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THE COTTAGE HOMESPUN INDUSTRY IN THE WEST OF IRELAND.

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Introduction

The Cottage Homespun Industry of rural Ireland is a craft based on a concept that a product is made by the community for the community. This product is handwoven cloth. Within this industry there are several different components namely, spinning, dyeing and weaving which are all handcrafted. In this Thesis I have chosen to discuss the homespun industry in the west of Ireland where the craft was widespread at the turn of the century. It played a vital role in the poorer country communities, both economically and socially. As with many other ways and traditions in the early part of this century, the craft took second place to mill production and the onset of the machine. The important criteria was speed, and technology produced this. The homespun craft was essentially replaced . People no longer needed or wanted homespun, all could be bought elsewhere. The public began to lose it's appreciation of the craft and its relevance to Irish heritage. Fortunately, I feel there has been a revival in old traditions and values , this is the basis of my discussion.

In this way I hope to trace and analyse the craft in the West of Ireland and its driving force of a century ago. My interests lie in areas where the West and its methods differ from the rest of the country. What techniques were exclusive to the west and who was involved? Also, the role of the craft in the modern world. The industry which had its roots in the poverty of the people has now changed. These changes will be analysed.

Chapter one deals with a brief history and outline of the homespun industry in the west of Ireland. The importance this had in rural districts and its role both practically and socially within the community.

In chapter two my objectives are to analyse and discuss the different factors within the craft that eventually effect the product, these being raw materials and processes. Prior to weaving, these are spinning and dyeing. Within these stages I will make comparisons so as to determine the techniques that are exclusive to the west. Chapter three discusses the traditional techniques within handweaving and which specific methods are formed only in the west. Also, attitudes to the weaver and the importance of his work will be considered. In chapter four I shall be discussing the journey of the craft and where it has led. What homespun means today? Our ancestors were poor and used the craft out of necessity. So, today, who or what is the driving force behind the craft, if there is one?

In researching this subject there was a limited amount of information available. The work, help and advice I got from Lillias Mitchell was indispensable. Other sources which were of great help were Dr. Anne O' Dowd, from the Dept. of Folklore U.C.D. and Sallie O' Sullivan in N.C.A.D.

CHAPTER ONE

"A BRIEF HISTORY OF COTTAGE HOMESPUN INDUSTRY OF THE WEST"

FIG.1 A WEAVERS COTTAGE IN THE WEST OF IRELAND.

The history of handweaving in Ireland in whatever form we chose to discuss is as old as civilisation itself. This is evident in clothes, baskets and woven articles. The materials have changed little since ancient times and the basic techniques at all. Today the looms are more refined and the yarns may be stronger but the contemporary weaver could understand the prehistoric weavers way of weaving quite easily. The total history of the homespun craft in Ireland is long and to some extent undocumented. It was after all an everyday task along with other domestic jobs. While indirect evidence can pinpoint 1600 B.C. as a date when it was known to have existed, it was obviously there well before that.

There are a number of reasons why this craft continued down through the centuries. One being that society in early Ireland was family dominated, rural and almost nomadic. Existence was predominately pastoral, cattle and sheep were wealth and provided not only food, but the raw materials for leather and for weaving. Outside of the towns and cities this essentially gaelic society continued to exist after a fashion right up to 1600 when Gaelic Ireland finally ceased, to all intents and purposes when the remaining great chiefs fled to the continent after the Battle of Kinsale. The towns and cities were the work of the invaders. But outside of all that Gaelic Ireland continued, and with that the domestic activity of weaving and related homespun crafts i.e. spinning and dyeing. For the handweavers had always remained fundamentally rural[1].

During this century our society has changed rapidly and drastically. Farms which at one time were alive with people and in close proximity to each other now stand empty in winter time, the friendly rural life has been exchanged for the isolation of identical flat in tall city buildings. The drift from country to town has meant breaking with many old traditions. Skills which have been handed down from father to son, mother to daughter are now forgotten. New generations learnt new techniques and new materials entered into our way

of life. Yet, is this a good enough reason to lose precious crafts which were so integrated into our ancestors lives? I think not. I believe we have to in some small way even, to keep these crafts alive, make records and notes so that at least the basic techniques and method will not be lost.

When each community was self supporting, it was necessary to know about the treatment of wool, dyeing and weaving in order to make clothes for everyday wear and festive occasions. The wider the gap between former generations who know the skills and our own, the greater the risk that these crafts will be forgotten. For most of us, it was our great grandmother who knew the secret of how to deal with yarns such as wool.

In Ireland, the west of the country "escaped" as it were the urbanization of life and work. The people spoke their native language and carried on in a simple manner in comparison to the east of the country. Here the machine was becoming more and more important in society and the workplace. In the west of Ireland, in particular areas such as Galway, the Aran Islands and Achill Island, the traditional crafts i.e. handweaving, spinning, dyeing were alive and well into the turn of this century. Each community was self sufficient. They made their own clothes and bed linen. The craft of weaving, spinning and dyeing along with its secrets was secure as it was passed on to each generation.

As this thesis is based on the Cottage Homespun Industry of the West of Ireland it is necessary to explain what the word homespun really means. This word means the production of yarn which has been handspun, then hand-dyed and finally handwoven and finished. The result is a cloth made completely by hand in a community, for the community. This craft was widely practised in rural Ireland especially where the traditional Irish lifestyle existed. These peasant folk were greatly helped by the abundance of good wool which was easily obtained in these areas. It may be that a craft is only truly

alive if it has a practical role in the community. In the west of Ireland, it can be said that the craft of homespun was alive. The society of spinners, dyer's and weavers put their craft and art into making the clothing, bedding and other essentials needed by their own community.

It was about the end of the nineteenth century that moves began to revive the traditional crafts of Ireland, handweaving being one, mainly tweeds and flannels. There was in certain areas, a continuing tradition of handweaving. There were no great industries but the craft was more a part of the economics of the area which mixed with fishing and small farms. The women of these parts simply spun their own wool, and had it woven up by a local weaver for use in the home. The real beginnings of the revival seemed to be at the time in the 1880's of the establishment of the society called the Donegal Industrial Fund which was successful enough in its work of fostering cottage industries and giving employment to weavers. It's work existed not only in Donegal, but also extended to my area of interest, Connemara and the Islands. This society was formed by a Mrs. Harte of London who noted that carding and spinning of wool was an established tradition.

> "Carding, spinning and weaving is an industry which the people have been long accustomed to"
> (Weaving: The Irish Inheritance, E.F. Sutton pg. 32.)

Also in 1891, the conservative administration in the United Kingdom recognised the importance of development in rural Ireland and they in turn established the Congested Districts Board. The awful conditions in rural Ireland, particularly the west were largely due to the Plantations and absentee landlords. These conditions were recorded in an account of Tomas O'Crohain who lived on the Great Blasket off the south west coast[2]. According to him, the houses were as small as ten feet by eight which were crowded with family members and at night were joined by the farm animals. Even up until the 1940's, conditions in some parts of the west for example Mayo, were still very primitive. Yet these people were always kept busy either

working on the farm or spinning wool, their needs being simple. In this way, it can be seen clearly that the craft of the homepsun was an integrated part of any family life in rural western Ireland.

The people of this area were in an awkward position whereby the land was poor and if they did not pay rent, they were evicted. The Congested District Board's aims were to increase the size of all small holdings and to develop suitable industries, particularly handweaving. It would be of importance to mention Dr. Muriel Gahan whose father was closely involved in the whole of the Congested Districts Board programme related to handweaving. She herself contributed a great deal in the revival of this craft and was actively researching homespun methods in the west of Ireland. Dr. Gahan in reference to the homespuns and in particular to the skill of the weavers commented that

> "The weavers didn't realise the beauty of what they were doing, they did it from poverty and necessity"
> (Weaving: The Irish Inheritance pg. 44).

A report on the woollen industry in Ireland in 1902 revealed that the spinning wheel and loom were holding their own against the on coming steam machinery particularly in rural areas e.g. the west. Handspun and handwoven cloth dyed with natural dyes had a special character which was recognised in the trade. In some cases, imitations were being produced of homespun cloth by machines, and sometimes the cloth was fumigated with peat smoke to give the illusion that it was home produced. The customers were buying into a concept that can be seen easily in todays advertising, whereby they could have a "genuine" unique homespun product with all its unmistakable characteristics. Yet it was not the same and to all intents and purposes unsuccessful. Therefore this evidence shows that there was a healthy interest in the homespun product at this time. The future looked bright for the craft.

