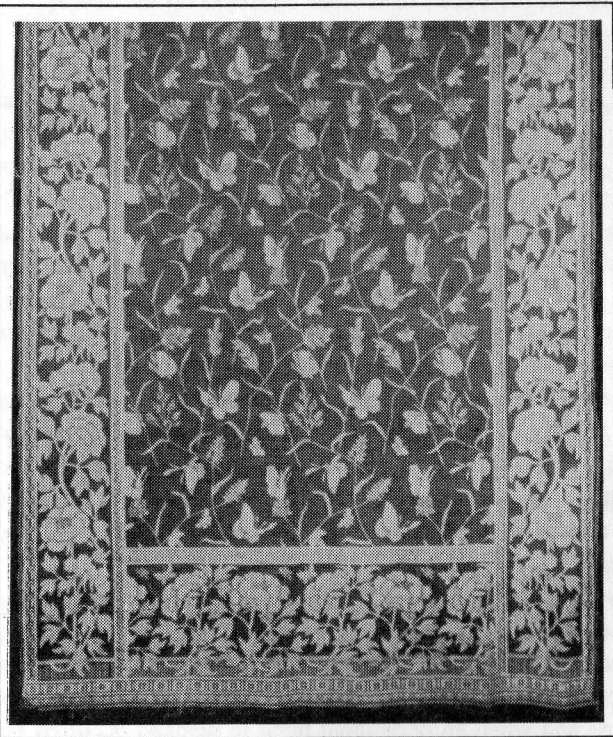
"Political debate seemed to be carried on at every corner. The groups gathered here and there in the street, or crowds clustered on the Green round a tree under whose branches a village demagogue was haranguing about the Charter or the Corn Laws."¹¹

Although the Corn Laws were eventually repealed, bringing cheaper food to the mass of the people, the great campaign of the Chartists withered away.¹² The handloom weavers continued to support successive measures for parliamentary reform, but in the last quarter of the 19th century the struggle for existence in their chosen profession entered its final phase. In November 1872 the Newmilns Harness Weavers' Association called a strike in an effort to maintain prices, but were beaten down by the Glasgow manufacturers.¹³ They gained judicial support in recovering loans from recalcitrant members at the end of the dispute: "the sheriff characterised it as a piece of monstrous injustice on the part of the defender to repudiate the obligation."¹⁴ But the sheriff found against the Association in its attempt to raise members' fees for the use of the beaming shed to meet the debt of £336 incurred during the strike. When the president, secretary and treasurer of the Association refused to repay money collected from renegade members in the interim, a portion of their house-hold effects were poinded and auctioned at the market cross.¹⁵

These events were straws in the wind. The beaming shed, that essential institution for the inspection of the price tickets on webs from the manufacturers to prevent price-cutting and to ensure the honesty and fair-dealing of weaver members, had to be sold to pay for enduring debts.¹⁶ The handloom weaving trade experienced a rapid decline and when an occasional burst in demand occurred for the finer class of goods it could not be met. Within a short period the local newspaper was able to comment:

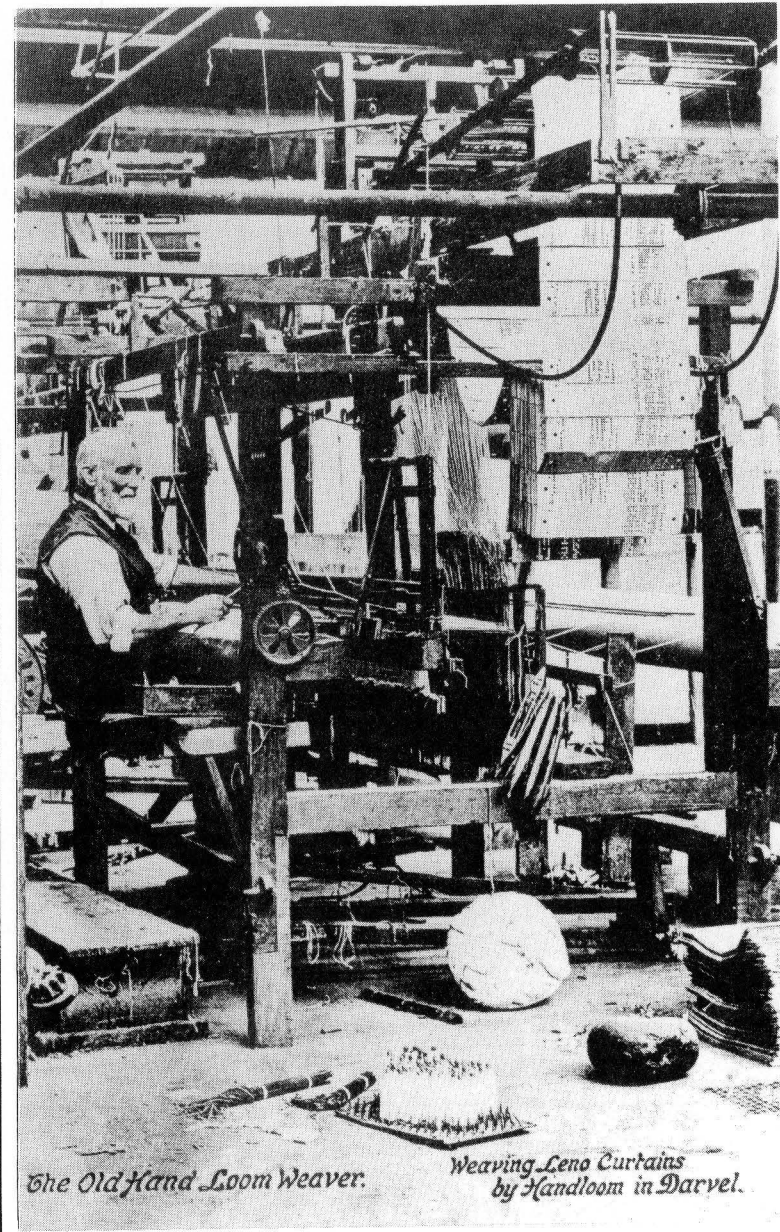
"Where are now the groups of weavers who used to congregate in the streets after meal times ten years ago, and hotly discuss questions local or national, political or ecclesiastical? All nearly gone ... a few are still contriving to keep alive a dying trade. Looms and jacquard machines are waiting in their turn, crowded in garrets, or exposed outside to the weather, to be burned."¹⁷

A false dawn appeared in 1881 with a surge in demand for all classes of lenos, but by that time it was considered that the manufacturers had "starved out many of the workers and forced them to seek other fields."¹⁸



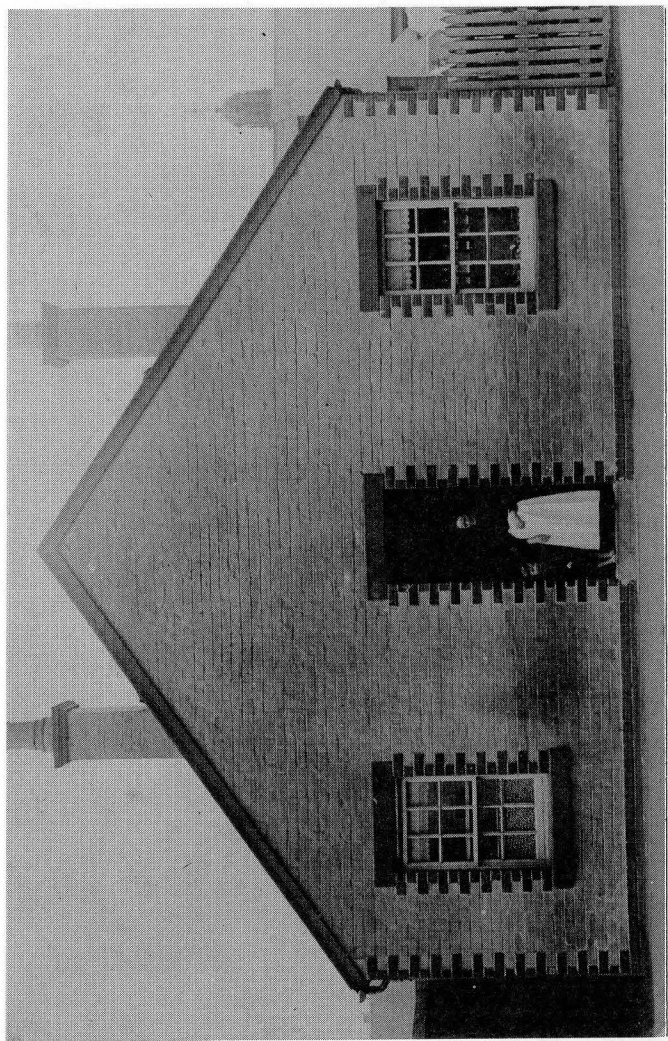
Muslin curtain of the old leno weave, similar in appearance to the lace curtain, but beaten for price in the market.

*Facing page:
Old handloom weaver working on a jacquard handloom. No longer working independently at home he is employed in a shed at a new lace mill.*

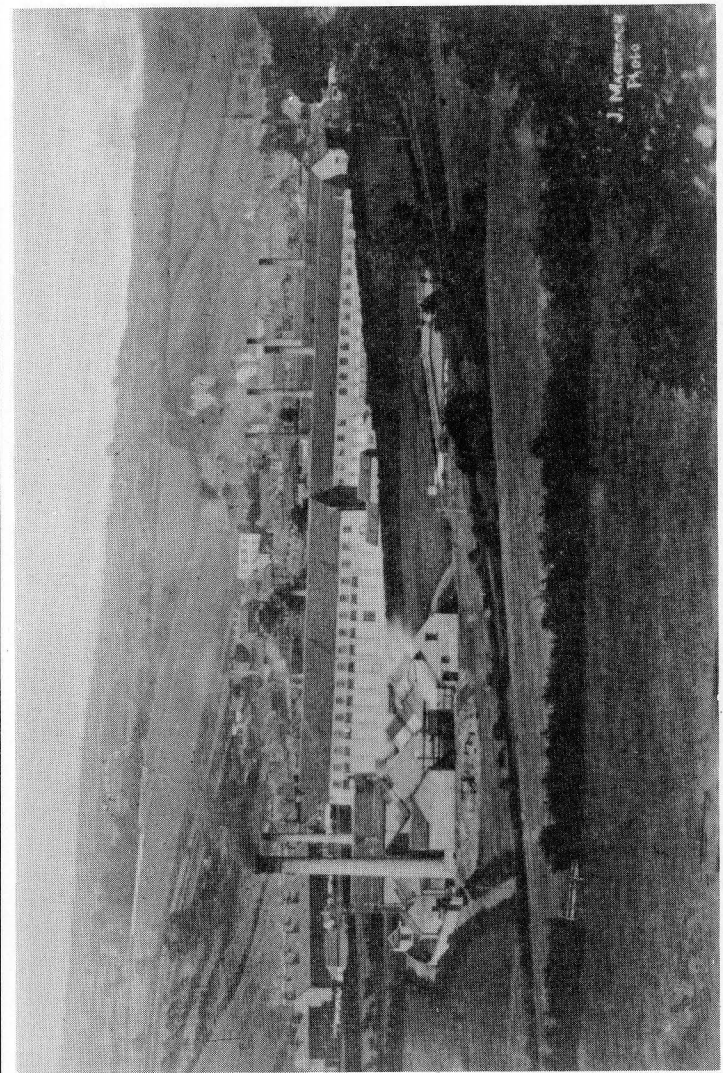


The Old Hand Loom Weaver.

