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The growth of the Flemish connection

In 1297, at the height of a constitutional crisis, the English barons advanced the claim that nearly half their country's wealth derived from wool.¹ Although in one sense an exaggeration, in another this statement is less than the truth for, although wool cannot have made up anything like half the gross national product, it contributed nearly all the country's export earnings. Yet while the wool trade was then the most important branch of English commerce it was not necessarily the oldest, for woollen cloth was sent abroad long before there is evidence of the export of raw wool. The medieval export trade may be represented, perhaps, as a cycle in which the earliest and latest periods were distinguished by manufactured woollen cloth, the volume in the last being vastly greater than in the first, while intermediate stages in the cycle saw the growth and the decline of the wool trade. During the first half of the eighth century gifts of cloaks were sent to English missionaries on the continent and, although this can hardly be described as commerce, Charlemagne's letter to Offa of Mercia later in the same century, complaining about English cloaks and requesting that they should be made as of old, suggests a trade of some standing. There is a possibility that English cloth went into the famous 'Frisian cloaks' which had wide currency at that time, and by the ninth and tenth centuries the fame of the English product had reached the Arab world.² While references of this nature do not prove the existence of an industry geared to an export market they presuppose one able to produce a surplus above purely local needs. Unless the organisation of this industry was so rudimentary that each family merely worked up the fleeces of its own sheep there was of necessity some marketing of wool, although little evidence of such a traffic has survived.³ A clause in Edgar's Andover code (959–63) apparently sought to fix the price of wool, but it is not clear whether this was intended to be the minimum or the maximum: 'And a wey of wool shall be sold for half a pound (120 pence), and no-one shall sell it for less (or more).'⁴

When raw wool began to be exported is an open question and will always remain so. Many writers have stated their belief that the trade was firmly established before the Norman conquest, but there is no

proof of this.⁵ The only evidence suggestive of a pre-Conquest export trade does not bear close scrutiny. It is a clause in a list of tolls exacted at Billingsgate, London (991–1002) which apparently grants permission to subjects of the Emperor to buy wool: *Praeter discarcatam lanam et dissutum unctum, et tres porcōs vivos licebat eis emere in naves suas*. Besides wool, which had been unloaded, and melted fat, they were also permitted to buy three live pigs for their ships.⁶ Robertson glosses *discarcatam lanam* as wool which is offered for sale by retail, but surely the very word *lanam* is suspect? Wool seems a rather unlikely commodity to have been bought by export merchants through retail outlets. More importantly what is wool doing in this place at all? The tenor of the clause appears to be that the merchants have been granted the privilege of buying limited quantities of certain goods for their own immediate use; by implication they are not to engross the market and take these things abroad for this would make life difficult for the citizens. If we reject wool what article which might be bought by retail should we put in its place? In a trinity which includes melted fat and live pigs the obvious choice is pork or bacon and therefore it is suggested that *lanam* may be a corruption of *lardam* or *lardum*, the latter having a known use in the middle ages as a synonym of *bacon* and *porcum salsatum*.⁷

