

Ayrshire Needlework

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Ayrshire needlework, as we know it today, seldom received that name in the county of its origin, where it was referred to simply as "sewed muslin," its trade name, or "floo'rin'" by the workers who executed the graceful flowery designs with their intricate fillings of fine lace stitches. The family christening robes and caps, so lovingly preserved today, and the superlative examples on display in museums, show a workmanship and style that must bring added pride to a county already rich in the variety of its traditions and culture. It is true that some of the examples labelled "Ayrshire embroidery" may have been stitched outside the county boundaries, but this unique style of white embroidery upon muslin, embellished with the characteristic point lace or drawn thread fillings, fully deserves the title of Ayrshire, since it was in the burgh of Ayr itself that the technique was first evolved and taught in Britain.

From first to last it was connected with the cotton industry in Scotland, particularly the muslin trade of Glasgow and Paisley. It will be remembered that the war with the American colonies brought to an end the flourishing Glasgow tobacco trade, and the Glasgow merchants turned their thoughts and their capital to the new inventions for spinning cotton. The first cotton mill in Scotland was erected in Rothesay in 1778, and was quickly followed by others. At first the yarn spun was suitable only for calicoes, but after the invention of Crompton's mule, it was possible to spin a yarn sufficiently fine to weave muslins capable of competing with the sheer Dacca muslins imported by the East India Company. The first British muslin was manufactured by Samuel Oldknow at Stockport about 1789, but it was not long before the weavers of Paisley adapted their skill in the weaving of fine fabrics, such as cambric and silk gauze, to the new fibre, and rapidly became renowned for the fineness of their muslins.

The new material was produced at an opportune moment, for a remarkable change in fashion was taking place in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The stiff silk or velvet gown worn previously, making its wearer appear, in Lord Cockburn's description, "like a ship from Tarshish gorgeous in velvet or rustling in silk" as she entered a room and sank upon a sofa, was giving way to a simple white muslin gown, the material falling into graceful draperies among the folds of the still full skirt. It was in response to this new fashion that the Glasgow manufacturers and the Paisley weavers turned their skill to making cotton muslins. The demand was so great that handloom weavers soon forsook the weaving of linen to undertake the more lucrative cotton fabrics.

The Rev. John Mitchell, recalling the Beith of his boyhood, gives a clear picture of the succession of events. Silk weaving had been introduced from Paisley some time after 1780. "In this latter town it began to be a lucrative as well as an elegant manufacture In extending its business it embraced the country towns and villages considerably remote and employed workmen and females in all these Wages were high (amounting I recollect to have heard even to seven shillings a day for a single hand). . . . To the silk, the muslin manufacture soon succeeded, and likewise prospered. Mills for spinning cotton yarn, at first on a small scale, but afterwards of larger dimensions, were introduced to this country and soon became somewhat numerous, being situated in different parts of the district, and driven by horse or water power and at length by steam." Although the spinning was contrived by mechanical means, the muslins continued to be woven on handlooms until almost the middle of the nineteenth century. The manufacturers of Glasgow and Paisley began sending out spun cotton yarn to agents in the country districts, particularly in Ayrshire, Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire, to be made up by the handloom weavers into fine muslin.

Plain muslin was not sufficient, however. The East India Company had imported embroidered muslins which had been used for aprons over ceremonial gowns. In 1782 an Italian embroiderer, Luigi Ruffini, had come to Scotland and settled in Edinburgh. Encouraged by the Board of Trustees for Fisheries and Manufactures in Scotland, who paid his rent for several years, he set up a workroom in Edinburgh, and others later in Dalkeith and Musselburgh where he trained apprentices to embroider the muslin with fashionable dots and sprigs. The fine fabric was stretched over a drum or hoop, called a tambour, and the embroidered material was known as "tamboured muslin." The manufacturers of the west were quick to copy this new method of embellishing the muslin, and enhancing its value. For some reason Ruffini appears to have remained in Edinburgh instead of moving west where the bulk of the muslin was woven. It was easy enough to copy his methods of working, however, for embroidery is easily reproduced, particularly when the designs consist, as they did then, of the classical simplicity demanded by the fashion of the day.

