

# **BOOM OR BUST? THE ECONOMY OF LIMERICK COUNTY AND CITY DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

By

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Limerick in the early twentieth century was a county with a wealth of natural advantages. It was at the centre of Ireland's premier dairying terrain at a time when farming in all its forms remained the country's most important industry. Co. Limerick also enjoyed the benefits of access to a large and important port in Limerick City. The following article examines how this rich land met with the economic challenges of the coming of the First World War, 1914-18. Much fine work has been done on the battlefield experience of the Irish during the war but, as Keith Jeffery has stated, 'the economic side of things is gravely understudied.'<sup>1</sup>

## ***The Rural Economy***

The Great War brought to Ireland, and particularly Irish farmers, the probability of great profits. It was expected that as with the Napoleonic and other wars of the British Empire the country would once more assume the mantle of granary to Britain's army and populace. The disruption of war to trade, with especially the new threat of the submarine, threatened food supplies that in turn led to higher prices and profits for animal meats and dairy products. The price of Irish agricultural produce roughly doubled during the course of the war and, even when set against the increased costs of materials and labour, the Irish farmer is understandably perceived as one of the few beneficiaries of that odious conflict; the poet Patrick Kavanagh writing of rural Ireland of this period in his autobiography, *The Green Fool*: 'The price of farm produce soared. Everybody was in good humour. They had money in every pocket.'<sup>2</sup>

Yet the submarine menace threatened Ireland, too. In the decades before the war, while exporting much of what was produced, an increasing amount of what the country actually

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffery, K *Ireland and the Great War* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Kavanagh, P. *The Green Fool* Penguin, London, 1988, p. 58.

consumed had been imported. Thus, immediately upon the outbreak of war much attention in Ireland turned to the question of food and food supply. This was true of other European countries also, the German authorities quickly establishing a programme of travelling cookery courses, public lectures, and articles in local papers to educate the populace, and the women especially, on the 'domestic arts' and wartime nutrition.<sup>3</sup>

To counteract any possible future food shortage the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) warned farmers against selling off their breeding stock despite the temptation of high prices. A steady food supply would serve the double function of enabling Irish farmers to maximise the profits they could secure from supplying Britain and her army while also keeping Ireland fed at a time when other countries struggled to adapt to the new war setting. There were early reports of a 'grave' food scarcity in Austria,<sup>4</sup> for example. From the beginning Irish farmers were moved to centre stage where it would prove difficult for altruism and capitalism, their patriotic urges and financial instincts, to co-exist without conflict.

Agricultural prices rose steeply with the war. In Limerick, for example, in mid-1915, calves that had earlier had been sold at 33 shillings were going for upwards of £4 10s and even £5.<sup>5</sup> The financial lot of the farmer improved but at the expense of the ordinary consumer who struggled to pay the new, skyrocketing prices. It is no surprise that much recrimination came the way of the farmer with accusations of profiteering and price hiking. However, farmers themselves tried to shift the blame to the middlemen, the merchants and the shopkeepers, disingenuously claiming that the 'producer suffered at one end and the consumer at the other end.'<sup>6</sup>

Despite the monetary gains available, it was obvious to those concerned with keeping the Irish food supply buoyant that previous trends in farming practice needed to be changed. Foremost among the necessary adjustments was a return to tillage and the sowing of cereal crops (wheat, oats, and barley). Again the DATI took an early lead, distributing leaflets on the need to till more land and to do so as quickly as was possible. Wheat in particular promised to be both scarce and expensive with so many of its major producers at war and so Ireland was faced with the choice between growing her own or purchasing wheat, and other vital crops, at exorbitant rates the next year and years.<sup>7</sup> However, the seventy years from the Famine to the Great War had seen a revolution in Irish land use, one that would not easily roll back. Where previously tillage had dominated now pasture reigned supreme.

Limerick had not been as affected as other areas during these years of change. This was because along with Kilkenny, South Tipperary and Mid- and North Cork, it formed the dairying heart of Ireland and dairying in general had held its own during the second half

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<sup>3</sup> Allen, K. 'Food and the German Home Front: Evidence from Berlin', *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914-18*, Braybon, G. ed., Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2005, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> *Limerick Leader*, 19 August 1914.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 21 June 1915.

<sup>6</sup> Russell, G. 'The Self-Supporting Community', *Studies*, Vol. 7, June 1918, p. 301.