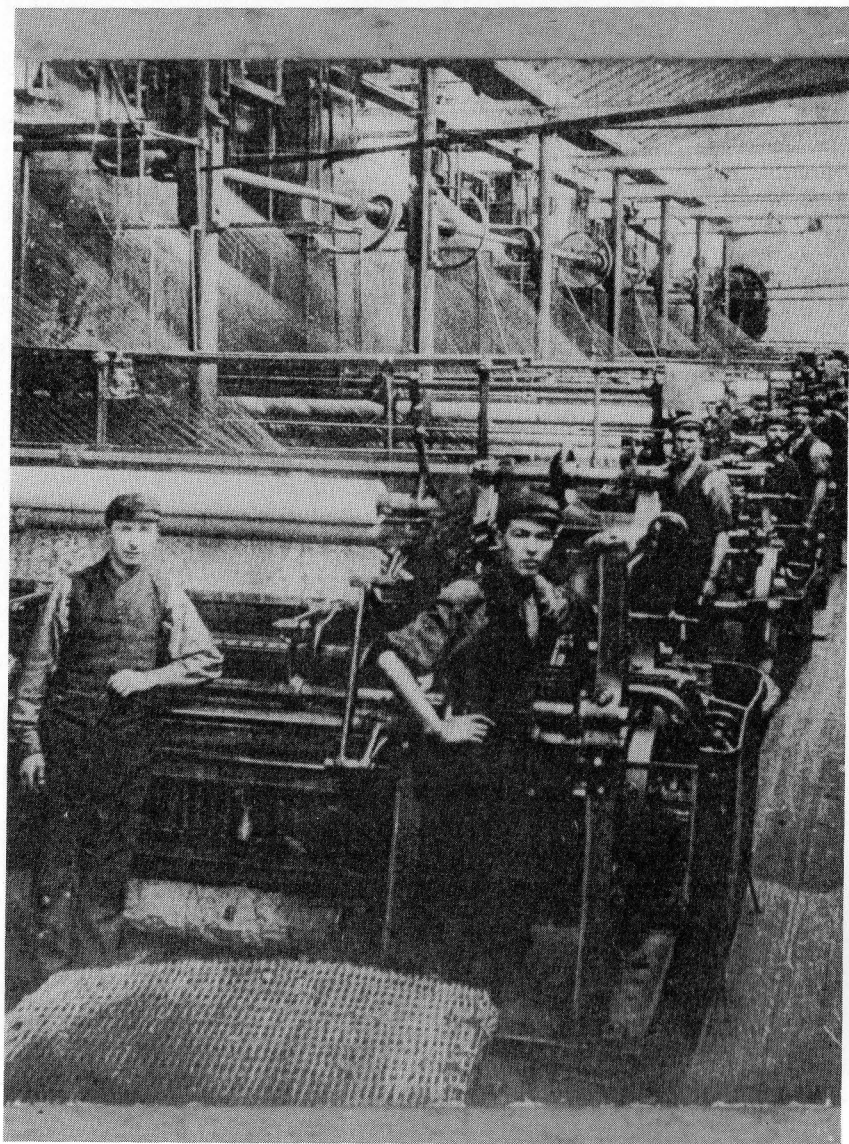
*Weaving Leno Curtains
by Handloom in Darvel.*



Beaming shed of the Newmilns Harness Weavers' Association, Greenside, later the band hall of Newmilns Burgh Band.



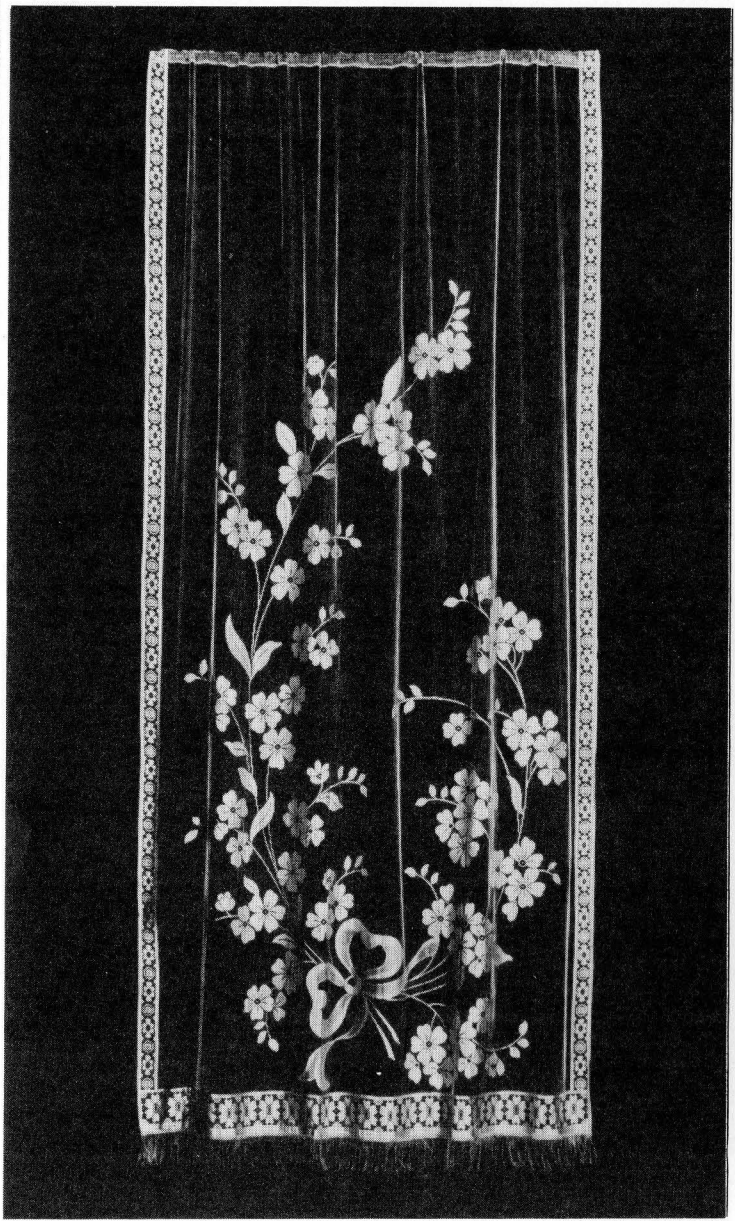
Lace mills, Newmilns, showing chimney stacks of seven of the eight factories involved in the 1897 lock-out, plus the bleachworks of Forrest, Gillies & Co. in the foreground.



Walter Forbes, first president
of the Newmilns and District
Textile Workers' Union.

Facing page:
Interior of lace shed,
Newmilns, showing the ends
of several lace machines
attended by weavers.





A lace "store" curtain, approximately 2.5 x 1.25 metres. The lace furnishing machine allowed a limitless variety of designs.

The Arrival of the Lace Machine.

In the early years of the 20th century the numbers regularly employed in handloom weaving barely reached double figures.¹⁹ A new industry had meanwhile been established in the district. The Nottingham power-lace machine made a similar type of product, capable of turning out vast quantities of cheaper material.²⁰ The change of fortune in the Irvine Valley was the result of a visit to an industrial exhibition in London by Alexander Morton of Darvel, an enterprising handloom weaving agent. He grasped the possibilities, in the lace machine exhibit, of an alternative method of production to the handloom in the desperate condition of the trade back home. Against the active hostility of the Nottingham lace manufacturers, he managed to install a second-hand machine in Darvel in 1875.²¹ The following year Joseph Hood in Newmilns incorporated machine-lace production at his earlier established wincey mill.²²

There was at the time a large pool of unemployed textile workers in the district. They were eager for employment and were willing to work at a fraction of the wages of the lace workers, known as twisthands in Nottingham, who had in their Lacemakers' Society one of the strongest trade unions in the country.²³ To their detriment, the English manufacturers were located in numerous small factories, and were struggling to overcome the resistance to change by the Nottingham union. In contrast, the new Scottish firms built bright modern factories to accommodate the wider new machines commissioned from machine builders who were keen to open up a new market, once the understanding against sales outside the Midlands had been broken.²⁴

Industrial relations in the Ayrshire industry were stable for a while, as employers and workers were fully immersed in establishing and developing the new industry.²⁵ Between 1875 and 1887 fourteen power-lace machine factories had been erected in the Irvine Valley.²⁶ Eight of these were in Newmilns, four in Darvel and two in Galston. One old handloom weaver might have amused himself watching the lace workers hurrying to and from their work at the sound of the factory whistle with "there they go, blawn in and blawn oot", but it had become clear that nothing would any longer induce "men to give up the steady wage of the mill for the precarious chance of the handloom."²⁷

There followed a period of consolidation and no new factories were built until 1895. From that year, however, a second phase of activity began and several large modern factories were constructed between then and 1915 - six in Newmilns, and nine in Darvel.²⁸ This trend pointed to a significant growth in the market. It

brought with it intense competition between the large centres of production, but the Ayrshire firms proved resilient and seemed fit for the fray. Some even opened up branch factories in U.S.A., Spain and Sweden to overcome tariffs introduced in the last decade of the 19th century. During this period, however, the cost of production rose and by 1897 firms at the margin were struggling to maintain their position.²⁹ With the high tariffs abroad, defending the emerging lace firms there, foreign competition increased and the Nottingham city trade continued to haemorrhage. Some of the manufacturers favoured dispersal away from the power and restrictive practices of the Lacemakers' Society and two Nottingham companies removed part of their production to Glasgow.³⁰

With their wider and more modern machines the Irvine Valley firms gained commercial advantages over the Nottingham lace manufacturers.³¹ They also had better designed factories, cheap building sites beside the river Irvine, a large pool of skilled workers seeking employment and a more efficient division of labour. In these circumstances they did not look kindly on any attempt to establish a trade union in their midst.

