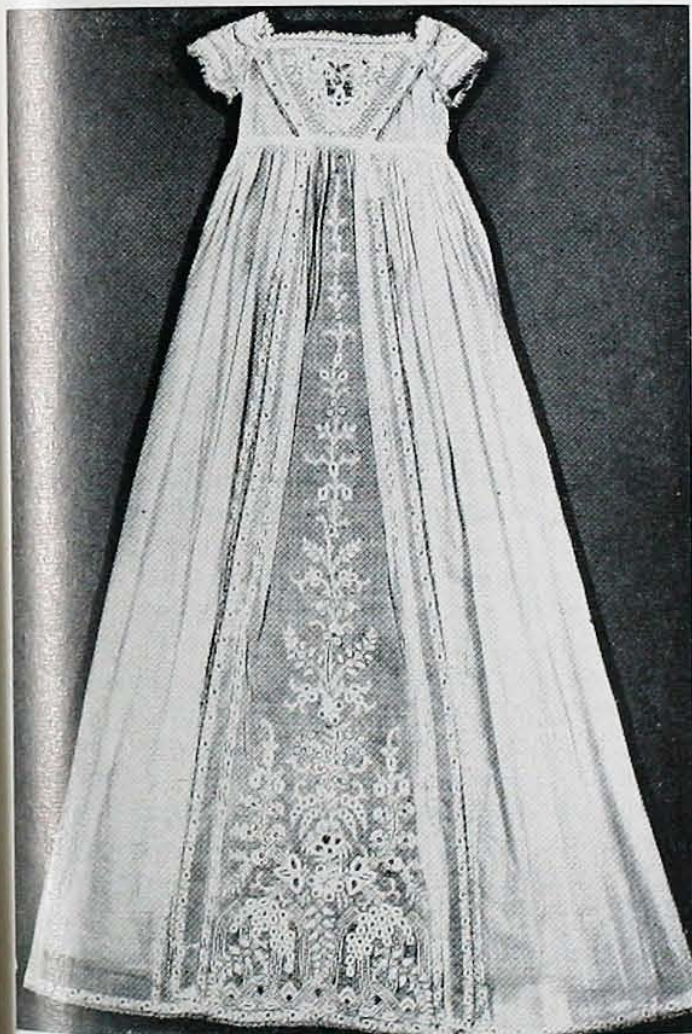


Ayrshire Embroidery

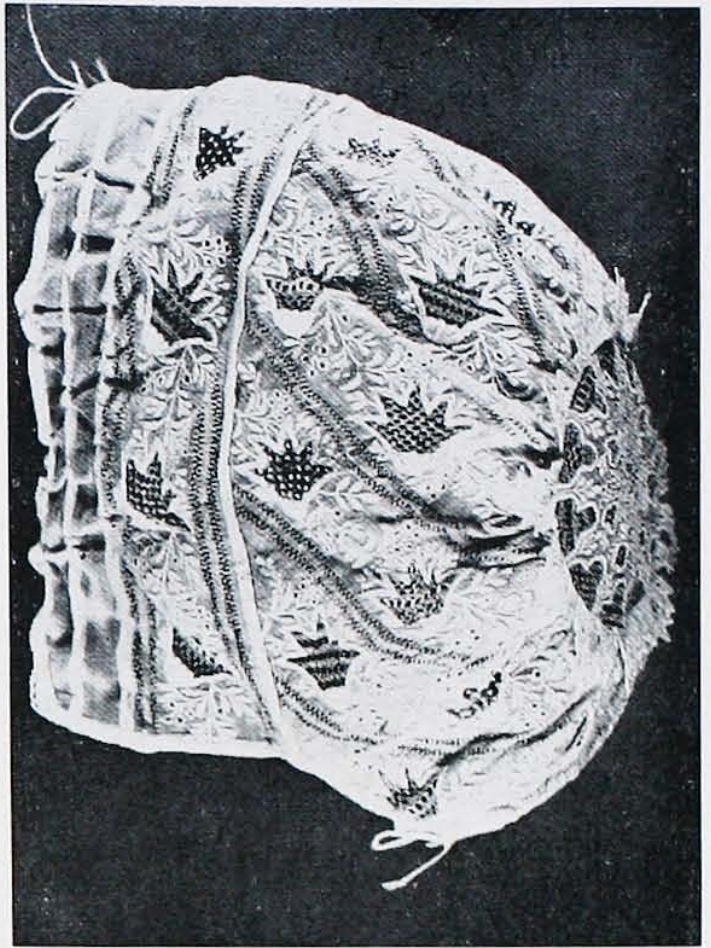
By Margaret Swain

Edinburgh, Scotland.

THE COUNTY of Ayrshire in the south-west of Scotland is famous as the birthplace of Robert Burns and Alexander Fleming, discoverer of penicillin. It has given its name also to a charming white embroidery, worked upon fine cotton muslin, which the countrywomen in Ayrshire and the west of Scotland sewed in their cottages over a hundred years ago. Christening robes and baby caps in this exquisite work are still treasured in many homes in Scotland and Canada today, and some of the finest have found their way into museums to show what fine stitchery could be achieved by countrywomen in the days when the only light to sew by was candle light. We wonder how they kept their hands soft enough for such fine thread when water had to be drawn from the well and tables scrubbed with sand and coarse soap.



Infant's gown presented to Mrs. J. Dalzell in 1841. (By courtesy of the Royal Scottish Museum.)



Infant's cap from collection of the late Mr. John Jacoby.

The spinning of fine cotton started in Scotland about 1780 and at first all the weaving was done on hand looms. The yarn was sent to agents in the country where handloom weavers wove it into white cotton muslin, then in great demand for ladies' dresses. Fashion demanded embroidered muslin dresses, so little girls of six or seven years of age (there was no compulsory schooling in those days) were taught to "flower" the webs of muslin. This was clean, light employment and when they grew up they could continue it in their own cottages where a highly skilled woman working for twelve hours a day could earn about seven shillings (one dollar) a week. Of course values have changed and for her dollar she could buy a ton of coal or seven fowls.

Ayrshire embroidery as we know it today, fine white embroidery on cotton muslin with open spaces filled with needlepoint lace stitches, was used for ladies' dresses, collars, cuffs and handkerchiefs as well as baby clothes. It owes its origin to Mrs. Jamieson of Ayr, an agent who is said to have given work to a thousand women. She was lent a French baby robe by Lady Mary Montgomerie who had brought it back from Italy where she had been with her young husband, an officer in Wellington's army. Mrs. Jamieson copied the fine lace fillings and taught them to the women working for her in their homes. There is a beautiful robe in the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, made for Mrs. Jamie-