Irih "Combinations" and Economic Activity in the Latter Half of the Eigteenth Century

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The purpose of this paper is to briefly discuss the activities of the antecedents to Irish trade unionism and economic conditions in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Specifically, the intention is to examine through principally secondary source material the evidence relating to the identification of a separate and succinct Irish workers' movement, which many writers have indicated exists as distinct from British labour activity.

The recording of Irish labour history has suffered at many hands from a lack of objectivity. Much effort has been expended to present a case for a distinctly Irish trade union movement from its very inception. Most of the proponents of this point are interested in establishing a "Gaelic connection" or a nationalistic concept to foster a historical background to their own social or political objectives. This short discussion attempts to place labour activity in Ireland in a realistic historical context.

In the year 1800, Dublin was the second city in the British Islands, and Cork had a population of close to 75,000. The steam engine had been in Ireland since 1740, and the arterial bisection of the country by a network of canals, combined with the increasing number of roads, and the changes in banking and economic organisation, made the country appear to be poised for industrial advancement and increased economic prosperity.

The prerequisite social overhead capital appears to have been sufficiently abundant to fulfil the requirements for continuing growth, development, and industrial expansion. Closer analysis, however, reveals that this prosperity of the late 1700's was, in part, induced by the special free-trade provisions enacted by the British Parliament in 1783. « The history of Irish industries in the eighteenth century falls naturally . . . into two periods;

first, the years 1700-1780, during which the restraints on Irish trade were in full operation, and which may be called the "period of restriction", and second, the years 1780-1800, during which Irish trade was unfettered by any serious restraints and may be called the "period of freedom" ».[1]

The growth of one important but relatively small industry in Ireland at this period, namely glassmaking, gives an example of how enterprise prospered under the new legislation. Although traditionally assumed by some historians as an indigenous Irish industry, glassmaking, with the notable exception of two minor Dublin glasshouses and one in Belfast (which in fact had moved from Bristol earlier in the century) all established before 1783, was almost wholly the province of imported English workers and materials to take advantage of the new freedom of trade and the fact that raw materials were taxed by weight in England and Scotland but not in Ireland. In discussing the establishment of the Cork glasshouse, Dudley Westropp said that « all the men and materials were being brought over from England, just as they were for the Waterford glassworks ».[2]

Other industries, however, were not so successful in establishing themselves as glassmaking was and Beckett states that during this period attempts were made to produce other commodities in Ireland and mentions particularly hats, gloves, carpets, soap, candles, paper, and crockery, but that in general the Irish goods were inferior in quality and dearer in price than the comparable British imports.[3] The primary industries were brewing and textiles, with the latter being the most significant employer of labour. The major economic concentration in the country, however, was agricultural and the rising prosperity can also be attributed to an increase in the price of agricultural commodities.

The organisation of working men that existed before 1800 reflected the skill of the crafts required such as carpentry, saddlery, tailoring, bootmaking, etc. In other words, the first groups of employed men to organise in Ireland were of the same types of working men as to organise in Great Britain, the German states, and the United States, i.e., skilled workers, primarily on the journeyman level, who were concerned with two problems in addition to hours of work and wage rates. These problems concerned the rules as to the number of apprenticeships in their respective trades and the fear that with the increase in commercial activity and the continued growth of market centres and transportation facilities, the capital require-

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1 O'Brien, George A. T., *The Economic History of Ireland in the 18th Century*, Longman Green, Dublin, 1918; p. 180.

2 Westropp, M. S. Dudley, *Irish Glass, An Account of Glass-Making in Ireland from the XVIth Century to the Present Day*, Herbert Jenkins Limited, London, 1921; p. 115.

3 Beckett, J. C., *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966; p. 243.

ments and opportunity to achieve "master" status were diminishing. Boyd comments that « In the eighteenth century the trades of Dublin were still regulated by guilds that had been set up in the Middle Ages; but whereas the mediaeval guilds had been fraternities of masters, journeymen and apprentices, the guilds of the eighteenth century were controlled entirely by the masters, who alone claimed the right to be called guildsmen ».[4]

"Combinations" of working men, specifically, the organised activity of journeymen and in some cases apprentices against masters, had appeared very early in the XVIIIth century and Clarkson [5] states that combinations of workingmen, artificers and others had been illegal under Irish law, as well as English, since the XVIth century. « When, however, early in the eighteenth century journeymen's associations became serious thorns in the masters' sides, recourse was had, in Ireland as in England, not to the courts, but to the respective Parliaments. In 1729, aware of certain irregularities in the payment of wages and in other matters, confronted by the necessity of determining the dimensions of bricks, and learning that "unlawful clubs and societies" had "presumed contrary to the law to enter into combinations, and to make by-laws and orders, by which they pretend to regulate the trade and the prices of goods, and to advance their wages unreasonably, and many other things to the like purpose », the Irish Parliament passed « An act to prevent unlawful combinations of work-men, artificers, and labourers employed in the several trades and manufactures of this kingdom, and for the better payment of their wages: as also to prevent abuses in making of bricks, and to ascertain their dimensions ».[6] The Act of 1729 was not effective in stemming the growth of combinations and evidence shows that it was "notoriously eluded". Another act passed in 1743 attempted to improve matters by stating that « assemblies of three or more persons, not legally incorporated, meeting for the purpose of making by-laws, etc., respecting journeymen, apprentices, or servants, were unlawful »[7] but this act also proved inconsequential. Additional laws encompassing sections