In a new industry working conditions and pay rates would take some time to rationalise, but from the beginning friction occurred in most branches over these points. In 1881 "the females in the employment of Messrs J & J Wilson, Manufacturers, Newmilns, left their work, agitating for an increase in wages. They afterwards assembled on the town's green and passed the time in chorus singing."³² However, it was not until 1890 that the Newmilns and District Textile Workers' Union (NDTWU) was founded. Throughout the 1880s attempts at organization had been frustrated by the sacking of active members and elected officers who were employed in the trade. During the same period, a representative of the Nottingham Lacemakers' Society lived in the district to encourage recruitment to their union, but his efforts were also unsuccessful. It would have proved difficult for an outsider to gain their confidence in such a close-knit society. No doubt he reinforced the idea of union in the minds of the local workers, but the old handloom weavers had enjoyed their own trade association. The new lace weavers, most of whom had merely crossed from one skill to another closely linked with it, would have been more inclined to create their own union with a committee and officers from among their members, long respected and trusted in the community.³³

It was only after the appointment of a president and a secretary from outside the trade that a degree of success was achieved. The first president of the NDTWU was Walter Forbes, a life-long friend of James Keir Hardie, born in the same village, Ferniegair in Lanarkshire.³⁴ In August 1890 Forbes had persuaded

Keir Hardie to intervene in a carpet weavers' strike in the firm of Alexander Morton & Co in Darvel over the question of fines for damaged goods. His mediation achieved a mutually acceptable settlement. His action created a strong impression in the district and was widely publicised in the local newspaper, the *Galston Weekly Supplement*, and in the *Kilmarnock Standard* and the *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*. The opportunity to further the cause of trade unionism was immediately seized and Keir Hardie was invited to give a lecture in Newmilns on "Trades Unions and Their Advantages". As a result, on August 30th officials of the Mill and Factory Workers' Federal Union (MFWFU) gave their assistance and enrolled members to form a union in Darvel and on the same day signed up workers to establish a separate union in Newmilns.³⁵ Within a year, however, the Darvel union collapsed.³⁶ Darvel was virtually a company town, employing in all the departments of Alexander Morton & Co some 650 people, while the other three smaller firms, fully established at that time, had around 150. In Newmilns the industrial base was of a different composition to Darvel. As an ancient burgh and the centre of a successful dairy farming district, large private savings from this and other mercantile interests had been built up and some of them invested in the new lace industry. Nine competing companies existed in the town, employing over 1600 workers. Consequently a more concerted anti-union effort by the mill owners would be necessary to put pressure on their employees.

Pressure was in fact building up on both sides. The lace employers insisted on their prerogative to determine wages and conditions. Walter Forbes, on the other hand, seems to have been the inspiration behind the move for trade union recognition. His friendship with Keir Hardie, who visited the town regularly in the campaign and on the Ayrshire Miners' Union business, was the catalyst in subsequent events. Keir Hardie was attacked in an anonymous letter to the *Weekly Supplement* as a "sweet phrased agitator ... who can spend one of his practised sneers on a master because he helps 'Jock' in time of trouble, it shows he is devoid of feeling and therefore incapable of discriminating between men and their purposes in life. If there had been any sincerity in his protest against the term 'hands' being applied to servants, it seems to me this destroying of mutual feeling between master and 'Jock' and making nothing but mechanical tug of war between them."³⁷

Before the year was out a significant event was held in Newmilns with a general meeting organized by the MFWFU, followed by a lecture on "Land and Labour". With Keir Hardie in the chair, the chief speakers were F.L. Crilly of the Financial Reform Association, Liverpool and W.H. Hughes, from South Wales, Secretary of the British Labour League.³⁸ All this activity promoting trade

unionism brought another spate of anonymous letters to the local paper condemning Keir Hardie and Forbes for organizing lace workers and coal miners.³⁹

Walter Forbes was employed as a foreman in the coal department of the Newmilns Co-operative Society and was therefore free of any threat of victimisation as president of the lace workers union, while the post of secretary was given to a local builder, George Brown, who would similarly avoid any form of persecution by the mill owners. But recruitment remained sluggish. Apart from the coal pits around the neighbouring town of Galston, there was little alternative employment and by 1897 there were still only 163 members in the NDTWU. The policy of the NDTWU, at that time, was detrimental to its chance of success. Seeing themselves a highly skilled class, the lace weavers did not at first recruit among the ancillary workers. The women were actively encouraged to join a separate women's union. This reduced its coercive power in times of dispute and prevented a quick and impressive expansion over all branches of the trade. This weakness would cost them dearly in the months ahead.

Strike and Lockout.

After a long period of decline in the cost of living, wholesale and retail prices began to rise in the mid-1890s and the Newmilns lace weavers applied to their individual employers in January 1897 for an advance in wages of two shillings per week. Their wages ranged from twenty-one to twenty-five shillings (£1.5p-£1.25p) through the 1880s and 1890s when there was a drop in real wages in the country as a whole.⁴⁰ Earlier disputes had achieved varying results. In one workers had resisted a change from three eight-hour shifts to two of ten hours, despite the threat "that all will be discharged on Saturday first and the mill will close till they comply with the masters' terms."⁴¹ By 1897 the fledgeling NDTWU felt strong enough to test its wings. The executive committee had balloted the members in each of the factories in the town and having received over the two-thirds majority, according to rule, decided to take action.⁴² On the last Saturday in June, five union men were selected to be dismissed arbitrarily by the firm of R. Muir & Son for requesting an increase. The NDTWU then demanded the men be reinstated and a reply given to their petition for an advance in wages. On receiving neither, all the weavers were withdrawn from that factory on the following Monday. The employers met and by the end of the same day had locked out the lace weavers in all the Newmilns factories. The *Weekly Supplement* reported that "the number affected by the lockout will increase every day as the girls and others employed in connection with the lace trade will soon have nothing to do. The men are remarkably quiet and well-behaved, and beyond a slightly busier street there is nothing to show that considerably over 1000 workers are idle in the town."⁴³

Two weeks later the same local paper reported on what it saw as the real basis for the dispute. "The request for a rise in wages seems now to have been pretty well lost sight of in the question as to whether the men have a right to combine for their own protection." Adding that "one gratifying feature in the struggle is the absence of unnecessary noise or ill-feeling."⁴⁴ The period of tranquillity would soon change as the millowners showed their determination to make the prime issue that of union representation and negotiation, in short to destroy the *raison d'être* of the NDTWU. By mid-August Alexander Morton of Darvel had offered his services as a mediator, but received from his fellow lace manufacturers in Newmilns a dusty reply:

"As employers, we claim the right to conduct and control our concerns as we think proper, and allow the Textile Workers' Union to do the same so far as their union is concerned. Very probably each employer

will be prepared to treat with his own men in a direct manner, but not through any outside source.”⁴⁵

A few lace looms had started up after the Fair Holiday week at the end of July with the odd non-union man willing to work. Attempts were also made to induce men who were not regular lace weavers to take charge of looms, but this backfired when they walked out to join their union colleagues. In the meantime the NDTWU remained solid and also increased its membership. Donations and promises of further support flooded in from all around the country, and from the lace unions of Nottingham and America. The strike fund was soon depleted, however, and the Mill and Factory Workers' Federal Union, with its constituent members mostly among the jute and linen workers of Dundee and district, had to reconsider its position. In support of the NDTWU, a federated member, its reserves were rapidly dwindling and were soon reduced by the sum of £1500. The NDTWU was forced to abolish strike pay and thereafter made emergency payments only to those in dire need from a strike fund of monies raised by other unions, through subscriptions, collections at football games and other public events and from the efforts of local amateur concert parties. The Newmilns Co-operative Society was to give invaluable assistance too in extending credit, particularly during the hard times which lay ahead.

The Arrival of “Free Labour”.

By the end of July as reported in the *Weekly Supplement*, the employers and employed remained “dour and determined,” but by early August it was clear that a new development was taking place. The mood of the people had changed:

“The feeling of the locked-out workpeople, against those whom they regard as opposing their interests by submission to the masters' terms was manifested in tumultuous escorts to and from their work, marked by plenty of noise and hooting, but unattended by violence. The police were in attendance to prevent any harm being done. The force has been considerably augmented at the present time. The crowds were composed largely by women and at times matters were very lively. At the closing hour of the working day several hundreds gathered in this way.”⁴⁶

At the height of the dispute, two dozen policemen were either billeted in the town or on call for duty daily in place of the sergeant and two constables normally allocated to keep order in the two burghs of Newmilns and Darvel.

The *Weekly Supplement* described how on August 10th events took a more ominous turn: “Mr Graeme Hunter, The Boss Union Smasher, was in the town on Tuesday, but the purport of his visit has not transpired.”⁴⁷ Although it was some years before a lace manufacturers' association was formally established in the district, an ad hoc group of Newmilns millowners had been formed in order to organize the initial lock-out. It is not clear if they had taken this action with the idea, from the beginning, of engaging the country's most notorious strike-breaking organization, the National Free Labour Association (NFLA), or it had come to them after they realised the resoluteness of the lace weavers or the support they received from their on-cost workers and the community at large. It is certain that some, if not all, were acquainted with the *The Labour Exchange*, the organ of the NFLA. This was the vehicle of the astute and colourful braggadocio William Collison, the self-styled apostle of free labour.⁴⁸

An ex-trade unionist, and one who claimed to be a working man, his beliefs fitted well the prevailing economic orthodoxy of the business and commercial world. His opinions of trade unionism were clearly put in the following statement:

“As to the subversive principles propounded, these [trade unions], under a mistaken idea as to their effect upon industry, involved an undue restriction of the hours of labour, an arbitrary limitation of output, a

curtailment, in short, of human industry against its will, and a restriction of productive power in the working of mechanical appliances. The result should have been obvious even to those who attempted to enforce it upon the country. By a restriction of industry the cost of production was increased beyond the limit of profitable investment.”⁴⁹

The success of the London dock strike and a year earlier of the match-girls of Bryant & May, gave impetus to the movement of trade unionism for general and unskilled workers. Those already established quickly expanded and new unions were set up almost weekly. These successes also brought a reaction from the employers who were inaugurating their own employers' organizations in great numbers, and many of whom were glad to recruit strike-breakers to resist workers' claims. How sincere were Collison's anti-union beliefs? Whether he simply recognised an opening in the market for anti-union activities is difficult to determine at this date. By the early 1890s, with trade unionism rapidly expanding, Collison's attitude had perceptibly changed:

“Experiences in the Bus Union were such that Trade Unionism could hold a place for me no more... It flitted into my mind that there must be thousands of other men as capable as myself, and with as clean a record, who shared my state of rejection. I thought then that were it possible for us to meet and hold council together we might well arrive at some common grounds of defence and retaliation. This was my first vague thought towards Free Labour.”⁵⁰