The spinning wheel and loom worked in complete harmony in rural communities and this could be seen in the demand for their produce. The Department of Agriculture was surprised at the report in 1902, that the wheel and loom were capable of competing with the machine[3]. At the turn of the century, this surprise was continually been expressed at how some industries managed to keep up with the demands of teasing and carding by hand.

When discussing the practical importance the Homespun Industry had in rural communities it is necessary to refer back to Dr. Gahan's quotation, in that the people didn't realise the beauty of their work. They, the peasant of the land, were hardworking and the craft of homespun was like any other daily jobs in a family. This society of spinners and weavers put their craft and art into making the clothing, bedding and other essentials needed by their own community. It was a daily part of their lives. Even post-famine years, when emigration was high and the crafts were decreasing, the communities somehow without instruction from any outer source began again to dye, spin and weave. It seemed that the craft was in their veins and began again as a natural consequence.

The role of the homespun industry in rural society of the West of Ireland was of up most importance. Whenever people gathered together in one household it was a time of great gossip and fun, which usually included either or both food and drink. This is one aspect of this lifestyle that anyone can understand and appreciate from any century. This was especially important for the women and although the work was difficult and tedious, it broke their monotonous routine of household jobs. When speaking with an enthusiast Miss Lillian Mitchell, of whom I shall be discussing in greater detail later, I learnt that this activity was indeed enjoyed by both women and men. Miss Mitchell who has made a large contribution to the teaching of weaving in Ireland, travelled to the cottages where homespun was still being practised and saw first hand what went on. From this interview, I learnt that the women

FIG.2 A TRADITIONAL SPINNER MAKING ROLLS.

gathered together in one cottage where some spent the day preparing the wool, carding and making rolls ready for spinning, while the remaining women made the dinner[4]. As the day progressed jobs would be swapped while each of the women caught up on the latest chat. Sadly, this is one tradition that has disappeared altogether but in South Donegal, in a small area called Dunlewey, the community there are very anxious to revive this way of working. In social terms, the thickening or finishing of the cloth was another important time where some of the community gathered together. The men did most of the hard labour and took turns as it was a difficult job, the women assisted and made sure everyone had enough to eat and drink. Miss Mitchell stressed in the interview that the women only spun and prepared the wool while the heavier duty work like weaving was always done by men. Yet in the finishing of the cloth both men and women shared the work. Considering that this type of work was so labour intensive, one might think the people would have availed of the tuck mills all over the country to do the job for them. Obviously, the time spent was far more important to them and helped keep up the community spirit. Ultimately, it is in this area that our modern day society falls down in. The communities of yesterday were rich in good neighbours, and good turns. In typical Irish fashion, the peasants of humble background considered their social life important. In this way, the craft of homespun was beneficial to the rural society as it gave the people the opportunity to meet and communicate.

CHAPTER TWO

"THE RAW MATERIALS AND TRADITIONAL PROCESSES"

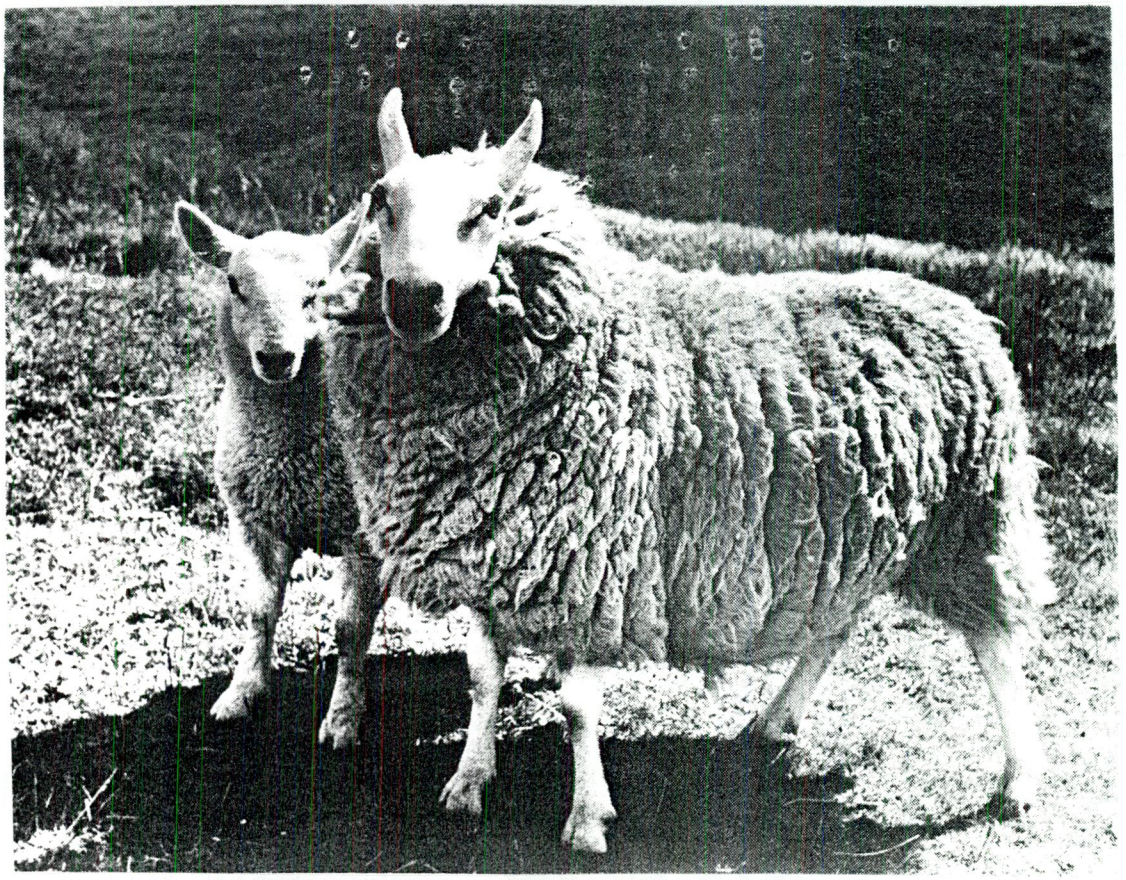


FIG.3 A GALWAY SHEEP.

> "Sheep, whick look so pretty, gently grazing in the fields, and on the hillside are one of natures most amazing mammals"
>
> (ref. Irish Spinning and Dyeing, L. Mitchell pg. 13)

One reason why the homespun cottage industry has been successful in the west of Ireland was the abundance of this simple animal, the sheep. At the turn of this century, inhabitants of poor districts in the west of Ireland lived on four or less acres and depended largely on secondary sources of income varying from weaving to fishing. The land was poor and to the farmer working both grass and arable land, the sheep provided both wool and meat, yet its services were further reaching. The sheep is a great clearer of the pastures, a provider of more and sweeter grass for the other stock. Therefore, given the situation for the average farmer in this part of the country, the sheep has a perfect answer to their problems. This animal could survive and thrive in the sometimes unfriendly mountain slopes of the west of Ireland including the Islands, Aran and Achill. Taking in the importance of this creature, it is necessary to give a brief outline of what breeds were commonly found in the west and question its role in the Homespun Industry.

Evidently, starting with good raw materials is an advantage in any industry and this can be applied to the homespun of the west. Among the variation of different breeds of sheep found here, the most commonly seen are the Galway breed, and Blackfaced Mountain sheep. These could manage rough grazing while the fleece was used for skirts and jackets. Similarly, the fleece from the Cheviot can be found used in this area and in many people's opinion is almost a thing of beauty[5]. Yet today, farmers have far more of a variety of sheep to choose from in comparison to one hundred years ago. Breeding sheep has become an "art" as it were where breeders breed specific types of sheep to produce the perfect raw material for a specific use. In comparison the homespun community adapted the cloth to work around the parameters of the fleece.

FIG.4 A BLACKFACE MOUNTAIN SHEEP.

Indeed the peasants were blessed with such a versatile animal where every part of sheep was used down to the bones as artificial manure. The question arises, could the craft of homespun have been able to sustain itself if the sheep, for some reason, was eliminated? I propose that the industry would have crumbled under the pressure of the people's needs. In the evidence I have shown, it is apparent that the people were very dependent on the animal whether it be for food or clothing. It would have been near impossible to depend on just one source, say flax for the craft as the people were missing out on the other advantages of the animal. The scales of food, clothing, heat and the land would be unbalanced. Even in the poorest areas, one or two sheep could be afforded which also served as a source of heat in cold wintery nights.

