



Belfast-based designer Chris Tyndall and Dungiven man William Ross look on as Marion works at the loom

of our history. I want to keep it going."

One man, who is very happy to see the return of the textile in Dungiven is William Ross.

His father owned one of the largest, state-of-the-art linen mills in the Dungiven area.

Employing around 60 people, Ross' Mill, which was in the family for over 100 years, produced an enormous amount of linen before closing its doors in the 1950s.

William's father grew the flax used to make the linen and the initial processing of the flax was carried out in Dungiven.

William says the linen industry was 'an important one'.

"It was hard, hard work back then," recalled William.

"Pulling the flax was hard and the thistles in the field weren't too pleasant either. On a good day you would have pulled 240 sheaves of flax.

"There were days when you would be standing knee deep

in water. The bundles of flax were put into the dam and left there for ten days. In the modern system they were packed into a square room with tanks and a steel door and the room was flooded with warm water and air was pumped through it. It stunk like silage.

"I would love to see it come back to Dungiven," he added, referring to Marion's plans to turn part of The Old Post Office into a workshop.

Another man, who is a big advocate of Marion's work, is Belfast-based graphic designer, Chris Tyndall.

Chris, who owns Loft Trading, a collection of handmade accessories for men, uses linen and wool made by Marion for his unique products, which include ties, scarves and pocket squares.

Chris' products are popular right across the world, particularly in North America and Asia.

Top male model David Gandy is a big fan of Chris' exquisite handcrafted accessories and has been spotted sporting some of his designs.

"The linen industry is a fragile one and without Marion doing this, where would we get our linen? Ireland is known worldwide for linen - it's one of Ireland's most important materials - and although it is only being done here on a small scale, it is good that Marion is trying to keep it going," he said.

Over in south Derry, the small village of Upperlands is home to Ireland's oldest linen-making business.

Clark's was founded in 1736 by William Clark.

The business, which is still in the hands of the Clark family, continues to manufacture fine linen canvas using the unique process of beetling - a procedure which pounds the fabric to flatten it and give it a distinc-

tive sheen.

Local historian, Bruce Clark, a direct descendant of William Clark, is excited about the prospect of linen being woven in Dungiven.

"My father, Wallace Clark, was a historian of linen, and he and eight generations of his forebears spent their professional lives working with linen so I am delighted by any initiative which gives people a renewed sense of the whole flax-and-linen cycle which is of huge importance for the past, present and above all, future of Ireland.

"Flax and Linen have been part of the lived experience of people in this part of the world for many centuries. One of Seamus Heaney's greatest poems is about a flax dam where frogs and butterflies in the summer heat. Yet we have slightly ambivalent feelings about the fibre. We know that linen is one of the great products of

Ireland, but not many people have a sense of the whole linen process, from dragging the muddy stalks out of a lint dam, to producing lovely clothing or tableware from a glossy fabric.

"That's probably because any given family or community experienced just one part of the linen cycle, whether it was growing flax, scutching it, spinning it, weaving it into linen, bleaching or beetling or it, or sewing with it."

Bruce continued: "From 1700 onwards, as the production and sale of linen became commercialised, the different stages in the process were separated, and different categories of producer were involved. For example, cottage weavers had to sell their newly woven cloth to businessmen who had the machinery to bleach and finish and prepare it for market in Dublin and beyond. Farmers who sold their flax in the market didn't have much con-

trol over what happened after that.

"In our time, this division of linen labour has become global, so that yarn produced in eastern Europe is sometimes woven into cloth in China and perhaps finished in Ireland."

Praising Marion and her husband Hermann for their efforts in bringing the textile back to Dungiven, Bruce added: "But we won't learn to love linen, as much as it should be loved, unless we regain an understanding of the whole process. By growing flax and then weaving, finishing and tailoring linen, all within the boundaries of County Derry, Hermann and Marion are helping us all to recover our sense of the totality of the linen cycle.

"Given that flax and linen are among the primordial products of human labour, and a product of Ireland since early Christian times or perhaps even earlier, that is noble work indeed."



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