On May 16th 1893 he called a general conference “of men interested in Free Labour, for the purpose of checkmating the ruinous and suicidal policy of the new Trade Unions.”⁵¹ His own account of his endeavours in this field is highly coloured to give an impression of public benevolence, but he also displays a shrewd understanding of political and industrial life in his time and of the personalities involved.⁵² As part of his campaign of self-advertisement he claimed that the government when it established Labour Exchanges in 1909, followed the system he had created at the inaugural meeting of the NFLA in 1893. The objects of the organization were in substance:

- “(a) To maintain freedom of labour, based on the right possessed by every working man to pursue his trade or employment without dictation, molestation, or obstruction.
- (b) To afford legal and other protection to its members in the assertion and enjoyment of that right.
- (c) To provide means for the free registration of the unemployed of all trades and industries, whereby the wants of employers requiring labour

may be met, and for the more convenient and ready selection of workers when required, thus bringing labour and capital together in the free and unrestricted exercise of their individual rights as employer and employed.”⁵³

These three principles would be echoed by the mass of employers over many years as the basis of employer-worker relationships, without any acknowledgement by employers of the inherent weakness in the workplace of the individual worker's position. “Free Labour” exchanges were opened up in London and other large cities throughout the United Kingdom to register and supply every class of labour in trades and manufacturing. Employers, on the other hand, who undertook to engage such workmen had to provide board and lodging for Free Labour men when they arrived at the scene of a dispute and to ensure their protection.⁵⁴ The Newmilns lock-out of 1897, one of the earliest confrontations of the NFLA, would also prove one of the most difficult, considering the small numbers involved. It was required to bring strange workmen from a distance into a district with a tradition of fierce radicalism and among people living in a very close-knit community. The NFLA had also to furnish operatives trained in a highly skilled type of work. They had to be able to tell when designs appeared faulty as they rose progressively in the machines and to trace these back to threads travelling from different sources. In addition, they had to ascertain how defects in the patterns in the cloth were determined by a malfunctioning jacquard machine and how to correct them.

Collison made bold claims on the proficiency of his recruits: “Skilled mechanics in every branch of trade and industry,”⁵⁵ but the Newmilns lace manufacturers took a very risky decision in this respect. The only very skilled recruits in this field of industry would have to come from the other main centre with the necessary expertise, Nottingham and district, and that would be against the advice and pressure of the strong and effective Lacemakers' Society. Collison asserted that his “Free Labour” workmen were vetted by his team of registrars, who were retired detective-inspectors of police and were “used to handling men and forming quick and accurate judgement of them.”⁵⁶ Whether they were to assess their morality or test their skill in their chosen trade is not made clear, but he said he would supply workmen willing to work in place of strikers even if it involved risk to life or limb. His plan would provide transportation, commissariat and protection whatever the location, using a staff of “Emergency Men” trained to protect his workmen from trade union pickets and any others inclined to molest them.⁵⁷

The Strike Intensifies.

Collison's travelling inspector, Graeme Hunter, known locally as the "union smasher", arrived in the town on the 10th August to put the final touches to an agreement with the lace employers. Having paid an initial engagement fee of £2000 and promised accommodation for up to 300 imported workmen from the NFLA, the employers set in motion their campaign to break the strike. They placed the running and immediate fate of their firms completely in the hands of an untried power.⁵⁸ The final result could not be predicted. Their action was based on an outbreak of hubris and what they considered the effrontery of their long-serving workmen in challenging their authority.

In Hunter the employers had a redoubtable leader of the strikebreaking workers. Although invariably accompanied by a bruiser, he was a man who displayed great physical courage in threatening situations and by the end of the dispute, although reviled for all his works, was still regarded with awe by his opponents. George Girvan, a veteran of the strike and later general secretary of the NDTWU, recalled: "He was one of the bravest men I ever saw. Hunter was once followed by a large crowd who surrounded him against the wall at Stewart's mill and pitched stones at him. A large well-made man, he turned, folded his arms across his chest and stood facing them. Nothing more was thrown."⁵⁹ When the first blacklegs (called blacknobs locally) appeared in the town in early September, the NDTWU tried to persuade them to return home, fares paid. But to be engaged by the NFLA they had signed a contract binding them for twelve months and threatened with breach of contract if they defaulted.

A number on arrival found accommodation with difficulty in rented property, but with a large influx towards the end of August and in early September lodgings were found in hastily constructed huts in a field at the west of the town, belonging to Major John Shields. He was managing director of the lace company Johnston, Shields & Co. and chairman and moving spirit of the newly formed, but purely local, Masters' Defence Association. After Alexander Morton's offer to mediate was rejected, it was clear the employers intended to break the NDTWU and exhaust its funds. The lock-out notices were withdrawn and the men invited to return to work on individual application and renunciation of membership of the union.⁶⁰

Meanwhile the severity of the law was applied by the judiciary under the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act. When minor cases arose they were processed through the local magistracy, the local lace employers in another guise.

Later when more serious offences occurred they were referred to the Sheriff Court in Kilmarnock by a greatly strengthened police presence. At the beginning, when work should have resumed after the local holiday, all seemed calm with the eight lace factories in the town virtually at a standstill. One thousand women and girls, with other on-cost workers, were idle as the 200 lace weavers on whom production was dependent remained on strike.⁶¹

The whole tenor of the dispute changed with the appearance of the representatives of Free Labour. Peter Muir, secretary of the Ayrshire Miners' Federation, advised the lace workers not to be so quiet, but to "blaze their grievances abroad" and support would come from many quarters.⁶² The *Kilmarnock Standard* reported that crowds of two or three hundred were "conveying to and from the factory those creatures who were working."⁶³ On 12th August fourteen townspeople were arraigned before the Sheriff Court for intimidation. Sheriff Hall, in the customary application of the law at that time, emphasised:

"It was a serious matter to interfere with the right which belonged to every citizen of a free country to exercise his own judgement as to the conditions on which he would accept employment to earn a living for himself and his family."⁶⁴

He added ominously that in a recent case in the High Court of Justiciary one of the judges expressed the view:

"That when men were convicted under section 7 [of the Act] they should be imprisoned without alternative of a fine. But ... looking to the self-restraint which had on the whole been exhibited during the continuance of this protracted strike he was really unwilling to do anything harsh."⁶⁵

Nine men and two women were convicted and each fined £3. A week later decisions from the bench were back at the usual punitive level on misbehaviour by the strikers. One had broken two panes of glass in a blackleg's window. The Honorary Sheriff Substitute, Colonel Dickie, found the charge proved and pronounced that:

"In ordinary circumstances the breaking of two panes of glass was a very small matter, but taking into account the present disturbances in Newmilns he must take a very serious view of the case."⁶⁶

His lordship stated that a fine was not an option and passed sentence of 30 days imprisonment.

In contrast, the punishment of the strike-breakers appeared to be more merciful. An assault on a striker by one of Hunter's bodyguards using an iron bar, received a fine of £2 or 20 days. Similarly, an attack with a knife on strikers

collected a fine of 15 shillings (75p) or 10 days,⁶⁷ while another blackleg who threatened with a revolver local men who were molesting him and his companions at the railway station, was fined £3 or 30 days.⁶⁸

From September onwards events moved quickly along. The blacklegs came under siege in their hut accommodation, in their lodgings, and while at work in the lace factories. Whenever they emerged from these they were accompanied backwards and forwards by a large, hostile crowd, hissing, booing and jostling. Graeme Hunter, and other strong-arm members of Collison's "Emergency Men", acted as guides and buffers.⁶⁹ Hunter also made the most of other incidents in his attempts to discredit the striking Newmilns lace workers. One of the blacklegs from the huts, while drunk, fell into a plasterer's lime pit in the town. Hunter used this in his attack and two local men were arrested on suspicion of assault and causing blindness, before being released through lack of evidence.⁷⁰

Under public pressure and fully aware of their apparent position of strength the employers finally agreed to a conference. Even if they had considered granting reasonable terms, they had already signed over the management of their businesses by agreement for one year to the NFLA, and given unreserved support to its agents to break the strike.⁷¹ The conference met on the 17th September between an employees' delegation with Councillor Johnstone acting as their secretary, and the employers including two of the leading instigators of the original lock-out, Major John Shields and Provost Andrew Mair, director of Hood, Morton & Co. The employers' terms were patently unacceptable. They would take back as many persons as possible, although new employees (blacklegs), who had been engaged on three to twelve months contracts since the strike began, would remain in their employment. Instead of a ten per cent advance, they preferred a ten per cent reduction, but would take back as many of the old workers as possible at the old wages. They would not agree to the NDTWU negotiating on behalf of their workers. As a result of the employers' position, Councillor Johnstone concluded there was no use prolonging the meeting as the manufacturers had made up their minds to concede nothing on the three points raised.⁷²

Earlier, Keir Hardie had summed up the situation in an address to the workers:

"The employers were local men. As boys his hearers and them had gone to the same school, had played the same games, had gone on sweethearting expeditions together and associated, as lads would, on perfect equality. But years rolled on ... They became employers of labour while the others remained employees, and then some trifling matter occurred which seemed to entrench on the interests of those men.

All the fellowship of boyhood, and all the good feeling that ought to exist between man and man, whether employers or employees, were ruthlessly swept aside and they tried to use their strength to trample upon what they believed to be the weakness of their fellowmen.

"It only showed that if gold had hardened the hearts of some and if business interests had come to supplant human feeling, those of them whose interests were still identical should all the more firmly knit together in the feeling of good fellowship and true comradeship, resolved that an injury done to one should be reckoned an injury done to all ... They had been endeavouring to obtain an advance in wages and they had been trying to do it through the Union. The employers ignored the Union, but they did not ignore the active members of it. Five of these were dismissed."⁷³

The Conflict Escalates.

With the loss of financial support from the Mill and Factory Workers' Federal Union, the lace workers became more dependent on donations and collections. These continued to flood in from every quarter of the trade union movement, including the American and Nottingham lacemakers. Resources were being stretched to the limit, however, when ancillary workers, even the boy shuttlers, came out on strike, refusing to work alongside strike-breakers.