Now that the importance of the sheep in rural west of Ireland has been established, what was the next stage for the raw materials within the Homespun Industry? Did the west of Ireland have any natural resources that aided the craft? Relating to the latter, it is important to remember especially the importance a good water supply has on this particular craft. All washing and dyeing originated from a fresh supply. Many say that the tapestry industry at Aubusson, France was started there because of good quality water. The same could be said for the west of Ireland as there was never a lack of fresh water from the mountains and lakes to clean the raw materials. In Connacht it was custom to wash the fleece in the river by tramping and pounding with their feet to loosen the dirt. Although experts might frown at this rough treatment to the wool, the general community spirit was splendid and very valuable to the people.

Other versions of this tradition were recorded from other areas of Ireland, but unfortunately all are now obsolete[6]. Also gone are the days when meetings were held in the villages and districts where the people were in the position to sell their surplus wool. Although the practise of these traditions

FIG.5 A SPINNER USING THE OLD METHOD OF SPINNING ON THE "BIG WHEEL".

FIG.6 USING A SPINNING WHEEL WITH A PEDAL ATTACHED.

has disappeared, the memories and techniques are still with us. Even the record of how something was done once by a people is no substitute for the real craft to be seen. The once thriving community of Dunlewey, Co. Donegal where homespun was alive, has a heritage centre devoted to the craft. Today, the modern day community of whom homespun was a thing of the past, is now crying out for the tradition to be revived, similar to the old ways. Homespun produced by a community for the community.

The Spinning

In discussing the different components of the homespun cottage industry of the west of Ireland, it is necessary to look next at the aspect of hand spinning and the role it had to play in this industry. Indeed it could be said that handspinning is the foundation of weaving, therefore a brief outline and description is relevant. Spinning is creating the yarn from the raw material upon which all the best weaving of every civilization has been and is still being built. Although nowadays the near majority of yarn is produced by machine, the homespun yarns used by the common peasants at the turn of the century, and also by the artists today, give each area a chance to expand and explore creativity, making their work unique.

The earliest record of spinning wheels been used in Ireland is before the sixteenth century, it was called the "Long Wheel". Across the country, many different variations on this model exist. In Donegal, a 'small wheel', in Kerry a lower version on that found in the west of Ireland. In Mayo, Galway and the Aran Is. there can be found the almost lost art of the Big Wheel. This is of special interest as it is only found here in the west, and nowadays there are only a handful of people that can actually use this wheel. It is a great pity that this technique is amost lost as perhaps it has one of our most skilled performances. Reasons behind the disappearance of this wheel may have to do with convenience, as the wheel could only be used to its potential if the

spinner was experienced. The average spinner chose an easier version with a pedal instead. The introduction of this wheel with pedal/treadle, made it far easier to spin as one hand was free to feed in the yarn, as was not the case for the Big Wheel. Furthermore, these spinners of this wheel were always women as the men were weavers. No reason can be found to explain this so it can only be looked upon as a tradition. In comparison the women of Sweden were allowed at either jobs.

Obviously the work of the spinners to the homespun industry was very important as they were producing the yarn which eventually became the cloth. If the group of spinners were poor, the cloth in turn would be of inferior quality. Communities were proud of their produce so ultimately there was competition between different villages and towns. Therefore, the spinners became great experts in their own fields. Women spun at home sometimes on their own, or preferably together where once again it was a time of exchanging stories and adding to the spirit of the spinners. Along with these humble gatherings great Irish folklore was abundant, where it created an atmosphere of songs and stories. As many of the women spun late and forgot completely about eating. An old saying was said in that time

> "A steady wheel and a woman without hunger"
> (ref. Irish Spinning and Dyeing, L. Mitchell page 61).

Working past twelve o'clock was unheard of as then the fairies got busy and any mischief might happen to the wool!

In this area today from Co. Mayo to Aran Is., little spinning is done. Spinning classes have been held in vocational schools of late years in an attempt to rekindle this craft but with some exceptions, all thread used for weaving is millspun. The beautiful art of seeing a good spinner at work seems to have had its day. We must once again remember the work of the spinners, of

FIG.7 COLLECTING LICHEN FROM A NEARBY ROCK.

whose day brings not only the rarest privilege, the opportunity of working creatively with her own hands and brains, in her own time at her own pace.

The Dyeing

Another component of the Homespun Industry in the west of Ireland which is worthy of discussion is the dyeing techniques used. Across this country, different areas had a distinctive use of colour which could easily be seen. In the north, the clothes were dyed in dark colours, in Mayo, somewhat similar only lighter. In Connemara, and Aran Is., white bainín was popular[7]. Considering these points, I wish to investigate and analyse the dyeing used in the west, where it originated from, and what was the essence, the signature of a cloth dyed in this area.

From my research and interviews particularly with Miss Lillian Mitchell, it can be said that in the Galway area the dyes used at the turn of the century were of a very natural base/colour palete which included sheep's grey and white. The preference was for simple lights with some exceptions[8]. Even in the early days it seems these peasants had a great fondness for these colours along with a highly developed colour sense and knowledge of dyeing.

In a world of modern conveniences, it is a most interesting task to study the traditional dyestuffs and techniques that were used by the simple peasant folk of the west. As a student in this area myself, I can appreciate these techniques and the importance they had on the homespun industry. Great trouble was put into developing the dyestuffs and their potencies. In comparison to a hundred years ago, contemporary dyers and artists have it easy. Yet I believe we are lacking an aspect of dyeing that those peasants of yesterday were steeped in. The tradition was linked directly with Irish folklore in stories. When a person was skilled in the use of dyestuffs very often they had a reputation as herbalists. They knew not only how to dye,

they had the knowledge of where to find the actual raw materials for dyeing in nature, and use these in the cottage industry. Great admiration has to be expressed for the dyers of old as they were indeed gifted people. Today it is sad and true to say, the meaning of the old dyes and shades is forgotten within this area in the west. Modern mills use artificial dyes, the knowledge and secrets of natural dyeing has been abandoned. Although the use of natural dyeing is not used in todays mills, does this great well of knowledge of this craft have to be forgotten just because it is not financially viable? I think not. It deserves to be kept alive. One person who has made a great contribution to the craft of natural dyeing in Ireland is Evelyn Lyndsay, an ex-student from the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. During the 1980's she rediscovered the beautiful art of natural dyestuffs, recording dye results from over two hundred plants and mounting her results. This project was very successful and I shall be discussing her work in more detail later. Mentioning her related work in dyeing is relevant here as it shows that in recent years after a long period of time, natural dyeing in Ireland is becoming more and more a focus of interest among weavers and dyers.

Primitive man stained his skin and possibly his clothes by means of fruit juices, decoctions of flowers, roots and leaves but the true art of dyeing began when man first learnt the use of a mordant to render the dye permanent[9]. In the west of Ireland there are a number of dyes which were used here and not elsewhere in the country. Of all the traditional dyestuffs, lichen was the oldest and remained the most popular. Lichen is a moss found on any surface in nature. The knowledge of its use was never lost and continued down to our own times. Ordinarily, lichens require no mordant and yield a good permanent dye. The most common often referred to as crottle, are much used by traditional dyers. In this way, the dyestuffs were practically growing on their doorsteps in the west as the lichens were abundant. This is another natural resource that aided the development of the homespun industry. In an account of Miss Mitchell in the Galway area,

she remembers how she was taken out into the rain with a pen knife and a small tobacco tin to scrape some lichen off a wall[10].

The first break in the long continuity of the craft came with the introduction of foreign dyewoods in the 17th and 18th centuries and in many places the native plants were displaced. According to a survey done by the Department of Irish Folklore in U.C.D. reveals dyes either still used or remembered were barks of fruit trees, ferns and onion skins. The non native included were indigo, madder and saffron. Taking this information into account, there seems to be a limitless amount of natural dyes to be found in Ireland, whereby the people in particular the west, took full advantage of.

Dyeing with purple in along the western coast of Ireland had quite a mysterious and interesting past. The colour had been used in homespun but is now obsolete. It was its extraordinary permanence that accounted for its popularity. Yet, between the 11th and 12th centuries the technique of making the dye was lost in Europe. Remarkably though, the use and manufacture of purple was still known in the west of Ireland, which worked by extracting a liquid from a type of shellfish found around this coastline[11]. This is proof enough that the rural peasants here were always capable of retaining old traditions of the craft which elsewhere were lost or abandoned.