By 1793, when the first Statistical Account of Scotland was compiled, many ministers noted the new industry among the women and girls of their parishes. The minister of Paisley recorded "within this twelvemonth, however, many of them have laid aside the wheel, leaving that useful implement of domestic industry to be occupied by those of higher rank, and have applied themselves to the easier, the more elegant and at present more profitable employment of flowering muslins." The minister of Hamilton wrote that, apart from the lace school, set up by the Duchess of Hamilton, and now in decline, the principal employment of women

had long been the spinning of linen yarn. As late as 1750 large parcels of this yarn had been sent to Northern Ireland. "But the Irish have learnt to make good yarn to supply their own demands. Now cotton yarn is spun by local weavers instead of linen. Young women, who were formerly put to the spinning wheel, now learn to flower muslin, and apply to the agents of the same manufacture for employment." In Irvine the minister wrote: "About 3 years ago, a company of manufacturers set on foot a tambour work here, and have about 70 girls employed who earn from 15d to 2/- per week."

In *Annals of the Parish*, John Galt makes Mr. Cayenne erect a cotton mill on his property in 1788, and "when the mill was set a-going, he got weavers of muslin established in Cayenneville; and shortly after, but that did not take place till the year following, he brought women all the way from the neighbourhood of Manchester, in England, to teach the lassie bairns in our old clachan tambouring." Even his redoubtable schoolmistress, Miss Sabrina Hooky, "set herself to learn and to teach tambouring, in such a manner as to supersede by precept and example that time honoured functionary, as she herself called it, the spinning wheel, proving . . . that if more money could be made by a woman tambouring than spinning, it was better for her to tambour than to spin."

At the beginning of his career in Scotland, Ruffini had adopted the old system of indenture: lodging, boarding, and clothing his apprentices, who were young girls mostly, under the age of 12, and paying them an annual sum. This plan was followed in other places, but generally, as in Irvine, the girls went daily to their work, and were paid weekly, the wages varying according to their skill and experience. As the girls grew up and married, they taught the technique to their daughters, and for a generation the tambouring of muslin continued with varying fortunes, following the ups and downs of the muslin trade during the long war with Napoleon. One thing remained constant. The fashion for white muslin gowns continued unabated throughout the whole period of the war. The industry was by now well organised. The Glasgow and Paisley manufacturers employed agents in the country towns to distribute the cotton yarn to the handloom weavers, to collect and pay for the finished muslin, and to despatch it to Glasgow, "that opulent metropolis of the muslin manufacturers," to quote Miss Rachel Pringle. The same agents often undertook to supply the women and girls with muslin to be embroidered, after which it also was despatched to Glasgow for bleaching and finishing. Sometimes the supervision and employment of the flowerers was undertaken by a woman.

It was at the end of the Napoleonic War that the point lace fillings, the chief characteristic and glory of Ayrshire embroidery as we know it today, were introduced. Archibald, 11th Earl of Eglinton,



FLOWERED MUSLIN CHRISTENING ROBE.

Made in 1841 for Mrs. John Dalzell, daughter of Mrs. Jamieson, Ayr.

By Courtesy of the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh.

left as his one surviving child Lady Mary Montgomerie, who married Archibald, Lord Montgomerie, eldest son of Hugh, 12th Earl of Eglinton, who had succeeded his cousin, the 11th Earl. Lady Montgomerie had two sons: Hugh, who was born at Eglinton in 1811, and died aged 6, and Archibald (later the 13th Earl) who was born in 1812 at Palermo in Sicily, where his father was on active service. Lord Montgomerie died at Palermo in 1814. The young widow returned with her two sons to Ayrshire. She brought with her an exquisite infant's gown of French workmanship, and lent it to a Mrs. Jamieson of Ayr, who employed a considerable number of women, and acted as agent for sewed muslin, as the tamboured muslin had come to be called.

