

Tillie, William

by Linde Lunney

Tillie, William (1822–1904), shirt manufacturer, was born in October 1822 in Crookston Mains, in the parish of Stow, Midlothian, Scotland, son of John Tillie and his wife Jannet Tillie (née Brown), who were substantial farmers; he had at least two brothers and a sister. Until Tillie was 27 he worked as an agent for Robert Sinclair, a shirt manufacturer in Glasgow, and often travelled to Derry to procure material or put out shirts for finishing. The textile industry in Derry and the region around had been undergoing major developments, thanks mainly to William Scott (qv).

Tillie and Robert Sinclair (his former employer and then his business partner), moved from Glasgow to the north of Ireland in the early 1850s. They took into partnership John Henderson to look after warehousing in Derry (and later elsewhere), and opened a factory at Little James Street, where they employed forty workers. For the first time, all the processes of shirt-making – cutting, sewing and finishing – were combined in one enterprise, though not confined to a factory; there were still scores of domestic workers. Tillie's company, however, had much better quality control over outsourced work, because they employed inspectors, rather than relying on local freelance agents. The partners experienced immediate success; the business soon had to move to larger premises in Foyle Street.

In 1854 Tillie and Henderson registered a patent for printing shirting fabric, and in 1856, Tillie, who was the dominant partner, further changed the whole structure of the industry when he introduced the newly invented sewing machine. He bought 100 machines in London, at the huge cost of £2,100. Not content with adopting the foot treadle machines, which had only just become reliable enough for industrial use, he developed an elaborate system of shafts and pulleys to have the sewing machines powered by a steam engine, probably the first in Ulster. The steam pipes also heated the huge factory that opened on 30 December 1856 at the junction of Wapping Lane and Foyle Road. It was originally four storeys and covered almost an acre; after further expansion in 1862 and again in 1866, the Tillie and Henderson factory was the largest industrial premises in Derry, and the biggest shirt factory in the world. An extra storey and a separate three-storey laundry were added in 1898. At one time the Tillie and Henderson factory employed 4,500 workers, almost all women, with 2,000 more outworkers. (The company was so well known that it was cited by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* (1867) as an example of the combination of the factory system with domestic production.) The industry had a very significant impact on the demography and social economy of Derry; in a city where there were relatively few jobs for men, women became the main breadwinners. Working women, and especially their solidarity in the factories, produced a characteristic culture and way of life still remembered in Derry.

The partnership with Sinclair was dissolved, apparently amicably, in 1862, and Tillie set up his own large-scale Abercorn factory in Derry. Two other Scots, Peter McIntyre and Adam Hogg, established another huge concern, the City Factory, built in 1863 to a design by Robert Young (qv). A steam-powered cutting machine for cutting out pattern pieces was invented there by a manager, William Croom. Tillie himself in 1859 patented a clamp to guide sewing machines, and later patented improvements for shirt construction. Such new technology and the skills of Derry workers combined in the efficient production of highly desirable products, renowned for the quality of fabric, for the cut, and particularly for what was known as 'the Derry finish'. Derry was for many years the acknowledged centre of shirt production in the UK. In 1860 Derry produced five million shirts; probably most 'white-collar workers' in the new middle-class jobs worldwide wore shirts produced in Derry. In addition, Tillie and Henderson manufactured huge quantities of collars and underclothing as well as complete shirts.

By the standards of the day Tillie was a relatively enlightened employer. In 1866 he established a national school in the factory, which gave the younger girls some education; the company had a 51-hour working week, much shorter than elsewhere, and paid for occasional holiday excursions and social occasions. There was a company doctor, and a library for workers; Tillie encouraged a popular choir in the factory, probably contributing to Derry's lasting reputation in choral singing. Notwithstanding the considerable loyalty to the company built up over thirty years, younger workers went on strike in 1883. Economic conditions at the time were less favourable, with the United States market closed off behind tariff barriers, and Tillie planned to cut production costs to sell cheaper products. Factory girls protested on the streets and attacked strikebreakers; Tillie's appeal to their mothers had little impact, though eventually the girls, lacking financial backing, returned to work. There were a few more decades of prosperity, but Derry's textile industry had begun its long, slow decline.