Early in September, fourteen weavers left to seek work in America as the blacklegs began to arrive in large numbers. The local weavers picketed the Newmilns railway station and gave new arrivals, accompanied by Hunter, a rough time. A scout posted at Mauchline railway station to inspect the English train heading for Kilmarnock, had time to arrive by bicycle to alert his colleagues in Newmilns. To avoid running the gauntlet from Kilmarnock through the town of Galston with its population of miners, sympathetic to the strikers, two lace employers escorted six blacklegs surreptitiously over the country roads from Mauchline station.⁷⁴ The chairman of the NDTWU, to retain public support, advised his members to keep within the law, refrain from throwing stones and from other acts of violence, and to avoid gathering in crowds at the railway station. He appealed to them to allow the committee to meet and speak to the parties as they arrived. This strategy sometime proved effective with small groups, but when larger numbers were involved, inevitably escorted by the Emergency Men, success was less likely. In one case, twenty-one men alighted from the train from Glasgow on September 15th, but out of this number, which included nineteen Englishmen and two Glasgow men, chaperoned by Graeme Hunter, only the two from Glasgow returned home. The others found work in Hood, Morton & Co.'s lace mill.

By mid-September, the boy shuttlers, who filled the machine brasses with yarn, were again on strike,⁷⁵ and this marked a turning point in the dispute as the conflict stepped up a gear. A number of scurrilous pamphlets and cartoons were published and distributed by both sides, attacking the character and pretensions of the manufacturers and the NDTWU leaders. Two satirical dramas *The Crisis, Act 1* and *The Crisis, Acts 11 and 111* were hurried through the press by the NDTWU, and the employers retaliated with *The New Democracy - A Burlesque from Real Life of the Newmilns Idlers' Union*. A poster, lampooning the Union leaders and supporters, entitled *Newmilns, Independent of Labour Party Tactics*, was also widely broadcast.⁷⁶

The *Weekly Supplement* described the situation as "bearing all the fruits of a chronic state of social warfare."⁷⁷ The Jubilee Bridge, an iron footbridge over the river Irvine, was erected giving easy access from the huts to seven of the eight factories involved in the dispute. By this new route the strike-breakers could avoid the hazards of a longer trek through the town to the next bridge upstream. It was during this period that Hunter displayed his greatest skills and resolution. On one occasion he met a new detachment from the south at Mauchline station. They were unable to obtain any form of conveyance there and so travelled on to Kilmarnock by train, and Hunter himself drove the char-à-banc on to Newmilns full of his latest recruits. They received a violent reception approaching Galston, and between there and Newmilns he whipped up the horses and drove through another mob at a gallop, but they were caught by a hail of stones and he and some of his passengers were injured.⁷⁸ Hunter wore a large bandage around his head for many days after this event, more as part of his propaganda war than from any serious injury.⁷⁹ Keir Hardie was again brought in to pacify the local population as the Galston miners had offered gunpowder to blow up the strike-breakers' wooden huts.

At this point it seemed that a negotiated settlement to the dispute would be impossible. Although some of the directors of the lace firms might have favoured one, they could not be seen to break ranks or abandon their original intention to crush the NDTWU and maintain absolute control of labour costs. But was their strategy entirely necessary? Competition was increasing world-wide, but they did not appreciate that their new factories and modern plant placed them at a distinct advantage over traditional producers, particularly as the market for lace furnishings had expanded dramatically. By 1915 fifteen new factories were to be established at Newmilns and Darvel, and between times others were to begin operations in neighbouring Ayrshire towns: two in Galston, one in Kilmarnock and one in Stewarton, with two English firms setting up in Glasgow. Without the stimulus of competition to improve methods and attract the best skilled labour the industry would have stagnated, as it had intermittently at Nottingham, the original locus of the lace trade.

In the circumstances of the 1897 dispute, the employers had embarked on a course which could not benefit employer or employee. Like their equally stubborn workmen they had been immersed in the great radical, temperance and religious controversies of the 19th century,⁸⁰ but a change had occurred which set them apart from what had been the common stock of handloom weavers and small farmers. As the conflict continued, they could not avoid the obvious construction that the imported workmen were not as skilled as their own, even if most came from lace producing areas in the English Midlands, and morale could not have

been at the highest among them, as they were caged like animals in their huts and ostracised by the community. But who were the personnel of the NFLA? Naturally they were enlisted from the vast army of the unemployed of late Victorian times who were perhaps desperate to find work and who had the misfortune to be in that condition. However, they were unlikely only to be, as the Newmilns weavers they replaced believed, "the wreck of society" from the slums of Nottingham and Glasgow who indulged in Sabbath-breaking, playing pitch-and-toss and cards.⁸¹ In time, the supply from England began to dry up and men were sought among the handloom silk weavers of Lanarkshire and of the wool trade of the Borders.

By the end of September there still seemed to be no end of the dispute in sight. There were already indications that the mild demands for union recognition and a small advance in wages by the local weavers would not be obtainable. The NDTWU executive yielded to the manufacturers' requirement that unless the men were "prepared to give in writing an acknowledgement that the recognition of the Union is to be dropped" no meeting could take place.⁸² The full implications of the employers' determination to succeed were clearly apparent. On Monday 20th September as many as seventy-two men had arrived from the south and, marshalled by Graeme Hunter, were led to the huts, with another eight met off the afternoon train.⁸³

The full power of the law was again brought to bear on headstrong strikers. Following the incident with Hunter and the *char-à-banc*, five lace workers were charged with the intimidation of twelve men on the highway.⁸⁴ The Procurator-Fiscal seemed to offer an argument in mitigation in recording a plea of guilty of assembly, but not guilty of throwing stones, stressing: "that the strike was entering its 13th week .. , and there were some foreign weavers that were being brought in to take the place of those who were on strike." The Sheriff held: "that they were not foreigners, but only Englishmen", and found the five guilty and fined each £3 or 30 days.⁸⁵ Popular sympathy lay with the strikers. In the burgh elections three Labour candidates were successful, including the president and the secretary of the NDTWU, and two directors of lace firms were defeated. The reporters for the *Kilmarnock Standard* and the *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald* were branded along with the NDTWU leaders in the employers' cartoon, because of their seemingly partisan stand.⁸⁶ As winter approached, bills were posted in the town that vacancies were still available in the factories. Applications to return to work could be made through Graeme Hunter. Not one was taken up, but at the end of October three strikers broke ranks, one trade-unionist and two non-union men. The employers intimated that as far as they were concerned the strike was over

with all the strikers' places filled and, probably, as a piece of propaganda, they added that at least 10,000 pairs of curtains were being produced elsewhere to the order of their firms.⁸⁷ As a final ploy in the battle of wits, the strikers organized a petition from residents near the wooden huts addressed to the burgh council complaining of their insanitary condition and requested "observations from the local authority and reports from the Medical Officer and the Sanitary Inspector."⁸⁸ But an end of sorts was in sight. Some of the firms seemed inclined to waver. Sensing this change deputations were sent from the NDTWU to all the mill-owners on Saturday 6th November, but were given the customary reply; they would treat only with their old employees individually and take on such men as they chose to select. All was not satisfactory among the lace companies at a period when they should have been at their busiest after the quieter summer season. The following Monday morning, it soon became known that one firm had broken ranks when Haddow, Aird & Crerar reinstated fifteen of their previous employees on the old terms.⁸⁹

It was at this point also that Councillor Johnstone, President of the Mill and Factory Workers' Federation, was in communication with the Board of Trade to invoke the terms of the new Conciliation Act of 1896. The request was made on behalf of the strikers after a dispute which had lasted for five months. G. R. Askwith was appointed by the government to attempt a reconciliation and twenty-one weeks after the initial lock-out was implemented he sat down with the employers.⁹⁰

The Crisis – A Drama. Pages from acts II and III of a retaliatory pamphlet by the Union on the employers.

With a degree of flexibility and compromise working conditions might have returned to some normality. The editor of the *Weekly Supplement* commented: “the conflicting interests at stake and suffering entailed have doubtless been accountable for unkindly feelings exhibited, and it may be sincerely hoped that old friendships will now be restored.”⁹² But the lace manufacturers of the town remained obdurate. 186 blacklegs were still living in the huts, with others in lodgings, almost all with seven to twelve months of their contracts to run.⁹³ Strikers returning to their work would find it difficult to fraternise with the men brought in to replace them, and it was not easy for the latter to escape from what would become progressively uncongenial surroundings. Earlier it had been reported that two strike-breakers sent home at the expense of the NDTWU had been prosecuted for breach of engagement.⁹⁴ In this climate, the employers almost immediately dishonoured their part of the agreement.

As soon as the weavers returned to work at Hood, Morton & Co. and to Stewart, Moir & Muir, an attempt was made to impose two twelve-hour shifts in place of the three eight-hour shifts in operation before the dispute. The weavers again struck work and during the following months, the spirit and letter of the agreement was broken by the employers on numerous occasions. Askwith wrote to the employers after he received a list of grievances from the workmen at Newmilns. With 56 old employees still idle by January 1898, new men were being

engaged from the neighbouring towns. The employers triumphant in their apparent success replied through Major Shields, Chairman of their Association, stating that some old employees could not be taken back "as their places were either filled, or previously arranged to be filled". He told Askwith that his interpretation of clause two was also not entirely correct, that the employers were prepared to receive a deputation from three employees to discuss any question, but "shall certainly refuse to discuss the grievances of those not in their employment".⁹⁵ Thus the door was closed to those old employees still out in the cold.

Graeme Hunter; boastful as ever, also took the opportunity to write to officials of the Board of Trade in support of his imported workmen:

"With a view to relieving them of the persistent vituperation to which they have been subjected ... that gentleman [Askwith] was aware of the existence of an arrangement between the employers and myself for the permanent employment of 186 hands, all of whom have at least twelve months agreement of engagement, the fatuity of dispensing with my hands with seven days notice will be perfectly apparent to you."⁹⁶

Little could be done by the manufacturers for the blacklegs after the end of the strike, as fresh assaults on them were reported. At the beginning of December, to maintain a feeling of camaraderie among them, a "Complementary Dinner to Loyal Employees" was provided for them in the huts by the employers.⁹⁷ It was becoming impossible to maintain their status in the mills as competent workmen or in the community, condemned as they were as pariahs. The employers had now to count the cost of their business adventure with Free Labour. They had placed production in the hands of men who could only ever be regarded as a temporary labour force, alongside unco-operative ancillary workers. Even their plant had suffered deterioration through lack of proper maintenance, as the weavers who had been replaced had been responsible for the cleaning and smooth running of their lace machines.

