Protectionism and the "Economic War" in Interwar Ireland

Gerard McCann
St Mary's College, Queen's University Belfast

Abstract

By the time of the Great Depression in October 1929 the economy of the Irish Free State, Saorstát Éireann, was still suffering fallout from the war of independence, a civil war and the partition of the country, which had dismembered the industrial north-east from the rest of the country. Partition had left the island divided not only politically, but two distinct economic systems had been carved out, with one region agriculturally dominant, the other industrially dependent. The movement for independence in the Free State had been driven by the farming communities across the south and with the creation of a twenty-six county economic policy framework there emerged a systemic bias towards this rural base. The result was a southern administration that had taken on the burden of rebuilding an economy that had been emasculated from its industrial hub, wasted by the war, and given the liability of transition through the Anglo-Irish Treaty (6 December 1921). By the mid-1920s the architecture of the southern Irish economy was such that protectionism had already been silting up economic development, while the internal market had remained frustrated by prolonged stagnation. It meant that the economy of Saorstát Éireann was affected to a lesser extent during the depression than many other regions of Europe – including the designated 'dominion' of Northern Ireland that had been more integrated into the global market. This article will assess

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the extent to which the Irish economy was affected by the Great Depression and how the respective Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil governments managed this period in Irish economic history. It will also connect this to partition itself, ideological bias, the depression in the north and how both governments struggled to address the implications of global economic meltdown.

1. Introduction

With a "natural" inclination towards livestock farming and the property-owning urban middle class, the Democratic Programme that had been rolled out through the 1920s by the Cumann na nGaedheal government under W.T. Cosgrave (President of the Executive Council from 6 December 1922 until 9 March 1932) was assertively agricultural. The Programme reflected a belief that the physical geography of the island of Ireland could play a major part in post-colonial reconstruction, working towards: "…the development of the nation's resources, to increase the productivity of its soil, to exploit its mineral deposits, peat bogs and fisheries, its waterways and harbours". (Mitchell and O'Snodaigh, 1985, pp. 59-60) The policies at the onset of the depression also affirmed the importance of land issues, with the government endorsing continued acquisition from mostly English landowners, thus consolidating republican support in rural areas. The outcome was manifested in the growth in the size of farms during this period, giving some indication of the extent of land acquired and placating larger-farm owners across the south.

The rebalancing of the political system impacted heavily on the economy. With large numbers of urban skilled labour emigrating, the urban power bases of the trade unions had been substantially weakened. The problem of dislocation for the Irish labour movement was further complicated by its lack of participation in policy-making and lobbying in this first administration. The labour movement had been given no role in the development of Saorstát Éireann, and was excluded from shaping the economic policies that were to bring the twenty-six counties into relative independence

from Britain. Beyond the antagonisms surrounding pro and anti treaty positions, this imbalance in labour representation would be an aspect of economic development that would mark economic policies throughout the 1920s. J.C. McCracken, in his *Representative Government in Ireland*, made the relevant point that both the first and second governments (Dáils) were made up of predominantly indigenous commercial and professional groups. This influence could be seen throughout the state's early formation and would define how the government acted in the face of the global depression (McCracken, 1958, pp. 33-34).

Notwithstanding the human cost of almost 3,000 dead as a result of the Civil War, by the mid-1920s the destruction of the infrastructure of the south was substantial, estimated to total £ 30 million. Together with the tens of thousands who were in need of hospital care, the damage to private property and the post-war demobilization of the Free State army, the first decade of the new state was economically fraught – irrespective of the depression. In Dublin alone the estimated damage caused during the fighting was £ 4 million. Food shortages and fear of famine further undermined attempts to consolidate the Irish economy after achieving independence.

2. From Reconstruction to Depression

Cosgrave had entrusted the management of the economy to Ernest Blythe in the Finance Ministry and Joseph McGrath in Industry and Commerce. Both were ideologically reactionary and influenced heavily by protectionist theories, yet paradoxically they utilized free trade rhetoric when they deemed it necessary. Conor McCabe, in *Sins of the Father: Tracing the Decisions that Shaped the Irish Economy*, encapsulated economic governance in the 1920s: "… instead of working towards the creation of a national economy with an independent fiscal policy and having agricultural products for export (not just livestock), the Irish government took to protecting the relatively small percentage of farmers, financiers and administrators who

made a comfortable living from the structural deficiencies of the Irish economy, while consigning the rest of the population to poverty and emigration" (McCabe, 2011, p. 72).

The primary task at hand was for post-war reconstruction and food security. This can be seen through one of the first pieces of legislation introduced, the Land Act of 1923. This transferred remaining landlord holdings to tenants, with the immediate effect being that it pacified areas which would possibly have been opposed to the activities of the new administration vis-à-vis their position in the civil war. It also provided incentives to the farming community to stabilize production, leading to yield increases that perhaps ensured food security throughout the decade. From a development perspective, while agriculture was able to support the indigenous market, export markets continued to suffer. Blythe's position can be gauged from a comment on the need for austerity from his budget speech on 19 November 1930: "… due to our having in the past declined to embark on rash schemes of expenditure and to our having endeavoured to keep in check increased outlay, even on the most desirable objects…. If the same line of policy is pursued in future in, if possible, a more rigid spirit of economy, we shall be able to escape all major difficulties under which so many countries are at present struggling" (Blythe, 1930).

As designed by the Anglo-Irish Treaty, economic divergence between the north and south had been structural. Comparisons between the states could be drawn from this period onward and differences between the economies and the various sectors therein distinguished how the respective governments would deal with external and intra-island pressures. In operational terms two alternative economic systems were being constructed – both in stark contrast to the modernising British economy. For example K.A. Kennedy, in *The Economic Development of Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, looked at comparative average incomes in the 1920s as a percentage of the average British income as an indication of the already depressed nature of the island economy. Whereas the average income in Northern Ireland stood at 61.8 per cent of the British level, the Free

State income was 55.7 per cent. This was less than in the years before the First World War (Kennedy, 1988, p. 26; 21-24). The policies of Blythe and McGrath were in line with the power-base from which they had emerged; bourgeois, rural and suspicious of organised labour. Their instinct – as with that of their civil service – was in favour of the status quo, and this meant adapting the pre-war system to the new dispensation. Even within the farming community, demands to prioritise tillage as opposed to livestock were not acknowledged by the new government.