The incident is recorded in the Ayr Directory of 1841-2, compiled by C. Lockhart and printed at the Ayr Observer Office:—"Ayrshire has long been known for the excellent quality of the needlework performed by her fair daughters; but the *chef d'oeuvre* of the art, called point, was first practised about twenty-eight years ago. The late Mrs. Jamieson, who carried on a pretty extensive business in embroidery at the time, having been shown a splendid specimen of French manufacture, brought home by Lady Montgomerie as a frock for her then infant son, the present Earl of Eglinton and Winton, with permission to copy the pattern, at once commenced the task, and succeeded so well as to become the founder of a new and unrivalled manufacture. The Misses Jamieson, her daughters, still continue the business on an extensive scale."

Mrs. Jamieson had not only to instruct her workers in the new stitches, she had to persuade the designers to change from the dots, sprigs and stripes of the earlier tamboured muslins to more elaborate designs with enclosed spaces to be filled by the lace stitch fillings that were a characteristic of the new technique. The pattern designers often worked for calico printers as well as sewed muslin manufacturers. Little appears to be known about them save one, who escaped from pattern designing as soon as possible. He was Alexander Smith, born in 1829 at Kilmarnock. His father, Peter Smith, was a pattern designer of printed fabrics and sewed muslin. The family moved to Glasgow, where Alexander was educated and afterwards trained to design patterns. In 1852 he published a long poem "A Life Drama," for which he received the sum of £100 and considerable fame. He immediately retired from pattern drawing. Subsequently he was appointed Secretary of Edinburgh University.

By 1827 the new technique in embroidery was well established. It was the custom of the Board of Trustees in Edinburgh to offer annual premiums for certain articles of Scottish manufacture, especially of linen and woollen cloth. They also very occasionally rewarded with a premium any persons who could prove that they had introduced a new industry into Scotland. In October 1827

Mrs. Jamieson wrote to Sir John Sinclair putting forth her claims to have introduced a new manufacture. The Secretary to the Board replied :—

“ Mrs. Jamieson, Ayr.

22nd Oct. 1827.

“ Madam,

“ Sir John Sinclair having transmitted here your letter to him of the 11th inst., stating the improvements you have made in needlework on Ladies’ dresses, scarfs, collars, baby linen, etc. and the number of persons you employ in sewing, I beg to acquaint you that it has never been the practice of the Board of Trustees to take needle work under their consideration by itself, because it is not considered of itself to be a manufacture. It is only where the manufacturer of muslin or cambric superadds or causes to be superadded embroider’d work upon the cloth, that such embroidery comes under the notice of the Board at all.

There is in the Board’s advertisement of premiums for this year one article, the 26th. in which the thread embroidery upon it is no doubt fully of as much consequence as the cloth is; yet, I am doubtful whether even for that article you could be admitted a competitor, seeing that you are not the cloth manufacturer.

But if you wish to know whether you would be reckoned an admissible competitor under the 26th or 27th article, for the next year, I shall not fail to lay the matter before the Board when they meet next month, and inform you.”

Mrs. Jamieson promptly sent a selection of embroidered articles to the Board of Trustees, who invited Messrs. Spittal and Blackwood, haberdashers of Edinburgh, the judges of the previous year’s premium goods, to inspect them. They reported to the Board that they thought the articles “ remarkably well done, and as the sewing or embroidery forms the great and chief merit thereof, and the manufacture of the Muslin is in this instance quite a secondary consideration, they consider it quite proper to allow Mrs. Jamieson to become a competitor, although she is no muslin manufacturer.” The Secretary accordingly wrote to Mrs. Jamieson :—

“ Mrs. Jamieson, Muslin Embroiderer, Ayr.

12th Dec. 1827.