As the weeks passed the employers continued their campaign against the NDTWU. The active members and officials were not reemployed and notices appeared in the factories barring union membership. The employers still regarded their actions justifiable in the period, towards the end of the 19th century, with the growth of a vigorous trade union movement. In the local situation they felt they had successfully resisted this development and Hunter, in another of his public statements reflected their views:

"When Mr Askwith came, he came to act simply as a feather bed on which the Union might fall, and he came at their instance not at mine ... The vacancies which the employers have to fill are only the vacancies

which exist among their own workmen, and not those which exist among mine. I am today as much bound to run the works for twelve months as ever I was, and I am perfectly prepared to do it."⁹⁸

Hunter could not resist taunting his opponents:

"Have the prophecies of the [NDTWU] officials ever in slightest degree been fulfilled? When Graeme Hunter first arrived, it was stated that there would be no men, and the withdrawal of the lock-out notices at my instance was treated with contempt and assumed by the leaders to be a victory for them. When the huts went up they were said to be 'poultry houses.' When the men arrived they were said to be rivetters. When the char-a-banc started from Kilmarnock it was never to reach Newmilns. Since that time how many instances of mutiny in my ranks have the trade unionists intimated were about to take place? And now they have another will-o-the-wisp in the fact that Jubilee Terrace [the huts] has been sold. It has, but it has been sold to be removed when it suits me."⁹⁹

At the time of writing Hunter must have known the huts would soon be taken down and their demolition was begun by mid-January of the new year. On February 9th 1898 the employers held a victory dinner and Provost Andrew Mair asked Major Shields to accept a token of their esteem - a gold watch inscribed:

"Presented to Major Shields J.P. by the lace manufacturers of Newmilns in recognition of his kind services during the labour difficulties of 1897."

The rest of the evening was enjoyed with song and story and a rendition by the Provost of his favourite poem, Kipling's *If*.¹⁰⁰

There were still 41 members of the NDTWU who had not been re-employed, almost twenty per cent of the weaving personnel of the lace factories, and the anti-union policies continued unabated. Clause four of the agreement, that the question of the revision of wages would be considered after six months, was the next clause to be breached. At the end of that period notices appeared in all the factories similar to that posted by the firm of Johnston, Shields & Co:

"To our employees who are members of the Newmilns Textile Workers' Union. As we have decided to conduct our business on non-union principles, each employee who is a member of the above union must leave our employment today. In the event of anyone presently being a member of the Newmilns Textile Trade Union being prepared to sever his connection therewith, we shall be pleased to receive his individual application with a view to reinstatement later on. By Order 23rd May 1898."¹⁰¹

Weavers in all the factories had also to sign a document similar to that issued to the workforce of A. & J. Muir & Co. which read: "I hereby acknowledge having been a member of Newmilns Textile Workers' Union, but now declare truthfully that I am no longer, and I shall not again form any such connection as long as I remain in your employment."¹⁰² In reality, although everyone appeared to sign such pledges, they remained loyal members of the NDTWU. Indeed, within a few months the Union was admitting former blacklegs, who had decided to settle in the community, on payment of a penalty of five shillings. Not everyone was admitted and the Nottingham Lacemakers' Society was warned about the return of a blackleg weaver to Nottingham.¹⁰³ Another applicant, Gilford, who had been in the *char-à-banc* incident was admitted as his case was considered exceptional. He had been "twenty-eight years a good Society man while in Nottingham, and had only come to this district through necessity" (having been victimised for his trade union principles in Nottingham). The NDTWU executive committee decided to be lenient, considering his circumstances, and admitted him to the Union.¹⁰⁴

At the end of 1897 Graeme Hunter was bragging that he was engaged in connection with seventeen other strikes, including a lace strike in Derbyshire and a printers' strike in Edinburgh.¹⁰⁵ But in a letter to the local paper an enquirer put a compelling question: "By the way Graeme, before bidding you goodbye, did you ever smash a union?"¹⁰⁶ The twenty-one week struggle laid the real foundation of the NDTWU. A lean period followed the strike, but most of the weavers were at first clandestine members and they were fortunate in immediately recruiting a first-class secretary to improve organization and develop tighter union policies. To prevent victimisation of members and officials, John Young was brought in from an outside source, from being an agent with the Co-operative Insurance Society. His impact was soon felt. While acting also as Union Collector one employer was heard to complain "we will never know who is in the society".¹⁰⁷

Within the first few years of the 20th century, branches of the NDTWU had been formed in Darvel, Galston, Kilmarnock, Stewarton and Glasgow. After a visit to the district by Mary MacArthur, famous for proselytising in the cause of trade unionism, a women's lace union was formed, subsequently organized within the NDTWU along with all other types of on-cost workers within the industry. The reputation gained during the long dispute of 1897 led to appeals from other workers to help set up their own unions.¹⁰⁸ Donations were made during the first decade of the century to striking miners and to the lace workers of England, France and Spain.¹⁰⁹

With the lace workers of England and France the NDTWU created cross-border co-operation with the formation of the International Federation of Lace Trade Unions and sent a delegate to the first congress in Calais in 1901.¹¹⁰ The NDTWU was also a founding member of the Ayrshire Trades Council in 1896.¹¹¹

The executive spent the first decade after the strike recovering lost ground and tightening its grip on the labour force in all departments. In opposition to the black list operated by the employers, the secretary of the NDTWU "was instructed to write a 'white list' of our members in the different shops so that they would know each other."¹¹² An example of the stricter discipline coming into effect occurred when two members were expelled for breaking the NDTWU rule by working the long twelve-hour shift.¹¹³ The two shilling increase, the demand for which had initiated the 1897 lock-out, had by this time been procured. This was largely achieved through arrangements with the new lace companies established in the district (five more in Newmilns alone between 1897 and 1912), and some of the new firms also agreed to meetings with officers of the NDTWU to discuss wage rates, the widths of machines and the class of goods produced.¹¹⁴ A new and more pragmatic approach was being practised by a second generation of owners in a highly competitive market in which the Irvine Valley lace producers were setting the pace world-wide. The strength of the industry was illustrated, in overcoming overseas tariffs, by companies operating in Scotland opening factories in the U.S.A. (Philadelphia), Spain (Barcelona), Sweden (Gothenburg), Denmark (Copenhagen) and Poland (Warsaw). The original Newmilns firms had to find alternative methods of increasing production than the punitive measures adopted in the 1890s.¹¹⁵

The period in the early years of the century has been described as one of "industrial tranquillity"¹¹⁶. This could be largely explained by the self-restraint of the trade unions, following the anti-union Taff Vale decision in the courts, but a more confident feeling was abroad among working people leading up to and subsequent to the Liberal Party victory in the 1906 election. Anti-union philosophies were still held commonly among employers, especially those operating at the margin, and numerous clashes occurred. As late as 1900 an anonymous writer was threatening the lace workers with the return of that "burly Goliath, Graeme the Great" to chastise them with scorpions, while comparing the workers with pro-Boers.¹¹⁷ By 1905 those same lace companies were not businesses struggling to survive in a down-turn. They formed practically a new industry, based on the great technical advances of the Nottingham lace-furnishing

machine, and people had to be attracted with good wages and conditions, into a rapidly expanding trade.¹¹⁸

When Graeme Hunter left Newmilns to batten on other credulous employers, the Newmilns manufacturers could not hide from their old employees, once they had returned to their posts, the costly damage done to the plant by the blackleg labour.¹¹⁹ By 1907 the NDTWU had virtually achieved a closed shop in the industry and seldom made any tactical mistakes after the hard lesson of 1897. The victory the employers achieved then proved hollow. The social consequences of their action had a more costly result than their business ones. They had precipitated their community into a long and bitter struggle and had lost face and respect as a result. At the local burgh elections in late 1898, the Provost, Senior and Junior Bailies, all manufacturers, did not stand for re-election. The employers probably made a mistake in judgement, but similar situations had developed in many parts of the country until the effects of the Trades Disputes Act of 1906 worked their way through the industrial system. The Act secured for trade unions, their members and officials, exemption from most forms of litigation, when acting on behalf of their unions, which previously could have deprived them of their individual freedom and union funds.

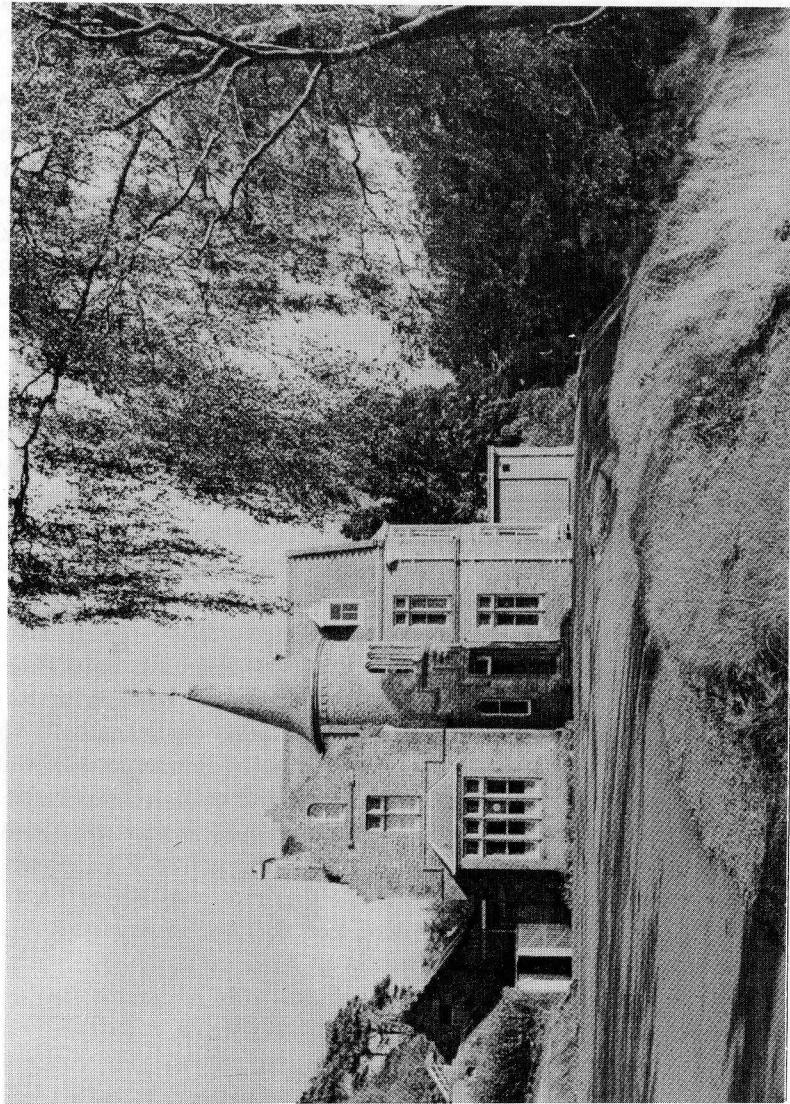
Newmilns never returned to its former social cohesion. Tension remained high for a while and then slowly declined. Although membership of the NDTWU was banned in the factories, the manufacturers must have been aware that their weaver employees were once again fully paid up members. Very little passed unnoticed in a town with a population around 4000, especially in the close social fabric of the lace mills, where many near and distant relatives were employed by the mill owners. The lace manufacturers association was at first an ephemeral organization which had grown out of the exigency of the claim for an advance in wages in 1897 by the lace weavers. But as the trade union movement grew in strength at the turn of the century, a corresponding movement arose among manufacturers to defend their own interests.