"Over a period of about 40 years, from the end of the First World War (1918), there was a general movement towards a consolidation in farm size. By the mid 1950s, 45% of farms were in the range of 30 to 100 acres. The total area occupied by both tillage and pasture in the 26 counties, in 1930, amounted to about 11 million acres" (Muck-Ross archives; accessed 12 February 2013).

Investing in tillage would have created more employment opportunities for labourers and small farmers but, as McCabe put it: "Cattle production for export had a tendentious hold on all aspects of Irish agriculture" (McCabe, 2011, p. 78). Livestock farming meant larger farms with fewer opportunities for labour. The government was also resistant to industrial innovation, with the only significant evidence of industrial adjustment being the plan to bring electricity to the west of the island through the Shannon electrification scheme, which was completed in 1929 after four years of construction. This included the atypical engagement of a foreign company, Germany's Siemens, to oversee the project.

While creating larger farms was implicit in the strategic plan of the new administration, there was also the assertion that labour's influence and class divisive issues should be kept to a minimum. "… about one-third of Irish workers in the major insured industries were out of work, roughly the same proportion as in Britain… Labour's position was progressively weakened until its best hope was toppled for mitigation of wage reductions rather than demand wage increases" (Fitzpatrick, 1978, p. 32). Although the Department of Labour had been established in 1919 with a restructured bureaucracy,

the voice coming through from the Department was effectively that of the employers and large farmer-owners. While the Anglo-Irish war had all but destroyed the manufacturing base in the south of Ireland, the restructuring of the economic system reflected the ideological breakup of the period with the post-conflict policy makers largely following contemporary economic orthodoxy from the USA and the continent (for example the Fordney-McCumber and Smoot-Hawley tariff acts of the 1920s). Patrick Hogan, the Cumann na nGaedheal Minister for Agriculture, justified the management of the economy during the early period of the depression: "… the Ministry for industry and commerce prepared the way, producing tables that listed employment gains due to tariffs already imposed and the value of imported items that might be protected …" (Cited in Ó Gráda, 1994, p. 387). Mary Daly in *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity, 1922-1939* reflected on Hogan's strategy, where he: "… urged curbs on local government spending to reduce taxes on farmers, advocating cutting the wages of local authority road workers to prevent pressure on farm labourers' wages, pressed for lower tax levels to increase competitiveness, and urged that farmers be compensated for cost increases consequent on protection" (Daly, 1992, p. 17).

Fiscal policy remained relatively strict, taxation was to be low, the Irish pound (the *Saorstát punt*) was pegged to sterling, and livestock production and its derivatives were primary catalysts for economic regeneration. "Exports were inflated by the effects of the civil war, but cattle exports (the best barometer of rural prosperity) rose by 27 per cent in volume and 12 per cent in value between 1925 and 1930. Butter, fresh pork, and sheep exports rose too" (Ó Gráda, 1994, p. 390; p. 386). In practice, livestock and dairy farming became the measures of economic development for the Cumann na nGaedheal administration.

Due to the underdeveloped manufacturing sector, a Fiscal Inquiry recommended that tariffs should be limited to specific imported, by-and-large *luxury*, items. Hogan designated the slogan for the government's economic strategy: "one more cow, one more sow and

one more acre under the plough". Within the crucial British market this agricultural focus was evident with Irish meat and dairy produce's share remaining stable or rising (McKeever, 1979, pp. 76-79). The importance of livestock and pasture can be seen in comparison to the decline in grain production: "Pasture was dominant, while the cultivation of grain continued to fall as it had since the Great Famine of the 1840s. Just over a million acres of grain crops were grown in 1921, this had fallen to just over 750,000 acres by 1931. In January 1930, the Honorary Secretary of the Irish Grain Growers Association appealed to Irish farmers to maintain at least the 1929 acreage of grain crops… The number of horses also declined slightly during this decade. However, at the same time, pigs and poultry experienced a sharp increase in numbers. The number of poultry rose by almost six million between 1921 and 1931" (Muckross-house archives; accessed 12 February 2013).

The depreciation of agricultural prices worldwide after the boom of the First World War had been further complicated in Ireland with a series of bad harvests in 1923-1924. Livestock and dairy produce were increasing in terms of market share, yet tillage was being reduced year-in year-out. By 1929-1930 it accounted for only 16 per cent of the value of gross output, yet it had been 22.5 per cent at the beginning of the First World War (O'Connor and Guiomard, 1985, pp. 89-97). This imbalance can be seen when set against the amount of government expenditure that was being directed towards agriculture in the early years of the Free State. Other interventions by the government seemed to be out of kilter, such as the 1927 Intoxicating Liquor Act which prohibited the sale of alcohol on Good Friday, Christmas Day, and to the alarm of the general public, Saint Patrick's Day. There was also the creation of a loan scheme for farmers, administered through the Agricultural Credit Corporation. This was one of a number of state agencies that the government established to stimulate economic growth, the most prominent of which were the Dairy Disposal Company and the Electricity Supply Corporation, both from 1927. The benefits of the credit injection would eventually pay dividends and was intended to be practical inve-

stment for farmers. The most formative elements of agricultural policy were the reestablishment of the trade nexus to the British market and the standardisation of produce – such as Irish butter, beef and eggs – to distinguish the quality of Irish products in the wider market. From this sector one product excelled in export markets and helped to sustain the Irish economy through the twenties. This was based around a continual demand for beer, and stout in particular, supplied largely by Guinness in Dublin. Three-quarters of the produce was exported, mostly to Britain, and in 1926 this single product accounted for 30 per cent of: "total manufacturing value added in Ireland" (Kennedy, 1988, p. 47). The freedom of access to the British market for this product ensured its legacy in Irish economic history and to an extent it underwrote the viability of the Irish economy throughout the 1920s.