In Connemara, competitions were commonplace between different dyers over the same colours and each competitor would not divulge their secrets to each other. This became a hindrance to the tradition of dyeing as the knowledge of many of the plants died with its owner.

The peasant ancestors had the ready availabiliy of the dyes on their side and rarely had to import dyes for use in the home. One exception to this rule is the use of the dye indigo on the Aran Islands. It is not clear where this dye was imported from but according to Miss Mitchell, Spain is a likely guess. Block or powder indigo was available and on the Aran the former was

FIG.8 MEN IN ARAN DRESSED IN THE TRADITIONAL INDIGO DYED TROUSERS AND GANSEYS.

preferred. A rare example of genuine indigo dyed cloth from Inis Mór is in the possession of Miss Mitchell and when I had the opportunity to examine this subject, it was explained to me that along with the dye, stale urine was also used to achieve the given colour[12].

Considering these particular dyes, the west of Ireland makes a perfect back drop to appreciate them in their fullest. A vivid memory of days in Galway in the picturesque quarter called The Claddagh is the dazzling red petticoats worn by wives and daughters of the fishermen. For a traveller, a 100 years ago, among the grey clouds and seas in this area, it must have been a pleasant sight to see these red dresses of the women. For the most, the petticoats were only worn for special occasions. The dye that produced this eye catching and vibrant colour originated from a lichen found in Galway. These folk had indeed a good sense of colour and for the fishermen returning home, the shore dotted with red would have been a welcome sight after many hours at sea.

If one looks at the history of homespun in the west, it can clearly be seen that in places where lichens were plentiful, this craft survived the longest. Therefore I have shown that the importance of dyeing in the culture of the people of the west, in past years, was great. They had a deep and lengthy knowledge of dyeing which was integrated into everyones lifestyle as spinning and weaving were. It would be a grave pity if, at this point in time, the techniques and old ways of natural dyeing of Ireland were forgotten about. It is up to todays generation of weavers/dyers to develop and keep this craft, which was so actively used by our predecessors in the west of Ireland.

CHAPTER THREE

"TRADITIONAL WEAVE TECHNIQUES"

FIG.9 MANUS FERRY,A TRADITIONAL WEAVER IN GALWAY OILING HIS BOBBIN.

FIG.9(i)MANUS FERRY WITH HIS PRIZES FOR HIS WEAVES.

In this Chapter I wish to discuss the distinctive characteristics of the Homespun Industry in the west of Ireland of weave techniques and specific items of clothing. Although the south Donegal homepsun was and remained the strength in well woven and substantial cloth, the homespun of Connemara and the Islands were of high standard also. In comparison to the Kerry homespuns, this area was considered superior in quality of colour and pattern. The cloth of the west was sometimes white (báinin) with also black, dark blue and red. Considering that there were many other differences in style within the west country, this is my next area of discussion.

Up to the 1920's many people of the west continued to wear clothes almost entirely of their own manufacture. This can be said for the people of Achill Is., in the Keel and Dooagh area. There were freize suits and overcoats, flannel vests and drawers, knitted socks for the men and red petticoats for the women. The list goes on. Sad to say in the 1940's, Achill folk did not wish to wear their lovely homespun garments, and thus emphasis was put on pinstripes while the girls had a new awareness of fashion dressing in the contemporary dress of the time. The last people to wear the traditional homespun in Achill were the old women. They seemed to have been most sensible about clothes. There were few who would have swapped their comfortable shawls for a tight fitting coat, or hat with a feather and veil, and as to their long full skirts or heavy serge, they ceased to wear them only when, as an old Keel woman once said

> "It no longer matters what there is to cover their old bones except maybe the brown habit, God bless us"
>
> (ref. Irish Weaving, Lillian Mitchell pg. 43.)

In the west of Ireland, there were many well known weavers living and working in Achill in particular, weavers known best were Thomas Lavelle of Pollagh, Jamsie the weaver and Máirtin Bán were regarded as the wise men of the district. Obviously these people were looked upon with a degree of respect

FIG.10 MANUS FERRY WEAVING ON HIS LOOM IN HIS STUDIO.

because of the importance of their own work. It is interesting then to know how the peasant folk treated the weavers in the community. Records and accounts of the natives here reveal that indeed the weaver held an important position in rural Ireland at the turn of the century. Some examples of this treatment are very similar to the attitudes held towards the parish priests up until recent times. A clean cloth was put on the table if any weavers were having a meal in the house. They drank their tea from the best tea cups, and the knives they used were always "shone up" with a grain of fine sand from the beach. If they were not treated in this way they might have their revenge on the people by making bad cloth for them. This was a serious threat as a great deal of time and effort was gone into the production of spunwool as I have shown in my previous chapter. An interesting fact was that in Keel, Achill Is., the weavers always had very long toes, and apparently the longer their toes, the more power they had over the loom[13].

Indeed the weaver was held in high esteem in the community as he was well trained and had always many years of experience behind him. Along with colour blending and weaving, the weaver needed to have a kind of mathematical precision in relation to the design of the cloth. In this way, if a community was blessed with a gifted weaver, they appreciated him greatly and treated him well. A certain amount of curiosity and fascination surrounded this fellow and this was apparent in the childrens treatment of the weaver.

> "The weavers loom was of great interest to me. I sat for hours at a time watching our craftman throw the shuttle, operate the crude machinery with his legs and now and then sprinkle the thread with a home made lubricant"
>
> (ref. My First Suit, Aranmen All, Tom Flaherty, pg. 40)

In this extract throwing the shuttle is mentioned[14]. In discussing the different techniques and methods used in the west of Ireland, the choice of the loom is relevant to this thesis and its analysis. With the invention of the fly shuttle

FIG.11 PEOPLE OF THE ARAN ISLANDS, INIS MOR.