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[4] BOYD, ANDREW, *The Rise of the Irish Trade Unions 1729-1970*, Anvil Books Ltd., Tralee, 1972; p. 15.

[5] CLARKSON, J. DUNSMORE, *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*, Columbia University, New York, 1925. This is probably the singularly most authoritative source on early Irish trade unionism. Although it contains some minor errors in the discussions of late 19th- early 20-century union activity (see for instance Jerome Judge's unpublished Ph. D. thesis, *The Labour Movement in the Republic of Ireland*, University College, Dublin, 1955), it is an example of meticulous and careful research which does much to dispel the myths and half-truths surrounding 18th-century and early 19th-century union activity in Ireland. Its treatment of 18th-century legislation is especially helpful and Professor Clarkson's contribution to the area of Irish economic history, although not always acknowledged by footnote, is certain to be regarded as outstanding.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

against combinations were enacted in 1756, 1757, 1763, 1772, 1780, 1787, and 1792, all by the Irish Parliament as distinct from the British Parliament and all apparently proved relatively ineffective.

Because combinations of working men were illegal, the organisations were secretive in nature and only fragmented historical records of them remain. In 1824, however, a select committee of the British Parliament met to consider the laws against combinations of working men. Evidence was taken from Dublin workers and employees by the Lord Mayor and transcripts of this show that a member of the Carpenters' Society testified that his association was upwards of 60 years old — in other words, it had been founded in or about 1764.[8] This date is accepted by most historians as the beginning of modern Irish trade unionism.

The first recorded incidence of strike activity in Ireland appeared in a petition by the Master and Wardens of the Corporation of Hosiers which stated « . . . in the Year 1749, the Journeymen Stocking-makers entered into a Combination, and formed a Bill of Rates, therein specifying the Prices to be paid by their Employers for the different Kinds of work then made in the City of Dublin; to which Bill or Rates they compelled their Employers to sign their Assent, by turning out and refusing to work until their Demand was complied with; and even by sending back to some Master-Hosiers their Frames, which are all made of Iron, under a heavy Shower of Rain ».[9] So, it appears that the first recorded strike activity in 1749 not only involved refusing to work but a minor touch of industrial sabotage as well. The only other mass industrial action accurately recorded in XVIIIth century Ireland and of enormous magnitude considering the characteristics of industrial employment in these times was in the aforementioned carpenters' testimony as reported by W. P. Ryan. « The carpenters could only recall two previous instances, one in consequence of a bill introduced into the Irish House of Commons, about 1789, they thought, and designed to reduce artizans' wages, as well as to enact that seekers for work should have "characters" from previous employers. Protesting workers assembled in the Phoenix Park, and marched thence with wands in their hands to the House of Commons. There were from 15,000 to 20,000 men in the procession. The bill was not passed ».[10]

The anti-combination laws in Ireland were more numerous than those in England but were seen to be less effective. The repeated renewal of anti-combination legislation has been used by the Webbs and other social historians influenced by them, as well as certain authors motivated by considerations of political expediency rather than historical accuracy, to establish a separate

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[8] RYAN, W. P., *The Irish Labour Movement from the Twenties to Our Own Day*, The Talbot Press, Dublin, 1919; p. 47.

[9] *Journal of the House of Commons of the Kingdom of Ireland*, Vol. X: 120.

[10] RYAN, W. P., *op. cit.*, p. 51.

and distinct labour movement in Ireland, significantly different from Great Britain, and in some cases uniquely Gaelic, as early as the time before Union. Although George O'Brien, probably the most noted authority on 18th-century Irish economic history, completely revised his treatment of combinations in his *Economic History of Ireland from the Union to the Famine*, the perpetuation of this "differences" myth continues. Surely the final word concerning this supposed difference must belong to Clarkson. « Although these facts, and the fact of a separate legislature in Dublin up to 1800, necessarily resulted in differences in detail, nevertheless, fundamentally there is no discernible difference between the Irish and British industrial working classes and their respective reactions to the rise of capitalist industrialism and to the introduction of the factory system. The difference is a matter of degree, not of kind ».[11]

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[11] CLARKSON, J.D., *op. cit.*, p. 59.