“ Madam,

“ I have the satisfaction to acquaint you that the Tippetts etc. which you sent here were considered by the Gentlemen who acted as Judges of the premium Goods to be remarkably well executed,

and that the Board of Trustees agreed that if you choose to transmit the number and kind of those articles which will be specified in the Advertisement of next year (to be published some time next month) you will be held an eligible competitor, tho’ you do not manufacture the Muslin, the embroidery being the chief part of the work.

Please to desire some person to call here for the articles. One of them, a collar, was sold at a guinea, which will be paid to any person who brings your receipt for it to Mr. Thomson of this office.

W. A.” (Sir William Arbuthnot, Secretary to the Board, and Lord Provost of Edinburgh).

It will be seen from this letter that specific articles of wear, and not lengths of material were now embroidered. In response to the new trend of fashion, with its wide shoulders and narrow waist, the tippet or pelerine (a wide fichu-like collar with long points in front) was being worn. Baby linen, the robes and caps with which we are familiar today, with their exquisite workmanship, formed a part of the selection. For the next two years Mrs. Jamieson submitted articles and won premiums, the baby dresses in 1829 being described as “ equal to the best French work of that description.”

For the next thirty years sewed muslin, or Ayrshire embroidery, as it came to be called, formed an important industry, not only in Ayrshire and the surrounding counties, but also in northern Ireland, where Scotswomen had been sent to teach the art to women and girls. The sewed muslin was returned to Glasgow to be marketed not only in Scotland and England, but in America also. “ It is also ” remarked the minister of Newton upon Ayr in the ‘ Statistical Account ’ of 1845 “ sent to France, Russia and Germany, and is exposed for sale in the shops of Paris.” Pigot’s Directory of Scotland, 1837, lists 115 muslin manufacturers in Glasgow alone, of whom 25 were manufacturers of sewed muslins. This Directory is also remarkable in being among the earliest so far discovered to use the term “ Ayrshire Needlework ” (though always in inverted commas). It occurs in the description of both Stewarton and Dalry, where “ a considerable number of females are occupied in sewing and embroidery, usually denominated ‘ Ayrshire Needlework,’ for the Glasgow and Paisley manufacturers.” Under the Burgh of Ayr itself, the town of its origin, no mention is made of the craft. Jane Jamieson is listed under Milliners and Dressmakers, with the words ‘ and baby linen ’ in parenthesis. By 1840, advertisements for AYRSHIRE NEEDLEWORK appear occasionally in the Edinburgh newspapers; in 1843 the Edinburgh *Evening Courant* carried an advertisement for the AYRSHIRE Needlework Warehouse, 50 New Buildings, North Bridge, offering,

among other attractions :—ONE LOT OF A THOUSAND AND FIFTY LADIES EMBROIDERED DRESSES from 9/6 to 42/-.

In the 1841 Ayr Directory, on the other hand, the Misses Jamieson (the daughters of Mrs. Jamieson who were carrying on her business) of 3, New Bridge Street, merely have "fine needlework" after their name, as do several other entries. Only Mrs. Burns, 4, Newmarket Street, admits to Ayrshire Needle Work.

One of Mrs. Jamieson's two daughters, Miss Marion Jamieson, married John Dalzell, a cotton agent of Allison Street, Ayr, as his second wife. In 1841 the workers presented her, on the birth of her first child, with a beautiful robe, said to be a replica of that worked for, and graciously accepted by, Her Majesty Queen Victoria, on the birth of the Prince of Wales the same year. Mrs. Dalzell's robe is now in the Royal Scottish Museum. From it we may judge the style and technique taught by Mrs. Jamieson to her workers. The graceful flowery design of the skirt panel is echoed in the triangular panel of the bodice. The spaces are lightened by a variety of lace stitches, and also by various fillings worked upon columns of drawn thread.