While the Cumann na nGaelheal party ruled right through the early years of the Great Depression, its drive for reconstruction led it down a path of consolidation, restriction and austerity in the interest of building the Free State. The focus on managing tariffs and searching for compatible markets brought the economy to a position where state control of selective markets assisted the growth of limited, although privileged, sectors. In the drive to reduce tax, the standard rate went down from 25 per cent in 1924 to 15 per cent by 1927; and with the income of farmers being exempted from taxation, this left a fiscal system that was largely dependent on customs and excise duties, and rates on property. Consequently, the imbalance created a mechanism which was heavily reliant on the income from urban tax payers, leaving little revenue for the government to invest in public services. From this period on, the role of the Catholic Church in the provision of social services was fixed in southern Irish society. Its involvement as a quasi-state provider was to have a profound and lasting impact on the development of the society, with aspects of religious practices proving highly controversial and undermining both the development of heath/welfare provision in the state and the Church's role in Irish society.

The censuses from the 1920s catalogued the impact of the read-

justment. While in the 5 years from 1926 until 1931 employment rose by 4,850, an increase of 970 jobs per year, manufacturing industries lost out. The construction industry was conflated while the lack of public investment and restrictions on export-focused industries forced older non-agricultural concerns to close. Alternatively, as Jon Press pointed out in *The Footwear Industry in Ireland 1922-1973*, new jobs that were created during this period were livestock derived and demanded larger numbers of women for the specific types of work that emerged – such as shoemaking (Press, 1989, pp. 33, 46; Daly, 1987, pp. 71-75). Symptomatic of this economic realignment was the role of emigration. This historic problem exacerbated the overall economic situation in the 1920s, as civil war, partition and poverty drove people from the island. Kieran Kennedy calculated its effects in *The Economic Development of Ireland in the Twentieth Century*: "In fact emigration in the decade 1921-1931 averaged 33,000 per annum, higher than the figures for either of the two previous decades, 1911-21 (19,000 per annum) or 1901-11 (26,000) per annum" (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 38). In a Dáil Éireann debate on 19 November 1930, future Taoiseach Seán Lemass highlighted the effects of the haemorrhaging of so many people from the economy, giving an indication of the establishment's understanding of the severity of the situation: "If it were possible to estimate in terms of money the loss which the state has endured in consequence of emigration, it would be shown that the capital loss… would amount to five or six times our national debt" (Dáil Éireann debate, xxxvi, 91, 19 November 1930). In the first decade of the state, emigration had been factored into the strategy for economic recovery; as was the north-south divide and the crude sectarian carve-up of the island that had contributed to demographic shifts and sectarian violence. In the south the non-Catholic population went down by 132,500 from 327,000 to 194,500 between 1911 and 1936 (Girvin, 2006, p. 47).

3. The Northern "Dominion"

Generally, the living standards of people in the north had been better than those in the south due to industrial employment opportunities and better wages. Throughout the 1920s there were openings not available to those in the south and consequently by 1926 there were almost as many employed in the northern six counties (505,000) as in the rest of the island (762,000). Furthermore, in that year there was more than three times the number employed in industry in the north (34,000) than in the rest of Ireland (10,000) (Kennedy, 1988, p. 99). Unemployment averaged 20 per cent during the 1920s and unlike the south when the Great Depression struck, Northern Ireland saw extensive job losses and unemployment rising to almost 30 per cent. The figure was influenced by both its dependence on the economic base in Great Britain (GB) – with exports being severely affected – and the sheer weight of numbers employed in industries such as shipbuilding, rope-making and the linen industry. Exporting had become crucial for the survival of the north's industries, with the link to the GB economy being its lifeline. The aspirations of the south to decouple from the British economy paradoxically led to further differentiation from economic activity in the north. The immediate impact of this could be seen in the border areas where, on the respective sides, businesses and economic activity were forced to look away from the natural hinterland and towards the largest respective northern or southern economic hubs. It was a differentiation that was to depress commercial activity in the border regions for decades to come.

The *Ulster Year Book* from 1929 gives some indication of the composition of the Northern Irish workforce in 1926, with 38.8 per cent of the "gainfully occupied" in manufacturing, textiles, shipping, engineering or building; 221,505 in manufacturing and building alone. 25.9 per cent were employed in agriculture. This represented a substantial industrial workforce concentrated in and around Belfast at this stage. State revenue for 1927-1928 amounted to £10,524,735, coming from both local taxes and transfers from London. Expenditure

amounted to £ 10,303,315 of which 49 per cent went on social services, 12 per cent went on law and order, 15 per cent went on administrative departments, while 14 per cent was returned as an "imperial contribution" to the UK Treasury. Notwithstanding the fluctuating fortunes of the linen and shipbuilding industries, the Great Depression affected the population of the north in one way familiar to the south – it lost a total of 57,500 to emigration between 1926 and 1937 (Harkness, 1983, pp. 46-47). While agricultural production remained relatively stable and adaptable to innovation, the contraction within industry caused more uncertainty within the main cities and towns. Half the population of the north lived in rural areas and after the NI (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1928 and the easing of export opportunities, agricultural productivity expanded, increasing its British market, particularly for potatoes, meat, eggs, orchard and dairy produce. The Milk and Milk Products Act (NI) of 1934 ensured that the production and marketing of agricultural produce from the region was as competitive as possible, covering areas as diverse as animal welfare and hygiene.

