

Scott, William

by Linde Lunney

Scott, William (1765–1858), shirt manufacturer, was born 12 March 1765 in the townland of Ballougry, in the Liberties of Derry city, the youngest of three sons of David Scott, a farmer, whose ancestors had held the farm since 1610. After a limited education, Scott was apprenticed to a weaver in Foyle Street. On completion of his apprenticeship, he worked for his master for a few years, until around 1790, when he became a master weaver, and set up in business in Weaver's Row. In that year he married Rebecca Scott, a distant cousin, from a well-to-do Church of Ireland family with a residence at Foyle Hill. They had a large family, several of whom died in childhood, but seven sons and two daughters survived.

Scott was a committed presbyterian, and for the unprecedented period of seventy years was an elder in the seceding congregation in Fountain Street. He was superintendent of the Sunday school for many years, and with another elder was responsible for establishing Fourth Derry to accommodate growing numbers of presbyterians in the city.

In the meantime, Scott's weaving business flourished, and after 1829, when a steamer connection between Derry and Glasgow was established, he travelled regularly to Glasgow to sell the linen cloth made by his workers. White linen shirts with collars and elaborate fronts, often starched, had become the new fashion for men, replacing the earlier unstructured open-necked undergarment which had often been of wool or flannel. Scott saw the potential for selling readymade garments, at a time when young men were flocking to work in cities, often far away from their families and female relatives who would hitherto have made most of their clothing. Rebecca Scott and her two daughters were fine needlewomen, and in early summer 1831 William Scott took a dozen shirts of their making along with his linen webs to Glasgow; William Gourlie and Son sold them, and ordered more.

In 1832 a Derry man who had become a merchant in Melbourne, Australia, placed a large order, and the Scott womenfolk, helped by a new daughter-in-law, worked night and day to get it finished. Orders continued to pour in, and a London agent was appointed; it was clear that more workers would be needed, and Scott took on local women who worked in their own homes. They were trained by Scott's family, and later trained others in their turn. An elaborate system of outworkers was established. Women even in relatively distant areas such as Limavady and Carndonagh in Donegal were issued with ready cut out material; Scott's shirt pattern remained standard for at least a generation. The shirts had a cotton body, with a detachable linen collar and cuffs (so that they could be washed separately and thus more frequently), sometimes with a linen embroidered front, and they were to some extent tailored to fit different body shapes; previously, ready-to-wear garments,

like those for sailors (which were called 'slops'), were cut square and fitted nobody properly.

The firm needed carters, pattern cutters, skilled needlewomen, finishers, inspectors and packers, as well as clerks to keep records of orders and payments. About 1840, the Scotts bought the old military hospital on Bennett Lane (latterly Bennett Street), and adapted it for their needs. By that date William Scott and Son employed 250 weavers and over 500 women making up the shirts, and paid out about £500 weekly in wages. Demand was worldwide, with about a quarter of a million hand-sewn and hand-finished shirts leaving Scott's Derry warehouse each year, and the shirt-making industry became synonymous with Derry city for a century and more.

William Tillie (qv), and others, notably Adam Hogg and Peter McIntyre, all from Scotland, had introduced the factory system into the city and still further enhanced the reputation of Derry shirts, but William Scott, who was 66 years old when he started to manufacture shirts, never changed the structure of his business or adopted new methods. He retired in 1850, when he was 85. His wife had died in 1835, and Scott moved to Burt, Co. Donegal, to live with a son who had also retired and had bought a large farm there. William Scott died on 26 May 1858, and was accorded a huge funeral, to St Columb's graveyard. The company he had founded did not long survive him.

S. Scott, *William Scott: founder of the Londonderry shirt trade* (1928); Geraldine McCarter, *Derry's shirt tale* (1991); Ciaran Roddy, 'The history of shirt making in Derry' (updated 2008), www.oocities.org/historyofshirtmakinginderry/Index.htm (accessed July 2015)