Tillie had many other business interests: a director of several railway companies, he also owned land and properties round the city. A very notable figure locally, prominently involved in many of the city's institutions, he was on the board of Foyle College, a member of the Corporation for a short time, a founding member (1885) and later president of the chamber of commerce, president of the North-West Agricultural Society, a bridge commissioner, and harbour commissioner for forty-two years. One of the biggest ships ever built in Derry, in 1892, a steel-clad sailing ship that traded to Australia and the Far East, bore his name. He was a JP and grand juror for many years, high sheriff of Co. Londonderry in 1872, lieutenant for the city and deputy lieutenant for Co. Londonderry. As lieutenant, Tillie welcomed King Edward and Queen Alexandra to the city in 1903; his son was Derry's mayor on that occasion. A long-time member of the governing body of Derry asylum and city infirmary, for which he funded a new wing, he also gave generously to the presbyterian church, and was an elder in First Derry, subscribing annually to the denomination's sustentation fund, and helping to support and educate ministers'

families. He is also said to have built houses for professors in Magee College and to have supported a national school associated with First Derry. In the 1870s he supported the Liberal party and was treasurer of the Londonderry tenant right society, but when Gladstone advocated home rule for Ireland, Tillie reluctantly turned to the Liberal Unionists, and was a member of the Ulster Convention League in 1897, and president of the Londonderry Unionist Association.

Tillie married in his home parish of Stow in March 1852; his wife, Agnes Marshall Lee, was also from a prosperous farming family. They had five sons and three daughters, one of whom married James Dickson, who was elected MP for Dungannon in 1880, as the youngest ever British MP. Agnes Tillie (d. 1900) also played a large part in charity in Derry; she supported the provision of district nursing in the poorer areas, and personally financed a fully equipped home for district nurses in Great James Street, as well as a horse-drawn ambulance for the police to use in emergencies.

William Tillie died on 8 March 1904 at Duncreggan, his house in Derry (later used by first the junior and then the senior school of Foyle and Londonderry College). His huge funeral united the city in an expression of general grief and respect; all the factories in the city closed, and all blinds on the funeral's route were drawn. There were thousands of onlookers, and the funeral procession included fifty RIC men, the boys and masters of Foyle College, the male employees of the company, and members of all the bodies with which Tillie had been involved. William Tillie's will disposed of a personal estate of £196,880; he left legacies of £500 each to Londonderry Infirmary and Londonderry District Nursing Society and £1,000 to the presbyterian sustentation fund. Family members in dispute about the provisions of the will had recourse to the court of chancery in 1907. In 1924 the premises and plant were sold, but the new owners retained the name Tillie and Henderson. This company, like most other clothing companies in Derry, eventually went out of business in the 1970s.

The abandoned Foyle factory, once Derry's boast, and the source of livelihoods for so many families, experienced vandalism and eventually an arson attack in late December 2002. It was demolished on 4 January 2003 by a developer who planned to put a hotel on the site. It was, however, still derelict in April 2012.

Census of Scotland 1851, locality transcriptions (Crookston Mains and Fernieherst), online at www.maxwellancestry.com/census/51transcript.aspx?houseid=69901007; *Donegal News*, 11, 18 Mar., 29 Apr. 1904; 15 Feb. 1907; Geraldine McCarter, *Derry's shirt tale* (1991); Annesley Malley, 'The burning of Tillie and Henderson's', *Foyle Civic Trust Review*, ix (2002–03), pp 3–5; Robert Gavin, 'History of the clothing industry in Derry' in Patrick Durnin (ed.), *Tillies*:

Tillie and Henderson shirt factory (2005); Annesley Malley, 'Historical background to Tillie and Henderson' in *ibid*; Ciaran Roddy, 'The history of shirt making in Derry' (updated 2008), www.oocities.org/historyofshirtmakinginderry/Index.htm; Kathleen Wilson, *Irish people, Irish linen* (2011), esp. 202–4; *DoE emergency dereliction improvement scheme* (Apr. 2012), www.derrycity.gov.uk/DerryCitySite/files/53/53002d9c-7fb6-4836-850a-6409627a4bbb.pdf; *Londonderry Journal*, *passim*; familysearch.org (internet sources accessed Dec. 2013 and July 2015)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.101.44.120 on Fri Aug 14 02:44:19 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.