The "Statistical Account" of 1843-5 contains many references to Ayrshire needlework, though the ministers in compiling their accounts generally referred to it as sewed muslin, or flowering. The minister of Newton upon Ayr who has been quoted above, wrote: "The Ayrshire needlework, so extensively known and justly celebrated, was executed in this parish forty years ago. It consists of patterns sewed on muslin and cambric for ladies' dresses, babies' robes, caps, etc. From the year 1815 when *point* was introduced into the work the demand for it in London and other parts of England, as well as Dublin and Edinburgh, has increased to a considerable extent." The minister of Ayr could write approvingly: "The flowering and pointing of muslin is carried on to a great extent, by agents commissioned from Glasgow and has proved a great blessing to many females [about 300] in this community." But the minister of Dalry expressed some doubts: "A large number of females in the parish are employed in sewing and embroidering for the Glasgow and Paisley markets, usually denominated Ayrshire needlework. A good sewer may earn 1d each hour at ordinary white work. For a short period during the summer, when embroidery is brisk, 1/6 to 2/- per day is occasionally earned at from fourteen to sixteen hours sitting. But this is gained at probable sacrifice of health." At Galston the minister was more disapproving: "The high wages which could formerly be earned at weaving and sewing have introduced in this class a taste for an expensive mode of living, which contributes greatly to abridge the real comforts of life, when wages are verging, as at present,

towards their lowest ebb The cotton manufacture, along with wealth and population, have introduced its too frequent attendants, vice and impiety."

The minister of Kilbirnie was untroubled by such considerations: "There are likewise about 150 females employed by Glasgow and Paisley houses in sprigging and flowering muslin. This branch of industry is very well paid at present, as without any outlay or much broken time, an expert and diligent sewer will earn from 7/- to 10/- a week, though probably the average gains, one with another, throughout the year, do not exceed 1/- per day. This employment furnishes the means of decent support to many respectable females, and is decidedly preferred by nearly all the young women, natives of Kilbirnie, to working in either of the manufactories."

"The erection of a cotton mill upon an extensive scale at the neighbouring village of Catrine (which has been conducted with unexampled spirit and success) has diffused comfort and happiness all round," asserted the minister of Mauchline, ". . . Spinning, weaving, tambouring and sewing have been extensive sources of employment." On the other hand, the minister of Riccarton wrote: "A great proportion of the females in the parish are employed in sewing and embroidering muslin. The wages vary from 9d to 3/6 per week; but this latter sum can only be earned at the best work, and by the most expert sewers, and at the expense of comfort to themselves. The employment, we believe, is very injurious to the general health of those employed, but especially to their chest and eyes." Certainly the delicate fineness of the thread used in the lace stitches must have imposed a severe strain upon the sight of the full-time workers, particularly in the winter, when candlelight was the sole source of illumination. Galt's humorous and affectionate thumbnail sketch of Miss Nanny Eydent gains added poignancy when this is remembered. Miss Nanny, it will be recalled, was the eldest of three sisters, the daughters of a shipmaster lost at sea when they were very young. The widow kept a small shop to eke out her days till Nanny was able to assist her, when she intended to open a girls' school for knitting and reading. "Nanny was destined to instruct to pupils in that higher branch of accomplishment—the different stitches of the sampler. But about the time that Nanny was advancing to the requisite degree of perfection in chain steek and pie holes—indeed had made progress in the Lord's Prayer between two yew trees—tambouring was introduced at Irvine, and Nanny was sent to acquire a competent knowledge of that classic art, honoured by the fair hands of the beautiful Helen and the chaste and domestic Andromache. In this she instructed her sisters; and such was the fruit of their application and constant industry, that her mother abandoned the design of keeping school, and continued to ply her little huxtry

in more easy circumstances. The fluctuations of trade in time taught them that it would not be wise to trust to the loom, and accordingly Nanny was at some pains to learn mantua-making, and it was fortunate she did so—for the tambouring gradually went out of fashion, and the flowering which followed suited less the infirm constitution of poor Nanny."

The flowering of muslin was not confined to the full-time worker, however. Many women found it an agreeable part-time occupation. The minister of Auchinleck wrote: "A number of women, both older and younger, throughout the parish are engaged in flowering muslin. This is not confined to those residing in the village, but many of the farmers' daughters and others find it a profitable employment. The cloth is sent out by Glasgow houses to their agents in the country, who take the charge of getting it flowered and returning it. The whole of the work is done by the needle, and it is therefore very tedious, but so expert have those occupied in it become, that Ayrshire work is considered superior and brings a higher price on the market. The wages earned this way are from 5/- to 8/- weekly, and even considerably more."