As with other places, unemployment in the industrial sectors became problematic as the north moved further into the depression. The linen industry was noticeably exposed, making it vulnerable apart from the fortunes of war production. Furthermore, negotiations between the various northern ministers and the shipping lines had become increasingly tense and this was compounded by the demands of a revived northern labour movement. The shipyard in Belfast had one major casualty of the depression – that of Workman, Clark and Co., on the Antrim side of the lough. Its contracts dried up to the point of closure in 1934, its workforce a mere ten per cent of what it had been in 1924. In an uncharacteristic series of state interventions, with the Loans Guarantee Acts (1922-38) the government was moved to guarantee loans for private enterprise for shipping orders. Another major attempt by the government to manage industrial decline was the introduction of the New Industries (Development) Acts of 1932 and 1937. The Acts took a broader view of the geo-economic location and attempted to draw on international

investment. It worked to a degree in that Short and Harland arrived in Belfast to produce aircraft in 1937, creating more employment – eventually rising to 6,000 – than the shipbuilding industry. The 1930s were, however, a period of industrial decline across the north in comparison to the early years of the century. Its location, its history and its increasingly antiquated production techniques, left the region floundering – until the war. Harkness, in *Northern Ireland Since 1920*, was to comment: "Increasing government caution and red tape, indecision and division of responsibility between ministries, and the inability to offer substantial taxation, wage or insurance concessions compounded Northern Ireland's natural disadvantages of distance, lack of raw materials and absence of cheap power, so that it remained amongst the most depressed areas of the kingdom" (Harkness, 1983, p. 50).

The situation was complicated by the conservatism of the representatives of the old industries sitting in the regional government in Stormont Buildings, their disregard for the social needs of the general public reflecting a lack of understanding of economic development. There was an innate distrust and suspicion of the Keynesianism that was to rescue the wider British economy from depression and a steadfast refusal to implement reform to the education system, or to ensure unemployment benefits. By continuously stigmatising those out of work, it give the administration a harshness that was, in British and Irish terms, Victorian. Furthermore, sending in troops to quell food riots during the depression embittered society to the role of the northern state.

The Northern Ireland government had a tendency to design policies in a peculiar way, in a fashion that was to affect long-term economic growth. It was an approach that was to frustrate the Treasury in London. Sir Richard Hopkins, the Controller from the Treasury, was to comment of this period:

"When the Northern Irish government was set up it was expected that their revenues would be sufficient both to meet their expenses and to provide a substantial contribution to Imperial services (defence, debt, &c) this expectation was realized at first fully and

later in a diminishing degree. Since 1931 Northern Ireland has been in effect a depressed area. So far from receiving any large Imperial Contribution we have invented a series of dodges and devices to give them gifts and subventions within the ambit of the Government of Ireland Act so as to save Northern Ireland from coming openly on the dole…" (Quoted in Bew *et al.*, 1996, p. 62).

Relief schemes – a raw nerve in the historical memory of the Irish, north and south – were to become a feature of life in the north. Just over a decade after being led into the slaughter of the Great War, thousands were being forced to labour on road works for food rations. In 1932 these schemes were being managed by the Ministry for Labour with opposition from the Ministry of Finance due to the cost and, apparently, the embarrassment of having to appeal to the Treasury to support this kind of handout. With unemployment relief, food riots and a stagnating economy, the early 1930s represented a period of intense crisis for the administration. Politician Hugh Pollock spoke of: "…the disgrace attendant on the insolvency of the province" (Quoted in Harkness, p. 53). In absolute contrast, in the middle of the crisis the neo-classical Stormont Buildings were opened by the Prince of Wales on 16th November 1932, with characteristic bullishness by the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, James Craig. Bankrupt as it was, the Ulster government was introduced to the world as a highlight of imperial splendour. In order to pay for itself the Finance Act (NI) 1934, the Valuation Acts Amendment Act (NI) 1932 and the Employment (Agreement) Act (NI) 1936, all attempted to restructure the economy of the north to make it more functional within the remit of the Treasury. This effectively meant the revaluation of the state for the purposes of survival and impacted again on the imperial contribution from Northern Ireland to Westminster. In 1930-31, this contribution was £ 545,000, yet by 1934-1935 it had declined to a mere £ 10,000.

Where the situation was most acute was with the urban communities that were subjected to immense deprivation during this period. In 1932 unemployment stood at 27.3 per cent with both Irish nationalist and Unionist working class communities struggling for

food and basic healthcare. Craig resisted the introduction of a Health Stamp which would have provided sickness benefit, only to concede and introduce it after pressure from London. The Victorian principles of "improvement" and "utility" remained intact in the dominant ideology of Northern Ireland in the 1930s, as could be seen by the provision of outdoor relief, the workhouses and work schemes. The number of people registering their families for relief gives some indication of the levels of poverty: "…relief cases mounted steadily during 1932, the Belfast board of guardians recording 884 in early January, involving 4,008 persons, 1,985 in mid-June, involving 9,144, and 2,612 by 10 September, involving 11,983" (Harkness, p. 69).

For those subjected to relief it meant hunger and the humiliation of seeking food support from the congested relief centers. The hunger was eventually addressed after riots by the unemployed in the Shankill and Falls areas of Belfast and the scare of the emergence of a communist movement which – against the cultural norms – threatened to cross the traditional and officially-sustained sectarian divides in the city. The result was that one third of all government revenue was redirected towards poor relief in 1933-1934. It amounted to some £ 331,494 and led to the creation of an unemployment board through the Unemployment Act (NI) 1934, and the Poor Relief (Amendment) Act (NI) 1937 which enabled poor relief to be distributed at discretion. Problems that remained included: poor sanitation caused by a lack of investment in the infrastructure, energy shortages due to the high costs of importation, almost one in three unemployed, a lack of health services, and housing for a significant minority being unfit for habitation. Together with widespread hunger, public-policy negligence came to blight the lives of the population of the north through the 1930s (Lawrence, 1965, p. 151). Government intervention, however, was unorthodox for an Ulster administration that remained suspicious of the gathering consensus on socialist economics in London. Conversely, with the state of Northern Ireland politically consolidated by the early 1930s, the identity of the region was marked by a series of expensive iconic projects: the Silent Valley reservoir opened in 1933, the Ulster Museum ope-

ned in 1929, and Stormont's own Parliament Buildings with its Greco-imperial garnish was revealed – positioned so that it could be seen across large parts of Down and Antrim.