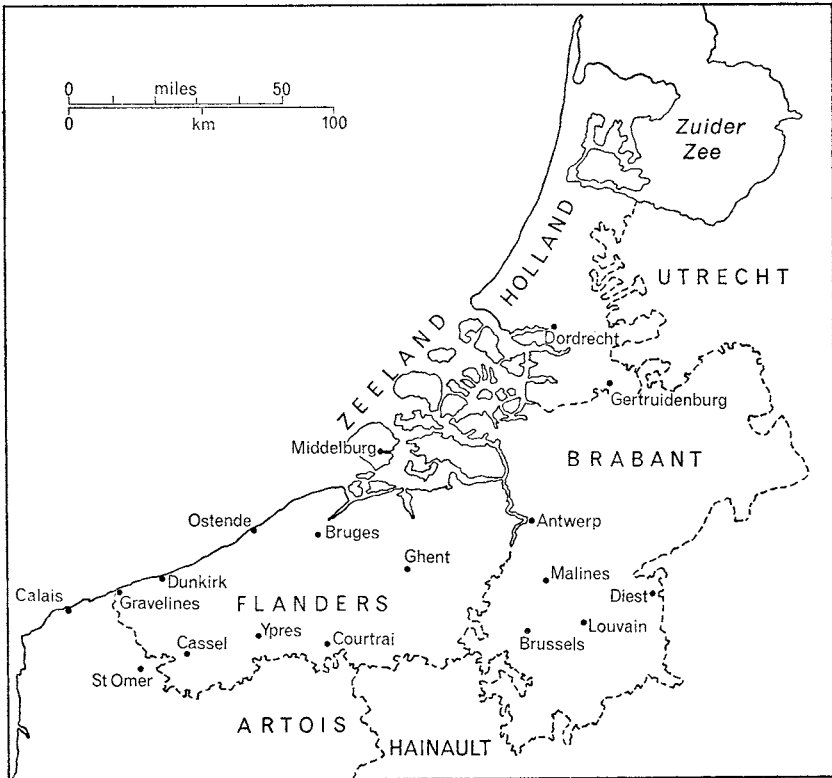
The foundation and growth of an export trade in wool depended directly on the growth of the cloth industry in Flanders and although this was certainly in existence at the beginning of the eleventh century it did not as yet need English wool, for in its early days it was self-sufficient in all manner of raw materials.⁸ The classic thesis of the Flemish cloth industry, established by Pirenne and his followers, states that at a comparatively early date local supplies of wool became insufficient both in quality and quantity for the needs of industry, which thus became dependent upon English wool until, in the later middle ages, it turned to Spanish imports. A later generation of scholars, however, reacted strongly against the suggestion that indigenous wool played little or no part in the economy of the matured Flemish cloth industry.⁹ They have shown that native wool was by no means despised and neglected by the manufacturers and that English exports were probably insufficient to meet all the needs of the Low Countries. While accepting these revisions one must exercise care to ensure that the pendulum does not swing too far in the opposite direction. It would be dangerous to underrate the importance of the Anglo-Flemish connection forged by the wool trade. For at least two centuries the economy of the two countries was interdependent.

According to the classic thesis the Flemish cloth industry was based

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initially in the countryside or in the cloister and was inevitably simple in structure and small in scale. It has been argued that in such an environment there was at that time no scope for large-scale industry, for until the mid-twelfth century merchants, suppliers of the essential entrepreneurial element, were illiterate and so incapable of exercising control over a scattered industry.¹⁰ A prerequisite of the 'great industry' of Flanders was an urban society in which industrial production could be concentrated and easily controlled. The urban infrastructure began to be established at an early date and at the very time that the Normans were conquering England the last considerable gap in the network of towns was being filled. This void was in the barren interior of Flanders which, lacking roads and settlements, separated the maritime towns from those of the Scheldt valley and made communication between the two groups difficult. The deficiency was made good by deliberate comital policy from the reign of Baldwin V (1037–67) onwards. Between the middle and the end of the eleventh century this



region saw the appearance of the towns of Lille, Messines, Ypres, Thourout, Aire and Cassel. Once established they made rapid economic progress, largely as a result of the favour of successive counts, which was expressed particularly in the granting of fair rights. The fairs of Thourout, Ypres, Messines and Lille, four of the five great *frankes fiestas de Flandre*, were all established by 1127 at the latest.¹¹ The towns of central Flanders were among the most flourishing centres of the cloth industry in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Pirenne believed that true towns grew up only as merchants established settlements in which they resided and stored their wares between journeys. The towns expanded with the immigration of artisans who found employment both in supplying the personal needs of the merchants and in providing them with trade goods. Ch. Verlinden, however, reverses the sequence of events, saying 'Le commerce y est ne de l'industrie et non le contraire.'¹² For him the town had its point of departure when groups of artisans, above all groups of cloth workers, were to be found plying their crafts in close proximity. The artisans provided the focal point to which the merchants flocked. According to this thesis a cluster of cloth workers might antedate a town and provide a nucleus for urban growth.

Once the Flemish industry came to need English wool it would have had little difficulty in satisfying its demand, for although in the dark ages Flanders had been commercially backward compared with the regions to the north and the south by the beginning of the eleventh century it had established trade links with England.¹³ This relationship was not permanently damaged by the Norman conquest of the island; on the contrary it was probably strengthened, for Flemish knights played an important part in the Conquest and afterwards were rewarded with grants of land. At the time of the Domesday Survey Flemings were particularly well-established, both as tenants in chief and as mesne tenants, in the eastern counties, including the important wool-producing areas of Holderness, Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire.¹⁴ In the absence of direct evidence it would be unwise to suggest that Flemish ownership of English manors necessarily stimulated the export of wool, but it would be equally foolish to deny that such connections might be valuable to any Flemish merchant disposed to venture here in search of wool.