An inaugural meeting of the Scottish Lace Manufacturers Association was held on May 4th 1903 with firms represented from Newmilns, Darvel, Galston and Stewarton. Other companies declined to join until the constitution was amended. They insisted they be allowed to continue production during a lock-out under certain circumstances with a voluntary penalty payment.¹²⁰ These firms must have reflected on the harmful effects of the total lock-out of 1897 on some of the individual companies. Why had the eight Newmilns companies been so ruthless in their stand in that year? The lock-out might have been initiated after a chance reading of the extravagant claims of the NFLA in its journal *The Labour*

Exchange, followed by informal discussions among the manufacturers which led to an anti-union plan of action.

The immense profits made in the early years of the industry had coincided with the construction of impressive mansions around the Valley towns.¹²¹ Many of the mill owners had become the nouveaux riches. They had to define their otherness from those from whom they had sprung.¹²² They felt it was their due for their entrepreneurial skills. They had become distinct and apart from a previously homogeneous society. They had acquired different manners and attitudes which had to be defended against anything which might have nibbled their new-found advantages away. Out of all the turmoil of the 1897 strike a new feeling prevailed. As the industry moved, with continued success in the world of commerce at the beginning of the 20th century, the basis for bitter hostilities evaporated. The Scottish firms expanded and increased in number to become collectively the largest producer of lace furnishings in the world. The industrial climate had changed and good wages had to be offered and maintained to attract skilled labour as competition intensified. Although another lock-out occurred in Newmilns in 1912, from that time onwards all industrial difficulties were resolved through the rituals of negotiation between NDTWU officers and the lace employers - gains and losses being determined by prevailing economic factors.

Collaboration developed between the lace trade unions of Scotland and England and also between the lace manufacturers of both countries. Joint Board meetings brought all four organizations together at regular intervals to help overcome difficulties and to formulate policies for the good of the trade.¹²³ Up until the end of the 2nd World War, lace weaving continued to attract workers with favourable wage rates. The employers under the dictates of commercial efficiency in their industrial environment remained aloof, but continued to have roles in the community through their church affiliations, some sporting activities and in their reappearance in time as candidates in burgh elections.



Gowanbank, home of Alexander Morton, completed 5 years after the installation of his first lace machine.

References and Notes.

- 1 Joseph Hood (1821-1893), was the mechanical genius of the Irvine Valley last century. By 1838 he had built and introduced the jacquard machine to the district. In the 1850s he developed power-driven cropping machines to replace the slow and tedious hand-clipping methods, using female labour. The first power-loom factory was built in 1863, where he produced winceys of cotton warp and woollen weft and in 1876 installed the first powered lace machine in Newmilns. He was an ardent Liberal and an enthusiastic temperance advocate. Twice provost of the town and a public benefactor, he suffered a financial disaster in 1892 through his misplaced generosity and never recovered.
- 2 James Mitchell of Newmilns invented the sewing frame as an attachment to the handloom in the late 1820s, bringing a great saving in expensive weft yarn in simple patterned cloth. See Gebbie M., *Sketches of Strathaven and Avondale*. (1880), 150.
- 3 Charter upon the creation of the town of Newmyllis into a Free Burgh of Barony, 9th January 1490/91. See translation in *Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society Collections*, 1, (1947-49), 95-97.
- 4 Charter by Sir Matthew Campbell of Loudoun in favour of the town of Newmilnis, 21st January 1566. Copy of the translation from Latin in the Dick Institute, Kilmarnock.
- 5 Names of witnesses in the record of baptisms in Galston Parish Church for the dates cited. The record for that period also covered Loudoun Parish.
- 6 Sources for the figures are Old Statistical Account (O.S.A.), New Statistical Account (N.S.A.), the government Handloom Weaver Reports and the *Weekly Supplement*.
- 7 Robert Tannahill, the Paisley poet and author of *Loudoun's Bonnie Woods and Braes*, was sometime resident in Newmilns.
- 8 William Cobbett, the radical reformer, was a great influence on the weavers' political education in the 1820s and 1830s. During his tour of Scotland in 1832 he visited the town, and was given the Freedom of the Burgh. He compiled an issue of his journal the *Political Register* while living at an inn there. See Cobbett, W., *Tour in Scotland* (1883), 152

and 234, where he comments: "I would go a thousand miles to see the looks of these Scotchies, especially at Newmilns."

9 Dr Archibald Lawrie (1793-1838) on one occasion refused to give the names of the famous reformer 'Orator' Hunt as forenames in a baptism. After omitting them the congregation was astounded on hearing the father declare in a loud voice that his son would be known as Henry Hunt. See also Johnston, T., *History of the Working Classes in Scotland* (1920), 236.

10 Loudoun parish was well represented at the nearby battlefield of Drumclog in 1679 and had its full complement of martyrs during the 'Killing Times'. The Rev. Norman Macleod in the 1830's still "had quite another class of folk beside the Chartists in the parish. Away out among the farmhouses, and up by Darvel, there were many descendants of the Covenanters, and there was a Cameronian Church in Darvel." See Macleod, D., *A Memoir of Norman Macleod* (1877), 73.
11 Macleod *ibid*, 73.

12 Although their hopes for a wider franchise in Britain were crushed, the spirit of the Chartists was still alive in 1860: "Garibaldi's Trumpet of Freedom has breathed life into them. £14. 10. 6 has been been subscribed for the use of the Italian Liberation." *Weekly Supplement*, 31st March 1916.

13 *Ardrrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 20th November 1872.

14 *Ardrrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 22nd April 1872

15 *Ardrrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 24th January 1873.

16 Newmilns Co-operative Society, the new owners, gifted the Beaming Shed to the town council and it thereafter became the burgh band hall. *Weekly Supplement*, 25th March 1904.

17 *Weekly Supplement*, 18th March 1882.

18 *Weekly Supplement*, 22nd April 1882.

19 These were the last independent weavers working in their own homes. For a few years after the introduction of lace, a small number of lace manufacturers allocated space in their mills to employ a limited number of handloom weavers to meet the shrinking demand for the old style leno curtain. (See photograph of handloom weaver in factory environment.)

20 Instead of the warp and weft of woven cloth, the figuring is achieved on the lace machine by inserting or twisting additional yarn on a warp ground from numerous spools and bobbins. By this method all the

cotton yarn is used, whereas on the handloom, to bring up the design, the floating threads, which are not tied in, are clipped off as waste. Although the appearance of the final products can be similar, the costs are vastly different. At the time of the introduction of lace in 1875 to the Irvine Valley, a pair of Nottingham lace curtains was 15/- (75p), by 1897 Valley goods of the same quality sold at 3/6d (18p) per pair. *Weekly Supplement*, 25th June 1897.

21 Alexander Morton & Co., established in 1875, employed by 1890 from 650 to 700 workers in its various departments. The firm by then could produce 100,000 pairs of curtains per annum and additional lines in chenille, madras and carpets.

22 Hood, Morton & Co. was established in 1863 for the power-loom production of wincey, but did not start up in lace until 1876-77. By 1890 winceys were given up, but were replaced by chenille and madras alongside lace.

23 The Nottingham Lacemakers' Society, a craft union, was eventually too powerful for its own good. They had "succeeded not only in forcing up wages, but in imposing rigid demarcation rules and trade practices intended to safeguard their status as skilled workers." Wells, F.A., *The Lace Industry* (1946), 50. Many Nottingham lace firms left the city to smaller towns nearby, to Derbyshire, Scotland and U.S.A.

24 As a separate manufacturing business, the lace machine builders could not for long be dissuaded from extending their business abroad. Scotland benefitted from this decision. The machine builders were willing to sell by hire-purchase and to develop wider and more efficient models.

25 "Within the last year or two an industry .., has sprung into existence, and into a surprising vitality as well ... Little more than five years ago a coalition of local manufacturers set the industry agoing in somewhat limited scale at the village of Darvel ... The new industry at once entered by leaps and bounds on a career of remarkable prosperity - doubly remarkable in these times. Up to the present and in the same district, comprising the other towns of Newmilns and Galston, somewhere about half a dozen other firms have embarked into the trade." *Weekly Supplement*, 4th September 1880.

26 Eight of these also produced madras.

27 *Weekly Supplement*, 22nd April 1882.

- 28 A final phase saw three new lace factories constructed in the 1920s. For a complete list of lace and madras companies established in Ayrshire between 1875 and 1927 see Mair, J., *The Origins and Establishment of the Machine-lace Industry in Ayrshire* (1973), M.Litt. thesis, the University of Glasgow.
- 29 The following firms opened factories overseas: Hood, Morton & Co. in Copenhagen; Johnston, Shields & Co. in Barcelona and Gothenburg and Cleland & Co. of Darvel in Philadelphia.
- 30 T.I. Birkin & Co. and Goodall & White.
- 31 Machines eventually reached a width of 480 inches, before problems caused by torsion prevented further development of machine widths. A ten point machine 420 inches wide has 4,200 steel shuttles moving simultaneously along the width of the machine.
- 32 *Weekly Supplement*, 16th April 1881.
- 33 The Scottish lace manufacturers suspected their Nottingham business rivals of trying to encourage a trade union in their midst.
- 34 [Walter Forbes] "was a leading man among the miners in his early days and along with the late Bailie Brown, and the late Mr John Littlejohn of Galston and Mr Keir Hardie M.P took a prominent part in the formation and early work of the Ayrshire Miners' Federation." *Weekly Supplement*, 26th August 1910.
- 35 *Weekly Supplement*, 29th August 1890.
- 36 *Weekly Supplement*, 17th July 1891.
- 37 *Weekly Supplement*, 29th August 1890.
- 38 *Weekly Supplement*, 26th September 1890.
- 39 *Weekly Supplement*, 17th October 1890.
- 40 *Weekly Supplement*, 11th June 1881. See also Cole, G.D.H. and Postgate R., *The Common People* (1945), 497.
- 41 *Weekly Supplement*, 25th January 1889.
- 42 Minutes of the Newmilns and District Textile Workers' Union (NDTWU) 11th June 1897.
- 43 *Weekly Supplement*, 2nd July 1897.
- 44 *Weekly Supplement*, 16th July 1897.
- 45 *Weekly Supplement*, 6th August 1897.
- 46 *Weekly Supplement*, 6th August 1897.
- 47 *Weekly Supplement*, 13th August 1897.
- 48 Collison, W., *The Apostle of Free Labour* (1913), 89. Collison by the time of the London Dock Strike of 1889 had formulated his views on the