The death of Edward Carson (the founder of Ulster Unionism) on 22 October 1935 marked the point of confirmation for the northern state, with his requiem service and interment being held at St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast. It signified the coming of age of ideological forces that had been fermented in the chaos of pre-partition and pre-war Ireland. The hegemony had been embellished by heightened fear of the Dublin government and anti-catholicism; each of which shaped policies and bureaucracy alike. Running parallel to the state-sanctioned sectarianisation process, sectarian conflict spread throughout the north in the 1930s, culminating in organised attacks on catholic pilgrims as they tried to return from the 1932 Eucharistic Congress in the south; in July 1935 nine were killed in Belfast in sectarian riots; in March 1936, 514 catholic families were forced from their homes in Belfast alone; and thirteen people, coming from both communities, died in the run up to the most intense fighting of that year. A report by the National Council for Civil Liberties in May 1936, addressing the special powers of the Northern Ireland state, concluded that sectarian and repressive discrimination were implicit to the operations of the regime. The Stormont government's official report on the conflict, *The Disturbances in Belfast in 1935*, predictably blamed "anti-loyal" elements for orchestrating the violence. The Ultach initiative, which comprised of critics of the state from Belfast's intellectual circles, branded the state "totalitarian" and demanded that the British government intervene. In a Europe succumbing to authoritarian regimes, the obscurity of the north – as with the south of Ireland – was rapidly becoming less of a concern for others.

4. Economic War

In the Irish Free State by 1929 there was some quantifiable eco-

nomic growth, but it was marked by the Cumann na nGaedheal government's lack of innovation and vision in regards to manufacturing. Import substitution, gambling on an experimental monetary system, relying on specialisation and comparative advantage within the agricultural sector had levied immense pressures on the economy. The Irish punt had been pegged to sterling and while monetary policy seemed at least to stabilize the financial system, it reflected the fact that sterling represented more than the English economy, but a magnet global currency (Kennedy *et al.*, 1988, p. 26; Ó Grada, 1994, p. 382). This was driven home by the need by the administration to develop a greater knowledge of sterling as a currency and prudence on the part of the Treasury in Dublin. Correspondingly, the administration managed a frugal fiscal policy which was notable for its 1927-1928 reduction in the standard income tax from five shillings in the pound to three shillings, from 25 per cent to 15 per cent. The consequence was the reliance on alternative revenue-raising and hugely unpopular reductions in pensions for the elderly. The party had long conceded its role as revolutionary managers of a new state. Going into the Great Depression and by its last year in power in 1931 it had come to represent a beleaguered establishment intent on maintaining its political base in the middle class and among large-farm owners. Furthermore, for the first time since before partition, the class issue had reemerged as a feature of Irish politics with the establishment of the politically astute Republican Congress.

Until the depression the Cumann na nGaedheal government held, rhetorically at least, to the principles of free trade with deference to its powerbase. The increasingly popular policy of protectionism had been spreading, yet the instinct of the administration had been one of suspicion of government intervention in the economy. Hogan, indeed, had acknowledged the practice of tariff imposition to be problematic in restraining the infectious impact of the international markets at a time of contraction. In *The Economist* in November 1927 he commented that: "We have tariffed, on the admission of anybody who has examined the matter, almost fifty per cent of our ta-

riffable imports. And that is called Free Trade? I accept that definition of Free Trade" (Hogan, *The Economis*t, 26th November, 1927; Ó Gráda, 1993, p. 387; O'Brien, 1936, pp. 360-361).

The opposition Fianna Fáil party only decided to take seats in the Dáil in June 1927, but with a groundswell of support across the Free State it had built up the momentum that was to take the anti-treaty leadership – led by Éamon de Valera and Seán Lemass – into government on 9 March 1932. The new administration immediately set about engaging the old enemies at home and abroad through an 'economic war', based unequivocally on self-reliance and protectionism. Lemass quipped: "The late Government was able to solve, partially, its unemployment problem by the annual emigration of 25,000 or 30,000 young people. That is ended. Those 25,000 or 30,000 people who, in other years, found an outlet through the emigrant ship are remaining at home or have to be provided for at home" (Quoted in Ó'Gráda, 1994, p. 379). In an interview for *Time* on 11 April 1932 de Valera made his combative intentions clear: "Britain", he proclaimed, "cannot frighten us". Although struggling throughout the late 1920s to engage with the broader open-market system in a manner that many European countries had been rejecting, the onset of depression carried the dominant economic and oppositional interests in the south to similar conclusions as Fianna Fáil. As other states began to prioritise and protect indigenous markets by closing down, so did the Irish Free State.

The Cosgrave administration had sought to curb spending and reduce debt, appeal to foreign investment where possible and enhance aspects of the agricultural economy to stimulate economic growth. The de Valera administration after 1932 brought a different type of vigour to the country, changing both the Irish government's political style and its economic priorities. One commentator on Irish affairs, the future US President J.F. Kennedy, saw de Valera and his party as holding on to principles that predated the foundation of the state itself, while continuing to be fixated with the British connection: "De Valera is fighting politically, the same relentless battle they fought in the field during the uprising of 1916, in the war of inde-

pendence and later in the civil war… He feels that everything Ireland has gained has been given grudgingly and at the end of a long and bitter struggle. Always it has been too little and too late… They have not forgotten, nor have they forgiven. The only settlement they will accept is a free and independent Ireland, free to go where it will be the master of its own destiny. Only on these terms will they accept the ending of the partition" (J.F. Kennedy, 1946; quoted in *The Sunday Times*, 14 March 2010, p. 13).