It seems obvious that those who did not sew for a bare living would embroider robes and caps for their own children, and put a delicate decoration on their mitch strings and frills. Carved wooden blocks, used for impressing designs upon the flowering webs, remain today. Some may have belonged to the agents who distributed and collected the muslin, but others may have been used privately, as a means of transferring a pleasing design upon plain muslin, which could be bought for a few pence a yard. It is even recorded that one worker used the homely method of placing a new piece of muslin over a worked piece, and rubbing it with the bowl of a pewter spoon.

The year 1857 saw the sewed muslin industry at the height of its prosperity. Indeed, so flourishing was it that it was brought to the notice of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, in a paper read before that body at its meeting in Belfast, by J. A. Strang. Perhaps because it was read in Ireland, no mention is made of Ayrshire in the paper. Glasgow is described as the chief seat of manufacture. The processes through which the sewed muslin passed, from the spinning of the yarn to the making up and packing of the garments, is recounted. The gross value of the sewed muslin manufacture, it reported, amounted in 1856 to about a million sterling, and employed 2,200 weavers, 450 pattern printers and pressmen, 200 designers and salesmen, about 3,680 females in the warehouses engaged in making up and finishing the garments, together with 25,000 flowerers in Scotland and 200,000 in Ireland.

The same year in which this paper was read, several Glasgow firms who specialised in sewed muslin went out of business, due to a financial crisis in the city, following one in America. For another twenty years or more, Ayrshire needlework continued to be made and sold, but several factors contributed to its final eclipse. Machine embroidery, particularly the Swiss manufacture, which at first copied the designs of sewed muslin, undersold the hand embroidery, especially in the American market. Fashion, which had called tamboured muslin into existence, changed once more. Richer darker materials were being worn by the '70's, and there was little demand for embroidered muslin. The American Civil War caused the imports of cotton into Glasgow to fall from 172,055 cwt. in 1861 to 7,216 cwt. in 1864. This accelerated the trend of industry in the West of Scotland to pass from cotton to heavy industries, such as engineering and shipbuilding. The flowerers of Ayrshire fell on evil times; their skill was no longer in demand. An attempt was made to revive the craft at the end of the century by Mrs. J. G. A. Baird, and Mrs. Vernon of Auchans. The workers were paid whether their work was sold or not; but it was found, owing to the change in taste, that coloured work sold better than the fine white Ayrshire needlework. By an ironical chance, the white work could not compete in price with Madeira work, which owed its origin to Ayrshire needlework. In the middle of the century, when the island's wine trade had been ruined by vine diseases, a Miss Phelps had been sent to teach the women Scottish embroidery. In the hot climate the workers' fingers had become damp, and discoloured the white cotton with which they sewed, so blue yarn was substituted.

The venture begun by Mrs. Baird and Mrs. Vernon came to an end with the death of these older workers. The incentives were too small to attract the younger women to learn the exacting technique, even under the more sheltered conditions. White work had become so unfashionable that, except for the admiration of a few discriminating people, this exquisite work, and the flowerers who embroidered it, have been in danger of becoming almost forgotten.

Note.—The following are among the chief sources of information for this paper:—

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Strang, J. A., 'The Embroidered Muslin Manufacture,' *British Association Reports*, 1857.

I am also indebted to Miss Shaw Smith, Muirkirk, for the loan of Pigot's Directory of Scotland, 1837, and to Miss M. Dalziel, New Galloway, for information about Mrs. Jamieson, her ancestor, and for the loan of the Ayr Directory, 1841. My thanks are also due to the Countess of Eglinton and Winton for information about Lady Mary Montgomerie, and to Lady Broun Lindsay for her advice and encouragement.