The location or relocation of the Flemish cloth industry in an urban setting did not necessarily bring about an immediate dependence upon English wool, for at first local supplies may have continued to suffice. The stage at which it became desirable to supplement these with imports was reached when the cloth industry became geared to an

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export market. It was not merely that more wool was needed, it had also to be of a higher quality, for if merchants were to go to the trouble of exporting cloth over a great distance then they had to have a high quality product. Poor and middling cloth could not have borne the costs of transportation and still have competed in price with a similar cloth or with a substitute made nearer at hand. Since English wool was superior to the home-grown variety it came to be preferred in the manufacture of fine cloth. But when did this happen? A sure sign of confidence in the quality of one's wares is the decision to market them under a brand name so that the customer may place a repeat order if he is satisfied. In the case of medieval cloth this meant selling it as the product of a given town, 'cloth of Ypres', 'cloth of Arras' and so forth. This stage had been reached by the 1180s at latest for from that time onwards we find named cloths from Flanders and northern France being sold throughout the Mediterranean and the Levant. The export trade itself was undoubtedly older than this for Italian merchants were in northern France and the Low Countries by the end of the eleventh century, while northern merchants were themselves frequenting the Champagne fairs before the middle of the twelfth century and shortly afterwards they advanced as far as Genoa.¹⁵

Although the Flemings may have been attracted to England in the first instance by the quality of the wool its very abundance soon became a virtue. Nor must one overlook the wools of Wales, Ireland and Scotland which although poorer than those of England were also exported at an early date. From sometime in the late eleventh or early twelfth century to the early fourteenth century Flemish clothiers had an apparently insatiable demand for wool and it is likely that throughout the greater part of this period exports from the British Isles were growing continuously. A number of developments favoured the expansion of the cloth industry in the Low Countries at this time, prominent among which was the rapid growth of population. The increase in population throughout Europe meant that there were many more people to be clothed as well as fed, a task which Flanders was only too ready to undertake as its own population grew beyond the capacity of the countryside and turned increasingly from agricultural to industrial pursuits. The transition was helped by the early maturing of an entrepreneurial class which organised the workers into more efficient industrial units and provided the capital necessary for the import of raw materials. Finally one must not overlook the technological innovations which were made during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, notably the fulling mill, the horizontal loom and the spinning wheel, all of which increased the productivity of manpower and consequently

helped to increase the demand for raw materials, including English wool.¹⁶

Although it is fairly easy to explain the causes which led to the beginning of the export of wool from England it will probably never be possible to say exactly when the trade began. It would be rash to say that wool was never exported before the Norman conquest but, as already stated, it is unlikely that a regular trade existed at such an early date. On the other hand by the reign of Henry I there was probably a thriving trade between Flanders and England which included the export of wool. Traffic between the two countries was apparently frequent and speedy, for in 1127 the news of the murder of Charles the Good of Flanders reached London within two days. The earliest important reference to the export of wool can be dated to the year 1113 – the often told story of the canons of Laon.¹⁷ During the reign of Stephen overseas trade may have suffered a setback, but the strong government instituted by Henry II made it possible for foreign merchants to resume their business. Moreover the king's willingness to concede commercial privileges, such as that granted to the men of St Omer (1155–8), was an even greater stimulus to trade. There can be no doubt that during the reigns of Henry II and his sons the wool export trade underwent a considerable expansion. Unfortunately there is no evidence as to the volume of trade during this period and paradoxically the best indications of its extent and importance are to be found during the periodic disputes between England and Flanders which brought trade to a halt. It has been suggested that one indication of an increase in commercial activity is provided by the greater precision which appears in descriptions of alien merchants in England at the beginning of the thirteenth century, brought about by greater familiarity.¹⁸ Whereas formerly they were described bluntly as *extranei mercatores* or *Flandrenses*, now they are stated to be burghesses or merchants of St Omer, Ypres, Ghent and so forth.

By the end of the twelfth century English wool was essential to the economy of the Low Countries and by threatening to cut off supplies the King of England could influence the allegiances of those provinces. It was Richard and John who first learned to use the wool trade as a diplomatic lever, not Edward I nor Edward III. The lesson had been fully grasped by 1208 when John was able to force the Flemish towns to remain loyal at a time when the Flemish nobles were breaking away from him and going over to the King of France. The history of Anglo-Flemish relations over the previous thirty years or so forms a prologue to that event. When Henry II's sons rose in revolt in 1173 some of those who aided them seem to have been lured by the prospect of ob-

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taining English wool on easy terms. The main figure behind the young king Henry was Louis of France, but the Count of Flanders was drawn into the conspiracy and in the summer of 1173 the Earl of Leicester led an army of Flemings into eastern England. Jordan Fantosme wrote of them:¹⁹

‘We have not come into this country to sojourn,
 But to destroy King Henry the old warrior
 And to have his wool, which we long for’.
 Lords that is the truth: the greater part of them were weavers,
 They did not know how to bear arms like knights.
 But they had come for this – to have gain and fighting.