An equally zealous Minister for Industry and Commerce, Lemass quickly came to focus on economic nationalism as the alternative position to the former government. Protectionism was promoted as a means of disengaging with the neo-colonial British economy. The nationalistic motivations of the party at this point cannot be understated and the assertiveness from this position can be clearly read into the key economic strategy document for government, the 1928 *Fianna Fáil and its Economic Policy*. De Valera had drafted this himself: "If the servant was displeased with the kicks of the master and wanted to have his freedom, he had to make up his mind whether or not he was going to have that freedom, and give up the luxuries of a certain kind which were available to him by being in that mansion" (De Valera, 1928, p. 3). Beyond the rhetoric, a series of plans sought to realign the south towards economic closure – the motivations appeared to be deliberately marginalising. *The Statistical Year-Book of the League of Nations* from 1940, the index of international economic performance, noted that between 1929 and 1938, of the smaller European economies, the Irish Free State was the most aggressively protectionist with its imports and exports combined dropping by 64 per cent (League of Nations, 1940, p. 189).

The Finance Act, which was introduced in May 1932, was a first major act of this realignment process in that it imposed *ad valorem* duties of between 15 per cent and 75 per cent on 38 different types of produce and imposed bespoke duties on 5 other types of produce. It meant the demise of certain key British markets and severe restrictions on others. For the Irish population it resulted in a reduction in the variety and quality of goods that were in supply. The rationale

behind the move towards economic disengagement with the British market contained three elements. First, the new administration needed to distance itself from the Cosgrave era by reigniting the civil war sentiments that were familiar to the Fianna Fáil political base. Second, the protectionism that was being advocated around the world post-depression seemed to be logical enough as a means of job creation – a conventional response to systemic economic inactivity. Finally, there was the desire to slow down or halt emigration, which was perceived to be a legacy of colonialism (De Valera, 1928, pp. 7-8). The political hook for the implementation of the policies that were to dominate much of the 1930s was the discourse on independence, the perennial question of Ireland's relationship with Britain.

The anti-colonial engagement accelerated after 1 July 1932 with the government withholding the land annuities that were being paid to London. By simply ignoring the agreement that was made by Ernst Blythe (the former Irish Minister of Finance) and Winston Churchill (the British Chancellor of the Exchequer) in March 1926, de Valera was now able to hold on to the annuities for the Irish Exchequer. The savings amounted to the equivalent of 20 per cent of tax revenue for the state. While the impact on the British economy was minimal, the effects were harder on the population of the Free State. The British response was immediate. On 12 July 1932 (the symbolism of which was not considered in London) an ad valorem 20 per cent duty was placed on most of Ireland's agricultural imports into Britain. The retaliation by de Valera was as quick as 13 July with the Emergency Imposition of Duties Bill – which meant that the Irish government could impose any and further duties as and when it wished. The first to be affected were imports such as coal, steel and iron and as the tussle intensified this list increased. In a sequence of exchanges, quotas, regulations, import licences and tariffs were introduced to strengthen protectionism. In return the British duty on agricultural goods was raised to 30 per cent in November. Export exceptions which had been in place were rescinded by the UK's Import Duties Act (1932). By 1933 the restrictions on cattle importation

came into force, with up to 66 per cent of profits going in duties to the Irish Exchequer. After 1 January 1934 there came complete restriction on the importation of beef and veal from Ireland to Britain. Although the intensity of the dispute was beginning to wane by mid-1935, damage to the Irish Sea market would take decades to repair. As Kieran Kennedy pointed out: "An indication of the range of goods involved may be seen from the fact that in January 1936 the official import list containing nearly 2,000 categories showed over half of them subject to tariffs, many in the range 50 to 75 per cent. The average tariff level rose from 9 per cent in 1931 to 45 per cent in 1936" (Kennedy, 1988, p. 43; Ryan, 1949; Neary and Ó Gráda, May 1991, p. 254). James Meenan reemphasised the point: "… at the end of 1931, the list of tariffs covered 68 articles including 9 revenue tariffs. At the end of 1936 it covered 281 articles including 7 revenue tariffs. These figures do not include a profusion of quotas and other restrictions. At the end of 1937 it was calculated that 1,947 articles were subject to restriction or control" (Meenan, 1970, p. 142; McCann, 2011, pp. 86-101).

The Irish Control of Manufacturing Acts (1932 and 1934) wrestled industrial ownership from the control of foreign nationals, restricting shares and voting rights for business owners who were not Irish nationals. The move attempted to recoup influence for the government over manufacturing that could be proved to be benefiting non-Irish interests. The initiative was also linked to the shift in production priorities across the various sectors of the economy to enhance those sectors that were perceived to be basic to the principle of national self-determination. Government support was also allocated to tillage and in a reversal of the previous government's priorities, smaller farmers were actively encouraged to move away from cattle and sheep production towards tillage.

Other programmes aimed at reshaping the Irish economy into becoming less dependent on imports included the development of quasi-state bodies that were meant to diversify or create innovative alternative products for indigenous supply. The results were to become household names in the evolution of the Irish economy. The

Turf Development Board (1934) provided an alternative source of energy to the importation of British coal; Aer Lingus (1936) from the outset became the dominant Irish air transport service; and Ceimici Teoranata (1934) worked to encourage the indigenous production of chemical goods for the Irish market. In the early years of the Fianna Fáil administration, the ideal of self-sufficiency was the government's primary reaction to the lack of control that accompanied the freer market that had been evident in the pre-depression years, and all that that had entailed. Interestingly, John Maynard Keynes referred to the various moves in the Anglo-Irish economic war as merely "a trend", which would not service the economic interests of either side, but which would particularly affect the Irish economy. He advised against ideologically-driven economic policies, advocating job-creation as the essential dynamic for economic growth. In reference to his *General Theory* – as guest speaker at the first Finlay Lecture at University College, Dublin on 19 April 1933 – Keynes argued that the Irish government should use deficit spending to create jobs, to spend its way out of depression. Furthermore, he cautioned against rejecting the international economic system: "Ideas, knowledge, science, hospitality, travel – these are things which should be home-spun whenever it is reasonably and conveniently possible, and, above all, let finance be primarily national. Yet, at the same time, those who seek to disembarrass a country of its entanglements should be very slow and wary. It should not be a matter of tearing up roots but of slowly training a plant to grow in a different direction" (Keynes, 1933, p. 181).