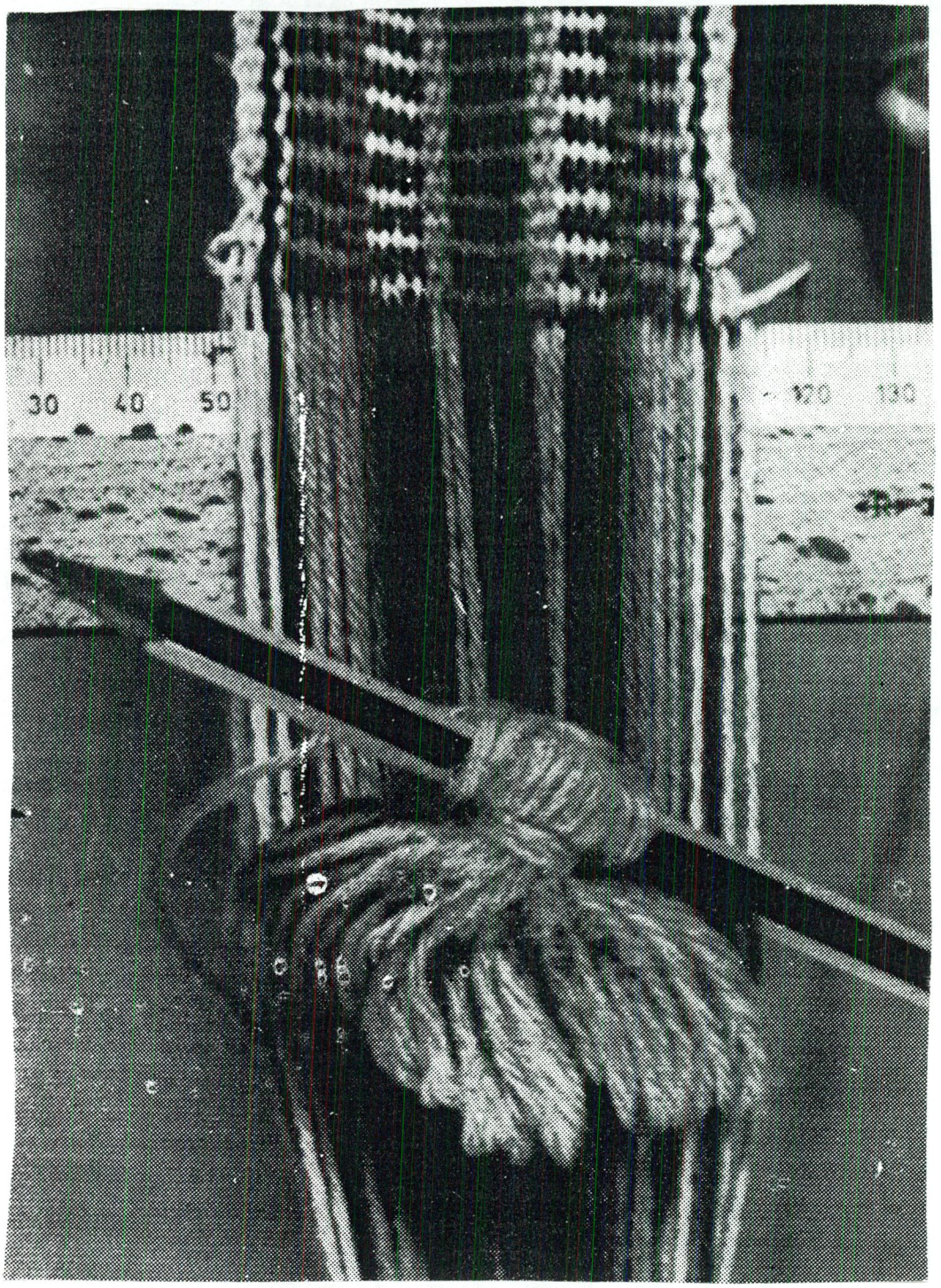


FIG.13 WEAVING A CROIS IN N.C.A.D.,1994.

in 1733 the older type of throw shuttle was more general in woollen weaving. In 1895, loom incorporating a fly shuttle was introduced into Co. Donegal for woollen weaving and the improvement in quality and quantity of cloth was remarkable. Within a few years this new make of loom became popular in districts on the western seaboard where it gradually took the place of the throw loom.

One of my objectives in this discussion is through my research, to find what unique methods and traditions the Homespun Cottage Industry of the west of Ireland had and still has to offer the world of weaving. I found one such item which was of great interest to me as its technique is old and exclusive to this area. It is the crios, of the Aran Islands. The crios is a woven belt still made on the Aran until recently but long since abandoned in dress. Many countries make woven belts but the Aran way is one of the oldest, and is therefore of special interest.

In the 1920's there was a certain amount of curiosity about such old traditions in the west. Few people got first hand experience of these traditions of local craftsmen. One person who was lucky enough to be invited to the Aran Is. was a Dr. Francoise Henry. She came alone to Ireland from France with little money and her bicycle, with an interest in the craft of making the crios and the local footwear. She was the first "outsider" to record and draw a crios weaver at work. Lillian Mitchell had also an opportunity to see this craft as she, herself put it

> "was lucky to have good friends to make arrangements"
> (ref. Irish Weaving, L. Mitchell, pg. 34)

Another person who became aware of this craft was Dr. Hald of Copenhagen[15]. She visited the Aran Is. with Lillian Mitchell to see both the crios and footwear known as pampooties being made. Therefore great interest has been experienced at this time in Ireland but why now, one may

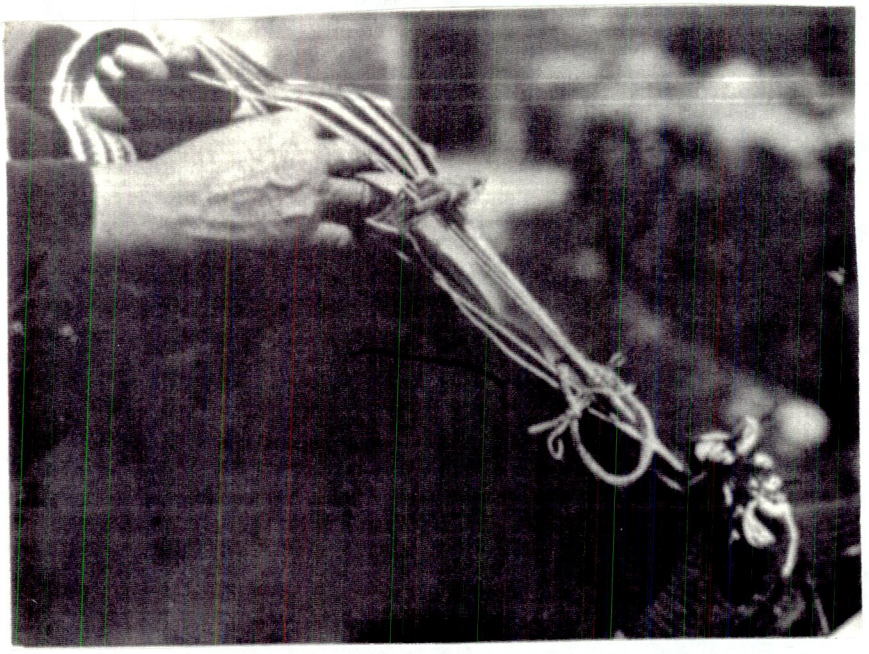


FIG.11 WEAVING THE CROIS ON THE ARAN.

FIG.12 DR.FRANCOISE HENRY'S DRAWING OF A WOMAN WEAVING A CROIS.

ask? With the revival in Irelands own traditional crafts, people began to see how much this country was rich in crafts and how these crafts compared in quality to other countries. They were of superior quality and quite unique. This can be said for the crios technique as both Dr. Henry and Miss Mitchell could find no other example of it in Europe except some traces in Iceland, known there as foot weaving. The definition of the crios can be explained in the following way.

> "Belt or girdle. This is often a girdle about the waist, and served not only to keep the léine in place, but also for carrying a variety of objects weapons, books or purses. Its material sometimes woven from woollen yarns like the criossanna made by hand in the Aran Islands to-day".
>
> (ref. Old Irish & Highland dress, H.F. McClintock pg. 34).

Dr. Henry leaves us a drawing of the Aran Island crios weaver who has taken off her stockings and pampooties and has the warp threads round her big toe, stretching to her waist. The women at this point in their work were shy in character, especially when their shoes were off with bare feet showing. Dr. Henry noted that while she was observing a woman weaving in this manner, on hearing of the priests arrival, the weaver quickly put her work away and ran into the next room to dress herself. This humble craft of the Aran was done in the home for both women and men. The wearing of the crios was of up most importance especially in boats as the men never went to see without them. 1962, Cíaran Bairead, a friend of Dr. Lucas tells us there was at least one woman on the island who could make them by hand. He wrote in a letter

> "It came as a surprise to me that women wore the crios, but I have been told all do, though it is not visible"
>
> (ref. Irish Spinning and Dyeing, L. Mitchell pg. 45)

It was apparent even to these enthusiasts that the tradition of wearing the crios on the island was dying out. The islanders were conforming to modern dress or just emigrating leaving the crios and the traditional dress behind.

Yet in the 1960's, there was soon to be a revival of the crios although in different surroundings and within a different culture. The arrival of the hippie brought about a new lease of life as it were, for this old traditional item of clothing. Along with the loose dresses and wide trousers the crios became a popular fashion accessory to the hippie phenomenan. Along with their "Make Love, not War" slogans and free love, the crios found an unorthodox but fitting home. Even in the late 1980's, with the revival of the sixties in fashion, the crios appeared on the streets once again on the fashion conscious youth. Although the traditional way and ideal of the crios had died out, previously with the freize coat, it carried on in a different form. It may well be one of the oldest and lasting items of clothing ever in Irish fashion.

In respect to the traditional dress on the Aran Islands along with the crios, the men wore woollen ganseys and Aran jumpers, indigo freize trousers and pampooties. Similar to the crios, the Aran knits enjoyed great popularity up 'till the present day. The women wore a traditional Irish dress down to their ankles along with large shawls to keep wind and rain out. What interests me most is the way in which these women of the west wore their skirts on special occasions. On normal days, the skirt was around the waist but on holy or special days the skirts were pulled up over their heads and drapped down. This way of wearing the skirt was predominately seen in the west of Ireland and is evidence to the question of what was exclusive to this part of the country.