A little later Fantosme remarks sarcastically,

They gathered the wool of England very late.
 Upon their bodies crows and buzzards descend.

Their aggression rebounded, however, not only upon themselves but upon Flemish merchants who were trading in every quarter of England and in Ireland. The pipe roll of 1173 and those of the next two or three years contain numerous references to the seizure and sale of Flemish goods, including wool in Essex, Sussex and Yorkshire, and woad belonging to ‘fugitives’ who had taken refuge in Leicester castle. Englishmen who had harboured the goods of Flemings were also punished for their misdemeanours.

Following the restoration of peace Flemish merchants appear to have traded freely in England until 1193 or 1194. It is well known that in order to raise money for the king’s ransom the entire wool clip of the Cistercian, Gilbertine and Premonstratensian orders was confiscated. Since the wool had to be converted to cash the government would not lightly have closed the door to the rich Flemish market. On the other hand in order to ensure that no wool escaped its clutches it would have been perfectly natural to place a temporary ban upon the sale of wool or upon its export. Although such a ban would seriously have inconvenienced the Flemings the very fact that they were the major customers of many monasteries made it necessary. If the government offered to sell any part of the confiscated wool to the Flemings insult was added to injury since the latter had probably paid the monasteries in advance for much of it. Evidence for the ban is slight but conclusive. In the pipe roll of 1194 Humfrey *filius* Stanhard and Alan, priest of Louth, made fine of 3½ marks to have the king’s peace for selling wool to Flemings, while Alan Saterdai and Humfrey *filius* Siward gave 3 marks in a similar cause.²⁰ Disobedience by the Flemings of a ban upon the buying and selling of wool would in itself have led

to a restriction of their activities, but the seeds of further discord were probably sown by the levying of a tax of one tenth upon overseas trade, presumably as a contribution to the ransom. This tenth has been strangely overlooked by historians, who have taken the fifteenth levied by John in 1203 as the first national customs duty. The oversight is the more remarkable in that although most of the receipts were probably accounted for at the special ransom Exchequer, records of which have not survived, there are sufficient indications in the pipe rolls to show what was going on. In the pipe roll of 1195 William of Yarmouth accounted for £573 14s 2d from the tenth of merchandise levied in the ports of Norfolk and Lincolnshire. It is possible that this tenth was not a once and for all levy but a regular impost, creating a precedent for John's fifteenth. At any rate Hugo and Adam Oisel of Ypres were willing to give 50 marks to be quit of the tenth for a period of two years commencing at Easter 1195, while in an account covering the period May 1197 to May 1199 Gervase of Aldermanbury, chamberlain of London, included £18 6s 6d received as a tenth of the goods of various merchants paid on 10 days in the 'first year'. In addition to the tenth, or possibly in place of it, Richard exacted fines for licences to trade in particular commodities. Gervase of Aldermanbury accounted for £96 6s 8d for import licences for woad in the two years from Whitsun 1195 and £71 14s 9d for similar licences in the following two years, together with £23 12s 0d for licences to export wool and hides.²¹ Fines for permission to import woad continued to be exacted in the early years of John's reign.

Whatever the cause Anglo-Flemish trade relations suffered a setback in this period. It is difficult to doubt that Flemish goods were among the 'chattels of the king's enemies' sold for £513 5s 9d in Norfolk and Lincolnshire in 1193-4, while similar sales were made in other parts of the country in succeeding years. Some merchants managed to evade the net and Simon Kime was fined 1000 marks for allowing alien merchants to depart with their goods and ships from Boston fair. Less fortunate were those who returned to England in 1195 when Richard appeared to be settling his differences with Baldwin IX, Count of Flanders. In 1196 Baldwin made an alliance with the King of France and Richard wreaked vengeance upon the merchants. Flemish merchants were seized at Lynn Fair and taken as prisoners to Hertford castle while in the same year 45 sacks of Flemish-owned wool, valued at 225 marks, were seized at Hull. Trade did not cease altogether for apart from a large-scale, though illicit, export of grain to Flanders some merchants probably continued to operate under licence. Hugo Oisel, for example, gave 400 marks in 1196 for permission to trade in

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England and in Richard's other lands in time of war as well as in time of peace. Nevertheless the interruption of trade must have had a serious effect on the Flemish economy and the prospect of its restoration was probably as important a factor as the promise of subsidies of silver in deciding Baldwin IX to abandon France and to form an alliance with Richard in September 1197.²²