He also gave a poignant warning that was applicable to Ireland and certain other European states in this period: "Italy, Ireland, Germany, have cast their eyes or are casting them towards new modes of political economy. Many more countries after them, I predict, will seek, one by one, after new economic gods… We do not know what will be the outcome. We are – all of us, I expect – about to make many mistakes… We do not wish, therefore, to be at the mercy of world forces working out, or trying to work out, some uniform equilibrium

according to the ideal principles, if they can be called such, of *laisser-faire* capitalism" (Keynes, 1933, p. 184).

De Valera and his senior economic advisors listened to this classical Keynesian method of kick-starting economic recovery, but decided that a crude tariff system driven by internal market forces would be more effective (Keynes, 1933, pp. 187-190). The model introduced at this period – based on restricting the external market, shifting agricultural produce to tillage and encouraging medium-sized indigenous enterprise – may have stood against cautionary wisdom and stunted natural economic growth in the south, but it had its logic in that it consolidated a political constituency with bias towards small farmers and labour. This was the primary reason behind such policies (Ryan, 1949; Neary and Ó Gráda, May 1991, p. 253).

With de Valera and Lemass introducing an aggressively protectionist economic system for the south, the attempts to sustain jobs by concentrating on the indigenous market adversely affected agriculture. Exchange quotas brought some relief to the sector, but the value of some products (such as livestock) went down by up to 50 per cent between 1932 and 1935. There appeared to have been a fixation on food security, as a base-line economic policy at the expense of growth or speculation on other sectors. Cereal production came to dominate agriculture, leading to skewed economic growth, an imbalance in the allocation of resources and finances, and, significantly the stunting of industry in a more general sense. Criticism of the policies came from across the board, not only from those who had heard what Keynes had to say, but also those advising the government of the day. Economists berated the policies in *Studies*, the *Economist*, and the influential *Round Table*, which pointed to: "… a heterogeneous shambles of tariffs… while the government have been seeking to build up little industries which can never hope to do an export trade, the Danes, with the aid of their better standards and methods, have captured the huge British market" (Quoted in Neary and Ó Gráda, May 1991, p. 251).

The policies did, however, register some changes, in that there was a partial rise in indigenous-sourced employment. The emer-

gence or adaption of companies in this period gave some indication of a shift within industry itself. Working to the legislation and extraneous circumstances, businesses naturally sought to adapt. This is reflected in the number of largely Dublin-based companies that were established during this period.

"Between 1922 and 1930 there had been only one public issue of shares, and that for only £ 15,000. By 1933 there were twenty-four quoted Irish industrial companies with an aggregate capital of £ 5 million. By 1939 there were seventy-eight companies, with a combined capital of almost £ 10 million. The *Times Issuing House Year Book* recorded three new Irish companies in 1933, nine in 1934, twelve in both 1935 and 1936, and ten in 1937" (Ó Gráda, 1993, p. 398).

For these new businesses, imports were needed to bring raw materials for assembly or manufacture in Ireland. The new businesses attempted to circumvent the protectionist legislation to produce goods that did not need to look to the British market. While the structural adaptation affected profitability for businesses implicated in the economic war, it also brought strains to industrial relations. Those in work were witnessing industrial changes which were marked by irregular working patterns, periods of poverty and unemployment. Among the Fianna Fáil faithful though, continuing to confront the British was a popular position to take. The Dublin Chamber of Commerce took a different view altogether of the policies: "The Council regards with increasing anxiety the effect of the present unequal struggle with Great Britain, which, if continued, must lead, by rapid process of financial exhaustion, to the annihilation of our external trade and the permanent and substantial diminution of our internal trade" (Dublin Chamber of Commerce, 12 November 1932, National Archives, 1064/3; quoted in Ó Gráda, 1994, p. 411).

5. Surviving the Depression

The economic tussle with Britain and the ideological flux of the 1930s rocked both politics and economics across the island. The statistics from this period are telling. Even though tariffs and quotas suppressed trade, the economy of the Irish Free State remained dependant on exporting to the United Kingdom. Going into the economic war around 90 per cent of exports were in this direction, and conversely in 1931 up to 7.8 per cent of British exports were going to the Free State. The introduction of the quotas and restrictions on exports, however, led to stagnation in the Irish economy for almost a decade. By the mid-1930s, exports from Ireland were approximately half of what they were worth in the late 1920s. Livestock exports in particular, which were profitable through most of the 1920s, by the mid-1930s were worth one-third of their previous market value. "From 1931 to 1934 the value of United Kingdom imports from the Irish Free State dropped from £ 36,500,000 to £ 17,200,000; the value of United Kingdom exports to the Free State dropped from £ 30,500,000 to £ 19,500,000" (Bromage, 1938, p. 518). The availability of goods other than those produced locally was a supply problem with such goods being either scarce or were commodities, mainly luxury items, that were unaffordable for the vast majority of the population.

Partition continued as the enduring contradiction in de Valera's strategy. Driven by ideological zeal and political pragmatism, he had helped to seal the border in a manner that could not easily be remedied (Neary and Ó Gráda, 1986, pp. 6-8). Border inspections were increased to restrict imports to the south and high tariffs were introduced to undermine competition from the north. The agricultural sector's output went down dramatically and, with prices decreasing by 40 per cent between 1929 and 1935, farming incomes were reduced accordingly. As a consequence smuggling across the border became a national pasttime and "wholesale". *The Economist* on 26 October 1935 joked that up to one hundred thousand cattle from the Free State had become part of "conducted tours across the border".

The illegal trade carried with it significant repercussions: it compounded the economic differentials between the North and the South, creating a system which ensured that partition was effective for the informal economy. The practice became hard to dislodge from the day-to-day commerce of border communities.