In the west of Ireland, the homespun did indeed have many unique and old traditions of weaving. Furthermore, with the examples of such techniques, I have shown that the soceity of weavers were gifted and knowledgable in their

34

FIG.14 WOMEN OF ARAN WEARING THEIR SKIRTS OVER THEIR HEADS.

diverse and beautiful craft. Whether it be the making of the crios or thick durable homespun socks, all were exicuted in the same manner, fine craftsmanship. Yet, the homespun industry development was following what appears to have been its inevitable course. First, a community started off as a flourishing homecraft for home use only. The use of millspun unknown. Then partially a homecraft, with homeuse and sale almost equal. To produce more for sale and to save drudgery, machine warp is introduced. The next stage was that homecraft almost disappeared in the country industry. Little or nothing for home use, everything for sale. The final stage is that everything is for sale with genuine homespun unheard of. This is the tale of the cottage industry in this century. Today genuine homespun is rare. Yet the techniques of the craft are not forgotten. People are now looking back at the history of this great craft for inspiration and appreciating the tradition whose driving force for many years was the poverty of Irish country people. But who, if any, is the driving force for the craft today? This issue I shall be discussing in my final chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

"THE REVIVAL"

Gone are the days when homespun was produced purely for one's own home use. In the west of Ireland today, the production of tweed/cloth is all millspun. In places where the homecraft thrived, it is now gone. Therefore one may ask, is the craft really dead forever? Are we ever going to see the likes of genuine homespun in rural communities again? The answer to this question is unfortunately no. Today, in the fast style of living, there is no valid reason for producing ones own cloth for home use as modern machinery can do just as good a job, a hundred times faster, than a hand crafted production. So where does this craft fit into our lives in the '90's if it still exists? In this decade the essence of this craft of rural Ireland is manifesting itself into a different form. What was once peasant in origin and was carried out of necessity has become the interest and sometimes the study for the middle class urban society. From this background comes a new generation of Irish weavers who bring new skills and new disciplines to the traditional craft whose driving force for many years was the poverty of Irish country people.

To begin with, one must look at this renewal of interest in the homespun craft, which was common place in Ireland especially in the west. The period between the two wars saw a revival. In 1936, the Irish Homespun Society was formed, Dr. Muriel Gahan being one of the guiding forces. Its primary aim was the development of the homespun industry especially in Irish-speaking areas in the west and north west of the country. During the post war years, Newport and Erin (Co. Mayo) emerged as two of the top three most important homespun producing areas of Ireland. Gaeltarra Eireann, the government organisation took an increasingly large part in the handweaving scene in the late forties and in the fifties. The aim of the organisation was to provide employment in the Irish-speaking districts, to prevent the continued flow away of the population and the consequent diminution of native speakers. In turn, the spin off from this work favoured the homespun industry greatly. Gaeltarra added organisation, design, and marketing to native skills and the result was a period of considerable success

at a time when handwoven tweeds were in vogue. So successful was the operation that it became impossible to meet the demand by hand weaving alone. The hand weaving had to give way to the machine producing tweed by the hundred yards. Machines can be so much more precise and size and speed can be engineered. It seemed that the day of the traditional handweaver had finally come to an end.

Not entirely however, for there was born a new generation with whom the tradition would be secure but for different reasons than mere inate skill. Today there is a new awareness of one's own history and crafts in Ireland. This can be clearly seen, with the healthy interest of contemporary weavers and students, in the crafts of homespun. Within the homespun craft, whether it be dyeing techniques, spinning or weaving, the old traditions are being revived both in art and education. People are "re discovering" as it were the precious and unique qualities this craft has to offer. With the onset of the machine in this century, up until modern day, although it may be cost efficient and fast, one should not forget the unique qualities of handcraftsmanship.

At the beginning of this century, William Morris recognised and emphasised the importance of fine craftsmanship

> "Handweaving should be preserved as a means of keeping alive the ideal of sound workmanship, fine skill of hand and inventiveness".
>
> (ref. Spinning Wheel, E. Kronenberg, pg. 21)

For these reasons alone it can be said that the craft of homespun is worth holding on to and passing on to the next generation. In Irish schools and colleges, handweaving/spinning/dyeing have particular importance in education. As a craft it is the most inclusive of all others, linked with the dress, environment and culture of the country. The last few years, the craft has seen a healthy revival within schools and can be taken as a part of the Leaving

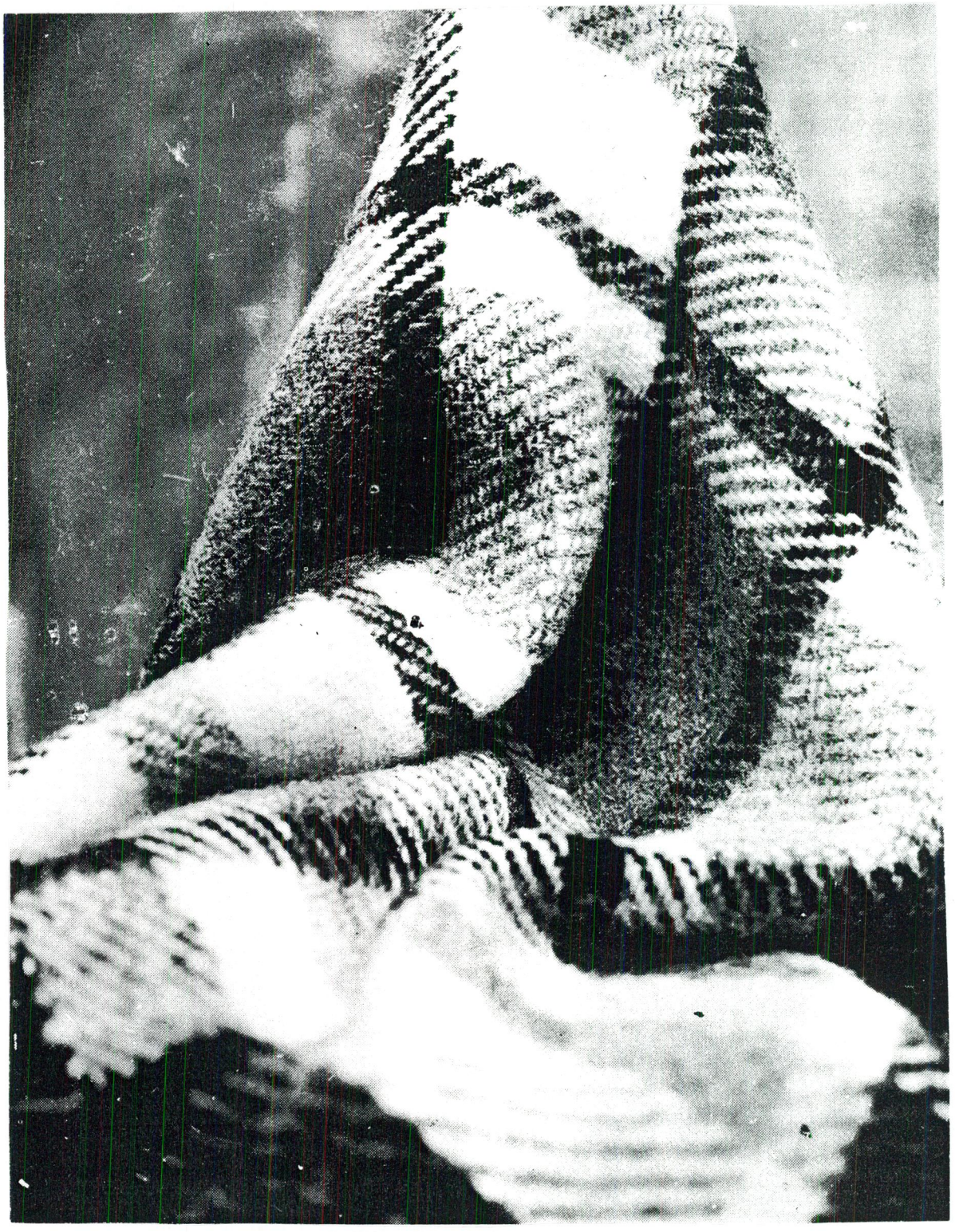
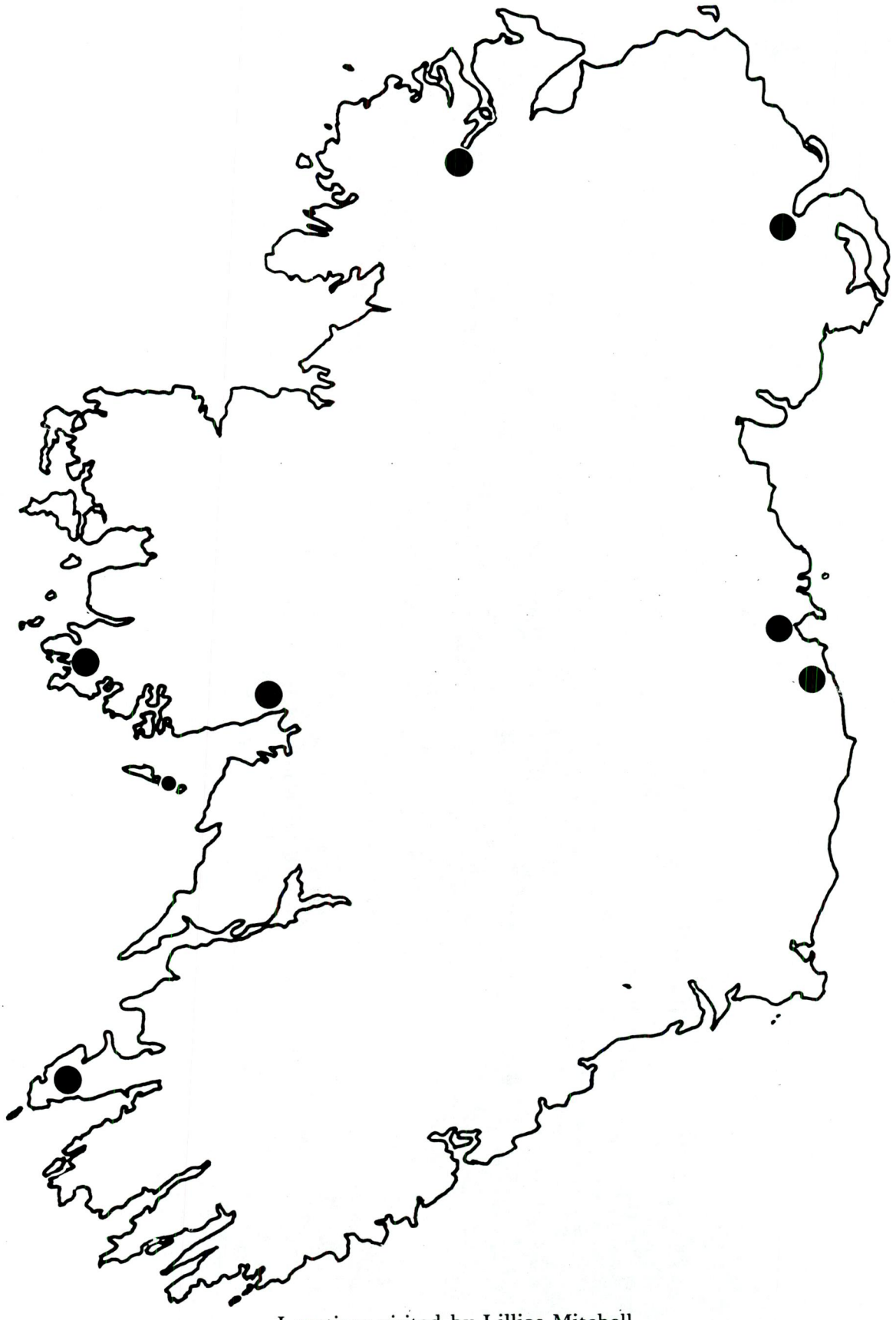


