

FLAX FOR FIBRE. ITS CULTIVATION AND HANDLING.

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION.

The cultivation of flax for fibre is of great antiquity, dating back to the earliest times of which we have any record. Microscopical investigation has shown that the bandages used for wrapping the Egyptian mummies were composed of linen; and, in the account of the destruction wrought by hail, one of the plagues of Egypt, it is recorded that "the flax and the barley was smitten, for the barley was in the ear, and the flax was balled."

The plant is also figured in ancient Egyptian paintings, and these are of interest as showing that the crop was not reaped with a sickle like cereals, but was pulled up by the root.

In the British Islands the growing of flax for fibre, although it has been carried on to a certain extent over the greater part of the country at different times, has become firmly established only in the province of Ulster in Ireland. Its cultivation in that country by the Keltic inhabitants is also of very ancient date. In the Brehon laws, which date back long before the Christian era, there are various references to flax and to the implements employed in its manufacture. It is of interest to note that here also the crop was pulled up by the root, and that steeping in water was the recognized method of retting.

The crop, however, in Ireland did not assume very important proportions until near the close of the seventeenth century, when large numbers of Huguenot refugees settled in the North of Ireland, bringing with them their spinning wheels and looms, and an acquired skill in the manufacture of flax products. With the formation of the "Board of Trustees of the Linen and Hempen Manufactures of Ireland" in 1711, and the administration of government grants in aid of the flax industry by that body, the record has been one of continued progress to the present time. The acreage under cultivation has varied greatly from year to year and, on the whole, has gradually declined. In recent years only about one-fourth of the fibre used in the linen industry has been grown in Ireland, the rest being imported from other countries of Europe.

In the year 1800 there were 76,749 acres of flax grown in Ireland, in 1864 the maximum area of 301,693 acres was reached, and in 1898 there were only 34,469 acres grown, the lowest acreage for the century. From 1901 to 1910 there has been a slight increase in the area grown, the maximum being 59,659 acres in 1907. Looking back over the past century it will be found that a rise in the price of flax has usually brought about an increase in the acreage grown.