Another major casualty of the economic war was the export stalwart of the 1920s and the company that had resuscitated the Irish economy in the years immediately after the Treaty Guinness. As the most profitable manufacturing company in the south it opted to relocate in 1936 to the Park Royal site outside London. The result was a reduction in the brewing of stout in Ireland: "… the decline in Irish exports from 1.3 million barrels in 1935 to 0.8 in 1938 closely matched the increase in output at the Park Royal brewery" (Kennedy, 1988, p. 47). The disappointment was not lost on Guinness itself, which released figures in 1939 almost to prove its historic commitment to the Irish economy: "Total amount of government duties and taxes paid by the Company, from its formation in October, 1886, till June 30, 1938… £ 221,778,000. Maximum amount of government duties and taxes in one year… £ 16,141,559" (Guinness, 1939, p. 32). Capital flight was to become a feature of the Irish economy from the depression onwards.

Industrial productivity did improve by the mid-1930s, but comparative measurement puts growth into the context of the depressed state of manufacturing during the last years of the Crosgrave government. Growth often looked better than it actually was. House-building through reconstructive investment accounted in part for the revival of the construction industry in the mid-1930s. Consequently, there was a quantifiable increase in those who were listed in industrial employment. Indeed, the numbers employed in construction rose between 1931 and 1938 from 110,600 to 166,100 (Kennedy *et al.*, 1988, p. 47). Even so, the unemployment figures continued to be a legacy of a constrained industrial sector, reaching 145,000 during this period. The pragmatic nature of the government's policies, matched with the topical practice of protectionism, brought the economy of the south to a relative level of growth in comparison with other

regions of the British Isles. For the general population income levels were largely unchanged, the variety of goods for sale had been restricted, and as the thirties went on emigration to Britain again became an obvious feature of Irish family and community life. The industries that had been created in the south were primarily established to supply the indigenous market, including "boot factories, canning plants, clothing manufactories and sugar-beet refineries" (Bromage, 1938, p. 519). Heeding the call of many economists at the time, eventually there was a realisation that the Fianna Fáil policies of protectionism and economic nationalism had been stunting Irish economic growth. This was even acknowledged by insiders, such as Seán MacEntee, the Minister for Finance, and purveyor of the policies: "In an effort to cope with unemployment we have increased tariffs, we have fostered tillage, we have subsidized dairying and pigs and livestock production, we have developed the sugar-making industry; we have raised the prices of agricultural commodities, we have shortened the working hours of the employed and given them holidays with pay, we have introduced quota restrictions and established virtual monopolies. We have more regimentation, more regulation, more control everywhere. And more unemployment" (Quoted in Ó Gráda, 1994, p. 420).

The economic policies that had brought the Fianna Fáil administration to power had been exhausted by the late thirties. On 29 December 1937 a new constitution was framed, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, superseding the statutes of the Free State and providing for the establishment of an Irish republic and a presidency. Crucially, in economic terms, the new constitution for the state of Éire provided clauses which could facilitate negotiation and accommodation with the British Government, and any of the British Commonwealth of Nations. The British response was nonchalant: "… to treat the new Constitution as not effecting a fundamental alteration in the position of the Irish Free State, in future to be described under the new Constitution as 'Eire' or 'Ireland'" (Quoted in Bromage, 1938, p. 521). Within the South the possibility of a European war brought an air of caution to the practicalities of managing an economy under such geo-political

uncertainties. The outcome was a strategic recalibration of the relationship with the British government and, in economic terms, the "phony war" of the mid-thirties came to a close with the Anglo-Irish Trade Agreement of 25 April 1938. The unusual premise to the agreement was that the republican party in Ireland, Fianna Fáil, had entered into a mutual agreement with the British Government, based on "relations of friendship and good understanding" (Irish Government, 1938, preamble). De Valera even visited London to work on the strategy, with the relationship becoming so involved that Craig – who was still at the head of the Stormont administration – called an election in mid-1938 to justify the existence of the northern state to London. While economically de Valera was hailed at this point by Fine Gael (the renamed Cumann na nGaelheal) as a convert to the "open" economy by relaxing the relationship with London, political unification of the island remained very much on the table. "Partition", de Valera told the *New York Times*, "… was one of the first things discussed at the London conference and one of the last. To the extent that there is no reference to partition in the agreement" (de Valera, *New York Times*, 6 May 1938). On the ending of the economic war, Lemass was adamant: "The economic war is over. It is, I suggest, a complete waste of time to discuss who began it. The important fact is that we won it" (*Dáil Éireann*, lxxi, 183, 28 April 1938).

6. Conclusion

The post-colonial engagement that marked the economic interaction between the Free State and Britain in the 1930s followed a familiar pattern of positioning, personality conflicts, retraction and hardship. It was caught within the context of the Great Depression and an ideological flux that was to crash into a world war. However, the protectionist path taken by de Valera's administration proved to have a high level of support at the time within republican areas of the south and typified the form of the island nation that de Valera had wanted to establish. This post-colonial fight also highlighted the awkward rela-

tionship that the Irish were forging with Britain and the disregard that the British establishment had developed for its smaller neighbour. Patrick McGilligan in a Dáil Éireann debate on the economic war on 13 November 1935 reflected on the problem bluntly: "It was to a great extent a bluff… We had these catch cries of the minister that we could get markets elsewhere; that Great Britain must buy; that we could cut off British supplies and would have Great Britain on her knees in no time… The Fianna Fáil government has made a demonstration to the world of what exactly our strength is" (*Dáil Éireann*, lix, 850, 13 November 1935). The Great Depression impacted on the Irish economy, North and South, as it did on other European countries. However, in comparison with other regions its blow was arguably softened by the fact that the Irish economy was already in a state of depression, operating from a situation where – certainly in the South – it was still in a state of post-war reconstruction, resistant to external influence, fixated with food security and agriculture, and ultimately suspicious when it came to economic innovation.

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