FIG.15

TRADITIONAL KNEE RUG WOVEN BY LILLIAS MITCHELL .



Locations visited by Lillias Mitchell

FIG.16

Cert. course in Art. With this, more and more people are being exposed to this craft, which is very good news to a once thought of dwindling way of life.

Yet this revival did not just occur on its own. With the help and encouragement of a handful of people in Ireland the homespun craft has more support. Among the important people to spark off an interest in the Homespun Cottage Industry, one name comes immediately to mind. Miss Lillian Mitchell has for over a half a century been involved within this craft. There is no doubt that she has made a large contribtuion to the teaching of handweaving in Ireland. Trained originally as a painter at the R.H.A. School, she subsequently specialised in spinning, weaving and dyeing in Wales which was to lead to her being invited by the Minister of Education to establish teaching in these subjects. He felt there was an urgent need for good teaching in this subject, primarily to preserve a traditional craft and as a natural consequence to promote handweaving as a part of the National Economy - the preservation of this national heritage.

In an interview with Lillian Mitchell she explained to me than in 1945 the work of reviving the ancient tradition of weaving in Ireland was important to her and gave her the privilege of being welcomed into homes, cottages and into families in a warm way. Miss Mitchell saw first hand the old ways of the homespun industry in the west of Ireland that I have spoken about previously (chap. 1,2). Among the places she visited and made records of different techniques were Achill Is., the Aran Is. and Connemara. As she talked of her experiences in the west she showed to me examples of genuine homespun which included indigo dyed cloth from the Aran, natural dyed heavy duty socks, and an array of naturally dyed homespun wool. Some of these mentioned are now quite rare as homespun has disappeared from the areas, leaving very little examples still intact today.

Miss Mitchells views on the homespun industry, and old traditions of the craft are as strong today as ever before. In her opinion, Ireland has the full roots of the craft and these roots are deeper than any other country in Europe. On her travels across the world she noticed that the Irish had a higher level of superiority and gift for homespun. With these in mind she wanted to promote the craft of the rural people especially the places she had visited in the west of Ireland. During the many years of travelling in Ireland, Lillian Mitchell made many studies of old methods which were still in use at that time. She had the pleasure of being among the first few to see the making of the crios on the Aran Is. She travelled to Galway to record the near extinct spinning on the Big Wheel and also made a study of the use of sea shells to produce a purple dye[16]. All this work and information is invaluable today in tracing the history of homespun in Ireland.

As a result of her great contribution to the craft, in 1950 the Minister of Education invited her to set up a Department of Spinning, Dyeing and Weaving in the National College of Art, Kildare St., Dublin. In the college prospectus they wrote

> ".. Instruction is given in hand-spinning, vegetable dyeing and handloom weaving. The history and technique of the traditional hand-spinners and weavers of this country is examined".
>
> (ref. Weaving Diaries, L. Mitchell pg. 1)

The introduction of this new department was gladly welcomed and gave art students in the college yet a new area for creative work. Although the basis of the course was primarily traditional, more creative and innovative work was also promoted. The fear for the future never took root in the weaving department which developed and expanded in many directions. Therefore once again, the Homespun Cottage Industry of the west of Ireland was enjoying a new lease of life in completely different surroundings. With the help of Lillian Mitchell, the old craft lived on. Even today, the

