

The Commercial

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FLAX-GROWING IN CANADA.

The subject of flax-growing in Canada has received special attention of late from the press all over the country. This question has been brought prominently to the front by the paper read in the Conference Hall at the late Colonial Exhibition in London, England, by Mr. E. B. Bigger, of Montreal, entitled "The Flax-Growing and Linen Manufacturing Capabilities of Canada." The paper, which has been published in full in the *Canadian Journal of Fabrics*, is a very comprehensive one, dealing as it does with all the stages of the flax-growing and linen-manufacturing industry, from the earliest records of its growth to the present day. Mr. Bigger commences with the earliest known manufacture of flax in ancient Egypt, and after tracing its history and development through the middle ages, concludes by showing the advantages which this country enjoys for flax-growing.

From the paper it is learned that flax of excellent quality has been grown in every province of the Dominion. "But it is of the flax-growing and manufacturing of the Canadian Northwest," says Mr. Bigger, "that I wish more particularly to speak." We are told that there are three species of flax indigenous to the Northwest, and that these grow luxuriantly over a vast area of country. Where such is the case it might be expected that the cultivated flax would attain a high state of excellence, and this has been abundantly attested by practical experiment, extending over a great number of years, since the early French pioneers introduced the plant into the country. Experience has shown that the Northwest is peculiarly adapted to the growing of an excellent quality of flax, the climate, soil and other conditions being specially favorable to the propagation of the plant. The Mennonites have grown this crop to advantage, though they use only the seed, the straw being burned. As high as twenty-five bushels per acre of the seed is said to have been raised by them. The price obtained is about 90c to \$1.00 per bushel, which would make it a paying crop even without utilizing the straw. According to a blue-book regarding the Mennonites, one buyer is said to have paid out \$24,000 three

years ago, and since that time doubtless the cultivation of flax has increased. In a country where so much binding-twine is used, it does seem a pity that the straw could not be turned to better advantage, and no doubt in time some profitable means will be found of disposing of it other than by burning the valuable fibre. Regarding the manufacture of the straw, Mr. Shantz states that owing to the scarcity of labor and the shortness of the season, the Mennonites have not found it to pay them to leave their other work to prepare the fibre.

Returning to Mr. Bigger's paper, it is stated that "while Ontario seed is remarkably rich in oil (about 14 lbs. to the bushel) that of the Northwest is still richer, yielding 16 lbs. to the bushel, which is probably the highest yield in the world." British manufacturers who have tested the Canadian straw, state that no better fibre could be desired. It is also the testimony of Canadian and United States manufacturers that the Manitoba straw excels in quality the product of any other part of the continent.

The adaptability of this country for growing flax would amount to little if it could not be shown that the product could be utilized in such a way as to make the crop a paying one. This part of the subject Mr. Bigger takes hold of in a vigorous way. After showing the permanent character of the linen industry, he gives figures regarding the demand for the product. Out of 100,000 tons of flax used in Great Britain in 1885, over 83,000 tons were imported, at a cost of £3,200,000 for the raw material. Of this amount 59,341 tons came from Russia. Besides this demand in Great Britain, a profitable export business might be done with the United States. Then there is the oil and oil cake, which latter products of flax seed have already been exported to a considerable extent.

As to the profit from flax-growing in Manitoba, Mr. Bigger says:

"The average value of Russian and German flax is £32 a ton, of Irish £56, and of Belgian £74. Taking the average production of European countries as a criterion, 8 acres will raise a ton of dressed fibre, of which the average value will be £41 or say \$200, which would give a total result much better than wheat at its present price in Manitoba and the Northwest. For the purpose of this estimate I have taken the average production of European countries; but, as a matter of fact, the yield per acre will equal, if not exceed, that of Ireland and Holland, which is about 32 stones per acre, and the value per ton will prove to be nearer that of Irish flax

than of Russian. We may put this extra value against any extra cost for transportation from the field to the sea, and we still have the profits of the seed."

As to what might be done at home in the manufacture of flax, it was pointed out that Canada imports linen goods to the value of over \$1,440,000 annually. In Ontario twines and rope to the value of about \$1,000,000 per year are manufactured, but these are not all from flax. Still we import linen twines to the value of over \$177,000, linen thread to the amount of \$150,000 and linen ducking to the value of \$750,000. Instead of importing, Mr. Bigger thinks we should be exporting all these goods. There is also the paper-manufacturing industry, for which the straw could be utilized to advantage.

One feature specially favorable to the cultivation of flax in Manitoba would seem to be in connection with the first breaking of the prairie sod. A good crop may be secured from the first plowing, where other grains would prove a failure. It has been the custom of the Mennonites to grow their flax from the first breaking of the natural sod, and they have always had good returns. It is generally supposed that flax is a very exhaustive crop to the soil, but Mr. Bigger holds that this is not the case where the waste material is returned to the land.

With all the advantages enjoyed in Manitoba for flax-growing, the progress already made in the cultivation of the plant, and the demand for the various manufactures of flax, there would seem to be a profitable field for the preparation of the straw which is now burned. There is already a large quantity of binding twine used in the province and the adjoining territories, and the amount consumed will be increasing yearly. In fact, the use of binding twine in this country is almost confined to the Northwest, and this article is imported into the province, whilst here the straw is burned on the ground. Though there might be some doubt as to the profitable growing of flax for the exportation of the prepared fibre, yet there can scarcely be a doubt but that the manufacture of binding-twine for home use would prove a satisfactory investment, if not now, at least in the very near future.

THE MANITOBA MENNONITES.

The Mennonites furnish a good example of what may be accomplished in Manitoba