Although anxious to retain the friendship of Flanders John seems to have visualised circumstances in which it might be expedient to present a show of force towards Flemish merchants in England. This, at any rate, appears to be the implication of his agreement with Nicholas Morel. In 1195 Morel had offered Richard £60 to distrain the Count of Flanders for £343 stolen from him, as was later alleged, by men of Ghent in the service of the widow of Philip of Alsace, the late count. Since Richard found it more profitable to sell arrested Flemish goods on his own account Morel saw none of his money and when John came to the throne he increased the offer to half of the sum recovered. Moreover in respect of 2000 marks stolen by the men of Lille, also in the service of the countess, Morel offered the king two thirds of the sum recovered. It was agreed that goods belonging to Lille and Ghent should be seized wherever Morel might identify them. It is unlikely, however, that any action was taken on his behalf for John soon showed himself favourable to freedom of trade in general and to the Flemings in particular. In March 1200 orders were sent to London and to the coastal shires of the south and east that merchants of all nationalities might freely enter and leave the realm for purpose of trade. At the same time certain Flemish merchants were given personal safe conducts protecting them and their goods from arrest. The following May a general safe conduct was issued in favour of all Flemings which accorded them the same protection as that enjoyed by merchants of the king's own dominions.²³

Freedom of trade did not long survive the outbreak of war between John and Philip of France and restrictions were placed upon the movement of goods and merchants. The most outstanding feature of these was the imposition of a tax of one fifteenth upon imports and exports. The circumstances of the fifteenth are obscure; in particular the dates between which it was levied are agreed upon by hardly any two historians. The earliest record of the fifteenth appears to be a letter patent of 13 July 1202 directed to the justiciar, Geoffrey fitz Peter, exempting Henry Costein and John de Espaygni, merchants of the Earl of Leicester, from payment of the fifteenth levied upon merchants of France and Flanders, from 11 July to Michaelmas 1202. The next reference is a further exemption granted to John de Spanny on 7 June

1203.²⁴ Although it is clear that an extraordinary tax was levied upon merchandise from the summer of 1202 it is not certain who paid it nor how it was collected. The only extant account of the fifteenth is entered in the pipe roll of 6 John, made up in Michaelmas term 1204. This offers the historian three choices of dates, for its rubric reads that William de Wrotham, Reginald de Cornhill and William Furnell, keepers of the fifteenth, accounted *a festo sancte Margarete anni quarti usque ad festum sancti Andree anni vi^{ti} sicut ipsi dicunt. quod tempus secundum annotationem scaccario. incepit in festo sancte Margarete. anni v^{ti} (durans) usque ad festum sancti Andree anni septimi*. The account also includes the issues of the fairs of Lynn and Boston for year 7. The editor of the pipe roll made no comment on the discrepancy in the dating of the account but noted that it covered the period 20 July 1202 to 30 November 1204,²⁵ apparently accepting the dates given by Wrotham and his colleagues and using the Chancery dating of John's regnal year, beginning on Sunday following the feast of the Ascension. If we use Chancery reckoning the alternative dates merely postpone the account by twelve months, 20 July 1203 to 30 November 1205.²⁶ However, the reference to Exchequer annotation suggests Michaelmas (28 September) as the terminal date of the regnal year and this usage reduces the period of account by a full year, 20 July 1203 to 30 November 1204.²⁷ The evidence of a fifteenth having been levied as early as 1202 does not necessarily conflict with the acceptance of 20 July 1203 as beginning the period of account recorded in the pipe roll, for it is likely that for the first twelve months or so of its existence the fifteenth was not the responsibility of the Exchequer. During this first period Wrotham and Cornhill were associated with the collection of the tax but the justiciar was probably the minister ultimately responsible for it. The first attempt to alter the method of administering the fifteenth was a proposal to assign it to Hugo Oisel in return for an advance of 1000 marks, but this arrangement was not carried out.²⁸ Instead Wrotham and Cornhill, with the addition of William Furnell, were confirmed in their responsibility but apparently made accountable at the Exchequer. The change was probably associated with the thorough overhaul of royal naval forces which was effected about this time, since the loss of Normandy had exposed the south east of England to a hostile power for the first time since the Conquest.²⁹ Wrotham, Cornhill and Furnell were made responsible for the navy as well as for the collection of customs, writs being directed to them, apparently indiscriminately, as *custodibus quindene* and as *custodibus longarum navium et portuum maris Anglie*.

Details of the new custom were incorporated in an assise which was