- industrial aims of 'New Unionism'. To him these included "strikes, intimidation, boycotting and unlawful picketing as a means of coercing working men into a recognition and adoption of those fallacies which the agitators preached, and also as a means of coercing employers into making changes in the wage rate not justified by economic considerations."
- 49 Collison, *op cit*, 89.
50. Collison, *op cit*, 42.
- 51 Collison, *op cit*, 93.
- 52 As early 1913 Collison gave his estimate of Ramsay MacDonald the future prime minister: "A raw Scotchman and uncertain of his subject matter, he was considered very 'shy' at the period when he used to be a constant figure at little 'artistic' tea parties... Since then MacDonald has lost his shyness, and moderated his opinions... He could never understand the British working man. As leader of the parliamentary Labour Party he may be said to serve a useful purpose, in as much as the party is unlikely to advance under his leadership." Collison, *op cit*, 308.
- 53 Collison, *op cit*, 94.
- 54 *Weekly Supplement*, 19th November 1897.
- 55 Collison, *op cit*, 99.
- 56 Collison, *op cit*, 99.
- 57 *Weekly Supplement*, 19th November 1897. From the form of engagement the Free Labour men were required to sign.
- 58 *Weekly Supplement*, 17th December 1897. Letter to the editor from Graeme Hunter: "I am today as much bound to run the works for twelve months as ever I was."
- 59 Interview with George Girvan, ex-Provost of Newmilns and ex-General Secretary of the Scottish Lace and Textile Workers' Union, on 8th June 1967 when aged 88.
- 60 *Weekly Supplement*, 13th August 1897. Notices were posted up in the individual factories: "This factory is open to all workmen who are disposed to return to their work, application to be made individually at the office."
- 61 It was a calm before the storm. The tumultuous escorts of strike breakers recommenced with the police in attendance. "The force has been considerably augmented at the present time. The crowds were composed largely of women and at times matters were very lively. At

- the closing hour [of work] several hundreds gathered in this way.”
Weekly Supplement, 6th August 1897.
- 62 *Kilmarnock Standard*, 7th August 1897.
- 63 *Kilmarnock Standard*, 7th August 1897.
- 64 *Kilmarnock Standard*, 13th August 1897.
- 65 *Kilmarnock Standard*, 13th August 1897.
- 66 *Kilmarnock Standard*, 20th August 1897.
- 67 *Weekly Supplement*, 24th December 1897.
- 68 *Kilmarnock Standard*, 2nd October 1897.
- 69 *Weekly Supplement*, 20th August 1897.
- 70 *Weekly Supplement*, 14th January 1898. “This was a perfect godsend [to Hunter], a real tit-bit which he rolled around his tongue like a sweet morsel, and used it with all his power to prejudice the lace workers’ cause, without taking the least trouble to elicit the truth.”
- 71 The eight lace companies operating in Newmilns in 1897 and in association over the lock-out were: Hood, Morton & Co.; J & J. Wilson & Co.; William Morton & Co.; Stewart, Moir & Muir; Johnston, Shields & Co.; Haddow, Aird & Crerar; A & J. Muir & Co.; and R. Muir & Son.
- 72 *Weekly Supplement*, 24th September 1897. Councillor Johnstone was President of the Aberdeen United Trades Council.
- 73 *Kilmarnock Standard*, 21st August 1897.
- 74 *Weekly Supplement*, 10th September 1897.
- 75 *Weekly Supplement*, 17th September 1897.
- 76 Copies in the possession of the writer.
- 77 *Weekly Supplement*, 17th September 1897.
- 78 *Weekly Supplement*, 1st October 1897.
- 79 John Falconer, retired college principal and octogenarian, described this incident in an interview on 28th September 1967, and summed up Hunter as “a showman”.
- 80 Many of the lace manufacturers were prominent members of the Liberal and Home Rule Association, borne out by the share distribution of the firm of Hood, Morton & Co. which in its original directorships had also a strong Christian element. The benefits of capitalism for workers and employers alike were extolled with employees encouraged to invest in the firm. In their first company registration they allocated to their workers 2,015 ordinary shares. *Register of Companies* (Hood & Morton).

- 81 *Weekly Supplement*, 1st October 1897.
- 82 *Weekly Supplement*, 24th September 1897.
- 83 *Kilmarnock Standard*, 25th September 1897.
- 84 Few of the names of the twelve were common in that part of Ayrshire: Barker, Grierson, Hancock, Penroe, Trackull, Smith, Howder, Rayner, Gilford, Barlow, Henshaw and Middleton.
- 85 *Kilmarnock Standard*, 2nd October 1897.
- 86 John Stone of the *Kilmarnock Standard* and J.H. Greene of the *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald* are figured with their notebooks in the middle right of the cartoon. Another outsider in the dispute and considered a busybody by the employers was Allan Green of the Newmilns Christian Mission. He appears as ‘Evergreen’.
- 87 *Weekly Supplement*, 29th October 1897.
- 88 Minutes of the Newmilns Burgh Council, 25th October 1897.
- 89 *Weekly Supplement*, 12th November 1897.
- 90 George Askwith, later Lord Askwith, had a long and distinguished career in this field in constant demand as a mediator in trade disputes. In 1912 he was chairman of a government enquiry into the causes of industrial conflict. He suggested compulsory conciliation before strikes commenced.
- 91 *Weekly Supplement*, 19th November 1897.
- 92 *Weekly Supplement*, 9th November 1897.
- 93 The paper signed by each imported worker read: “I undertake to proceed to the strike in Newmilns, or to any place you may require me in the United Kingdom for a period of twelve months, and as a competent lace weaver work at the trade as such in a thoroughly satisfactory manner, the amount of remuneration to be at the rate of for forty eight hours work. I agree that my personal conduct and behavior shall give you entire satisfaction. During intimidation, you [the NFLA] to provide food and lodging and in all cases of removal to advance fares.”
- 94 *Weekly Supplement*, 19th November 1897.
- 95 *Weekly Supplement*, 4th February 1898.
- 96 *Weekly Supplement*, 4th February 1898.
- 97 *Weekly Supplement*, 3rd December 1897.
- 98 *Weekly Supplement*, 17th December 1897.
- 99 *Weekly Supplement*, 17th December 1897.
- 100 *Weekly Supplement*, 11th February 1898.

- 101 *Weekly Supplement*, 27th May 1898.
- 102 *Weekly Supplement*, 10th June 1898.
- 103 Minutes of the NDTWU, 14th August 1900.
- 104 Minutes of the NDTWU, 9th December 1900.
- 105 *Weekly Supplement*, 11th November and 17th December 1897.
- 106 *Weekly Supplement*, 24th December 1897.
- 107 *Weekly Supplement*, 19th November 1915. John Young was General Secretary of the NDTWU from 1898 until 1914. He streamlined its organization by immediately cutting down the unwieldy committee, replacing it with a small executive. He inaugurated an early form of shop-stewardship to prevent unofficial action through the appointment of responsible members in each factory. He moved on to become the Secretary of the Scottish Textile Workers' Federation and manager of its state insurance department. During the upheaval of the 1897 strike he was elected to Newmilns Town Council and pushed through the municipalisation of the gas works. A fluent speaker he was also Secretary of the local branch of the I.L.P and appeared in the employers' scurrilous cartoon as 'Spouter'.
- 108 Minutes of the NDTWU, 14th August 1900. As well as assisting other trades to form their own unions, the NDTWU admitted the following groups of workers to its ranks: Darvel Carpet Workers - 1906; Johnstone Hacklers and Roughers - 1907; Irvine Valley Women Lace Workers - 1909; Kilmarnock Women Tweed Workers - 1911; Kilbirnie Flax Dressers - 1915; Stewarton Hosiery Workers and Kilmaurs Hosiery Workers - 1915; Galston Hosiery Workers and Galston Blanket Makers - 1916; Irvine Hosiery Workers, Lanark Hosiery Workers, Troon Hosiery Workers, Irvine Valley Madras Workers - 1917; Catrine Cotton Operatives - 1918; Mauchline Hosiery Workers - 1920. With the widening of its field of activity the NDTWU changed its title in 1916 to the Scottish Lace and Textile Workers' Union.
- 109 Minutes of the NDTWU, 8th December 1900 and 15th March 1902.
- 110 Minutes of the NDTWU, 10th April 1901 and 3rd July 1902.
- 111 Minutes of the NDTWU, 28th November 1896 and 23 December 1896: "Agreed to recommend to members that a delegate be sent to the next meeting at Ayr on 16th January for purpose of forming a Trades Council."
- 112 Minutes of the NDTWU, 15th March 1902.
- 113 Minutes of the NDTWU, 24th March 1906.

- 114 Minutes of the NDTWU, 9th February 1907.
- 115 As early as 1890 Keir Hardie's advice had been: "Fair employers always welcome the advent of a trades union, since it protects both them and their workmen from the injurious tactics of the unscrupulous employers, who manage to reduce both wages and profits by their unfair competition." *Weekly Supplement*, 5th September 1890.
- 116 Cole, G.D.H., *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement* (1960), 317.
- 117 *Weekly Supplement*, 31st August 1900.
- 118 In 1904 the lace factory of R. Muir & Son was sequestrated. It was the most inefficient of the firms involved in the 1897 lock-out, but round which the other seven companies had set their campaign against an advance in wages. *Weekly Supplement*, 25th November 1904.
- 119 *Weekly Supplement*, 7th September 1900. "A nice lot of lace weavers he [Hunter] brought last time? ... And what a nice bill of expenses he presented, not to speak of the damage to machinery, caused by his happy-go-lucky myrmidons."
- 120 Minutes of the Scottish Lace Manufacturers Association, 4th May 1903.
- 121 A new company which started up at the beginning of the 20th century during the second wave of factory construction showed profits of fifteen to twenty per cent in the first three years of operation. In the early years of the trade in the Irvine Valley most of the companies practically doubled their capital annually. Most loans from sleeping partners were quickly paid off, and new capital was readily available to build tariff-busting factories abroad.
- 122 In the first period of company formation and factory building from 1875-1887, the original occupations of the forty-one partners were:
- | | |
|--|----|
| Handloom weaving agents and auxiliaries: | 19 |
| Warehousemen and Manufacturers: | 16 |
| Farmers, graziers and dairymen: | 3 |
| Lace and madras factory workers: | 1 |
| Others: | 2 |
| Total | 41 |
- For the occupations of all the partners in the Ayrshire lace and madras companies, up to the formation of the last established company in 1927, forty-two in all, see: Mair, J., *The Origins and establishment of the Machine-lace Industry in Ayrshire* (1973), Appendix 1, 200-205. M. Litt. thesis, University of Glasgow.

- 123 Minutes of the Scottish Lace Manufacturers Association, 10th October 1919.

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