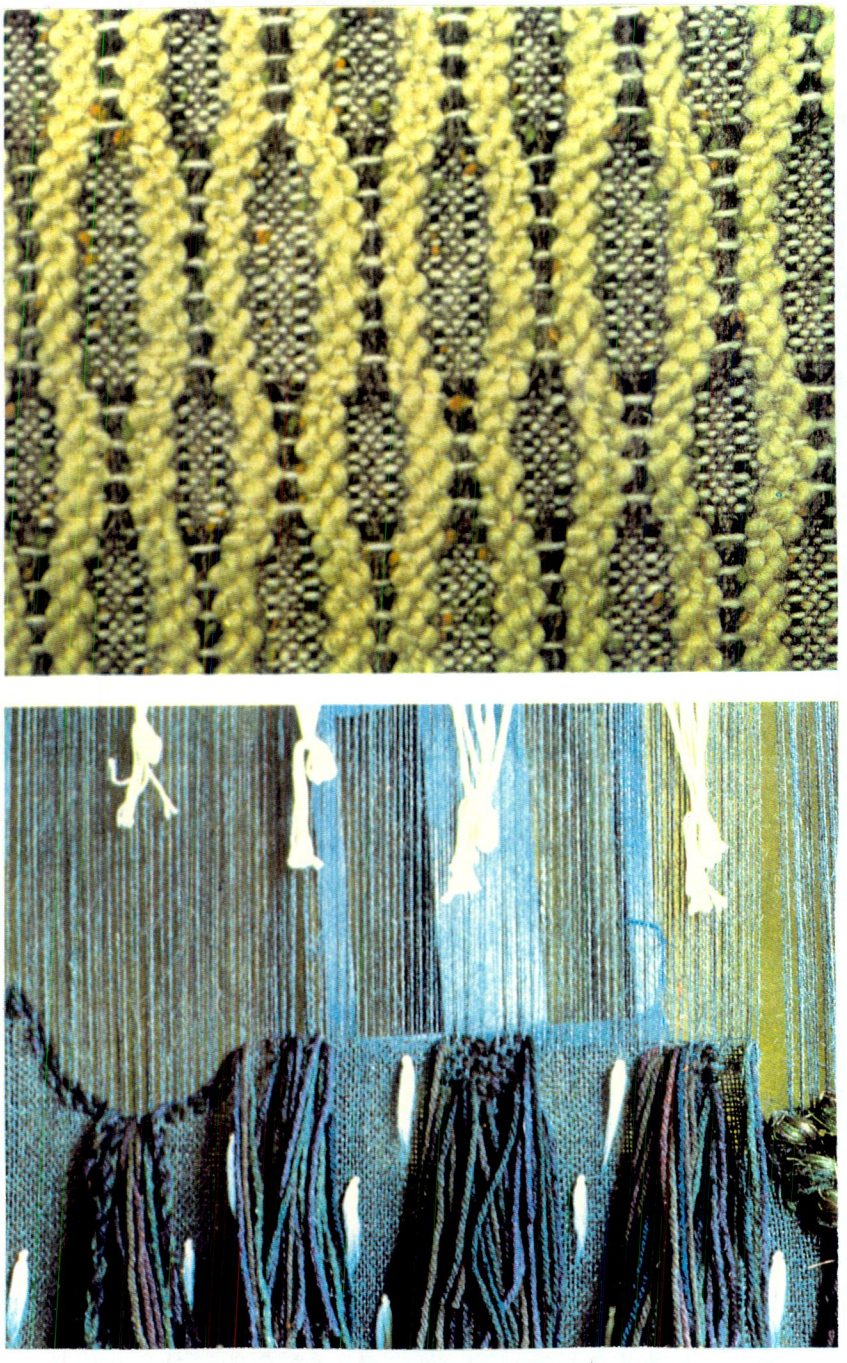


FIG.17

FIG. 17 WORK IN PROGRESS, BY SALLIE O'SULLIVAN.

weaving/spinning/dyeing techniques have changed little since first introduced to the college so it could be said that we owe a lot more to our rural ancestors than first thought. The basics are the same, yet today the wide area of creativity differs. We are using the different components of the homespun industry together with flexible, diverse, innovative ways, to produce our own work. New dimensions are being added.

Today the craftsmen - designers are different in many ways to that of the simple weaver, making his own product for his own use. The weavers-designers are trained in every aspect of the craft and equally competent as designers or consultants and as individual craftsmen. These people are far removed from the ancestorial weavers in so far as they do not carry out their craft purely out of necessity, but regard it and practise it consciously as both designers and artists. There is a sense of creating something differently beautiful and of using the basics in a new way. This seems to be the way forward for the dying craft of the homespun from the west.

Most of todays creative weavers in Ireland are women. This is comparitively different to our predecessors as all weavers were men. In the National College of Art and Design, the students are sometimes lucky to have these weavers as tutors. The work of Evelyn Lyndsay was of great importance and interest to me in researching, as her work in natural dyeing techniques is an inspiration to any weaver or dyer today. It linked the old traditions of dyeing which were on the way out to the contemporary world of art in weaving. Evelyn Lyndsay taught in N.C.A.D. for over 15 years alongside Miss Mitchell and the present day tutor Sallie O'Sullivan. Amongst her work, the study of natural dyes from different plants, roots, berries and barks has a great memorial to this area of interest[17]. Before this time, the knowledge of natural dyes was known by few who were scattered across Ireland. In her work, she tracked down every known source of natural dyes which was an important

FIG.18 NINTIES USE OF NATURAL DYES.

aspect of the homespun, recorded and presented it in a fashion easily read. Therefore the work of Evelyn Lyndsay cemented the once dying methods and techniques of homespun dyeing. Today in the world of fashion, there is a come back of natural dyes and staining so this study is very valid to this generation[18]. Without studies like this one whole craft could and can disappear so great importance is put on to record technique of a craft. This can be said for the homespun craft.

At this point I can say that there is a revival of the essence of the homespun craft in Ireland. From the facts I have shown, it is evident that for a "dying" craft, it is doing well. Yet unfortunately so many precious unique aspects of the craft will never see the light of day again. To our humble rural ancestors these were among the most important aspects of the craft. One being the loss of community spirit. Different members of the society gathering together in one place to share in the participation of a craft. Whole communities of both women and men working together to keep themselves self-sufficient. The carefree attitude of the people who spun wool with their neighbours or washed their fleece in the open rivers of the west. Society has moved on too far for this craft ever to have a role in the peoples lives again. With the loss of the traditional ideal of homespun we not only lost a way of life but also some of our culture, folklore and language. These three issues were inter connected with the craft in rural Ireland so if one begins to die, all three begin to wither. This was seen in Ireland at the turn of this century when emigration increased, the result being the loss of many of our homespun craftsmen, who were predominantly native Irish speakers from the west. Once where large Irish speaking areas thrived within the industry, began to dwindle leaving only small pockets of this peasant rural way of life.

Yet all is not lost, as I have shown in this chapter, that with the help of great contributors like Lillian Mitchell, or Evelyn Lyndsay the craft is living on. The best of Irish techniques were recorded and applied to the preservation of this

national heritage. The result of their research now constitutes the basis of a syllabus for modern training of students in the traditional Irish methods.

Conclusion

I hope that I have proved the importance of the cottage homespun Industry, particularly in the West and its great influence on todays techniques and methods in contemporary Irish weaving. The poverty of the people who were involved in the craft does not exist anymore. This has been replaced by the middle-class society who chose it as a subject of study and an area of creativity. In this way, the once doomed industry is being revived. Although the old traditions may have disappeared, the essence of the craft is still alive. Also, by the very fact that we are continuing this craft and tradition we are gaining an immense insight into the history of out people and a better understanding of how our forefathers and their lifestyle. We can appreciate their knowledge and ingenuousness.

With the help of enthusiasts like Lillias Mitchell and Sallie O' Sullivan the craft is enjoying a revival and this is evident as it has become increasingly popular in schools and colleges in Ireland. This revival will ensure the craft's continuation. It is a wondrous thing to know that we are using utensils that fit into the modern world and yet, are virtually the same in appearance and construction as they were one hundred years ago. Therefore the homespun craft deserves to be remembered and practiced by a new generation of weavers. We look to the future with confidence and hope.

APPENDICES

1. Interview with Miss Lillian Mitchell, on November 28th, in her home.
2. Interview with Sallie O'Sullivan, on January 11th in College.
3. Weaving diaries, Lillian Mitchell, January 5th to August 15th, 1971.
4. Weaving diaries, Lillian Mitchell, January to December, 1974.

FOOTNOTES

1.This craft remained rural throughout Irish history until the beginning of this century.

2. Account of life on the Great Blasket, ref., biblio. no.12, p.g. 36.

3. A report on the woollen industry in Ireland in 1902, ref. biblio. no.12, p.g. 44.

4. Reference to making rolls. This is a process whereby after the fleece is carded, it is rolled up by hand in orderfor it to be spun , ref. biblio. no.13, p.g. 21.

5. The fleece from the Cheviot sheep is very fine and used for delicate work i.e. babies clothes.

6. In Dunlewey, Co.Donegal, a version of this tradition was seen,ref. biblio. no.10.

7. Bainin or white is --- the fleece is not coloured or bleached.

8. The preference was for simple lights with some exceptions. There can be seen in the form of bright vivid reds for womans petticoats on the Aran Is .

9. The use of a mordant is important in natural dyeing as it acts as a fixitive and makes the dye permenant, ref. biblio. no. 6, p.g.82.

12. Indigo dyed cloth from Inis Mor, ref. appendices 1.

10. Miss Mitchell's account ref.biblio. no. 10 p.g. 15.

11. The manufacture of purple, ref.biblio. no. 6 p.g.82

13. The weavers had long toes ref. appendices no. 1.

FOOTNOTES

14. Throwing of the shuttle. The shuttle is the container for the thread which is then thrown horizontally across the warp(the vertical threads) to produce cloth. The loom derives its name from this process.

15. Dr. Hald of Copenhagen, of the National Museum, Copenhagen, a Bronze Age specialist was interested in the crois, ref. appendices no.1.

16. Lillias Mitchell studied the shell Purpura Lapillus in 1977 with a local girl on Achill Is. Co.Mayo, ref. biblio. no. p.g. 24.

17. Evelyn Lyndsay died in 1983. Her study of natural dyes can be seen in the Deptment of Irish Folklore UCD,

18. Natural use of dyes sees in Fig.18.

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