<sup>7</sup> *Limerick Leader* 4 November 1914.

of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as resolutions passed at meetings of the Limerick and Clare Farmers' Association pointed out, Limerick, too, in time of war, needed to turn more to tillage than heretofore.<sup>9</sup>

A corollary of the importance to Limerick of dairying was the importance of creameries (both co-operative and privately owned) to the economy of the county. During the latter part of the nineteenth century the creameries took on the work of butter making from the farms and 'more than in any other county' the milk supply of Limerick went to creamery. Limerick dairy farmers also benefited from the production by Cleeves of condensed milk at their Limerick and Tipperary factories.<sup>10</sup>

With creameries to the fore Limerick was a stronghold of the co-operative movement that had been growing since the 1880s and which really thrived between 1913 and 1920 when, with around 1,000 societies, the turnover rose from £3.5 million to £14.5 million.<sup>11</sup> Limerick indeed was where the movement first really made its mark. In 1889 the first co-operative society, a creamery, was established in Drumcollogher, Co. Limerick; Horace Plunkett, the leader of the co-operative movement, making use of his friendship with Limerick's Lord Monteagle in that instance. Within a few years there were fifteen more creamery societies established including nine in Limerick.<sup>12</sup> In 1913 Limerick had fifty-three co-operative creameries, each handling an average of 400,000 gallons of milk per annum.<sup>13</sup> In September 1914 Horace Plunkett repaid the farmers of Limerick in a manner when he defended them from charges that they were to blame for the increased prices of goods.<sup>14</sup>

Like the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, the co-operative movement and its leaders saw quickly the opportunities the war presented for Irish farmers with the production and trading ability of rival countries, such as Denmark, greatly hindered. Nevertheless, they were also as concerned that Ireland's own food supply be looked after first and so launched a 'Grow more Food' campaign, an integral part of which was increased tillage. In November 1914 Horace Plunkett, speaking to the Limerick and Clare Farmers' Association, said it was 'incumbent on the large farmers to increase their tillage area.'<sup>15</sup>

The co-operative movement had always preferred tillage to pasture farming but their previous exhortations had been without success.<sup>16</sup> In 1914, however, with theirs now one voice among many - with government ministers, the DATI, and many newspapers all

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<sup>8</sup> Meghan, P.J. 'Social History', *The Limerick Rural Survey, 1958-64*, Newman, Rev. J. ed., Muintir Na Tire Rural Publications, Tipperary, 1964, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> *Limerick Leader* 23 September 1914.

<sup>10</sup> Meghan op. cit. pp. 155-7.

<sup>11</sup> Bolger, P. *The Irish Co-Operative Movement: Its History and Development*, Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 1977, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Ó Gráda, C. 'The Beginnings of the Irish Creamery System, 1880-1914', *Economic History Review*, Vol. 30, May 1977, p. 299.

<sup>14</sup> *Limerick Leader* 23 September 1914.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* 16 November 1914.

<sup>16</sup> Bolger op. cit. p. 256.

favouring a return to tillage - the appeals seemed to work. The Limerick County Committee of Agriculture and Technical Instruction announced in December that 'in West Limerick there was ten times and in East Limerick five times more wheat sown this year than in 1913' with similar results nationwide.<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes, though, the lure of easy money proved too difficult for farmers to resist and supplanted their supposed duty to country. In January 1915 it was reported that many Irish farmers were engaged in the 'short-sighted and reprehensible,' albeit profitable, 'practice of selling in-calf heifers to the butchers for slaughter.' The Limerick and Clare Farmers' Association abhorred such practice and argued the need to keep food supplies and livestock resources high in case of a long war, a notion Europe was only just beginning to come to terms with having expected initially a conflict of short duration.<sup>18</sup> But money was a strong attraction and in May that year it was reported that the export of store cattle was continuing at an alarming rate despite the myriad of warnings.<sup>19</sup>

An element of profiteering, perhaps, also played a role in the Irish butter trade's failure to perform as well as expected during the war, which had clear ramifications for Limerick and its prevalence of creameries. Dirty butter being sent over to England was a regular complaint and with competition from rival countries temporarily decreased the DATI warned Irish farmers they were losing a great opportunity to gain a firm hold of the English market. The poultry industry was similarly warned, bad eggs too often being shipped across the Irish Sea. This latter practice reflected poorly on Limerick, too, as during the war the poultry industry, particularly co-operative poultry societies, had grown vigorously in the county.<sup>20</sup> Many Irish and Limerick farmers it seems were more intent on the easy fast buck ahead of worked for and sustained profit.

Another problem for those involved in agriculture, one that raised its head in the midst of the demands for more tillage, was that of the shortage of rural labour. Tillage was incomparably more labour-dependant than pasture farming and the rise of the grazier in Ireland had seen a concurrent fall in the number of farm labourers. A number of schemes were put in place to try to alleviate the situation, among them the establishment of courses at the Munster Institute to educate women on how to work on the farms. However the problem was not easily overcome.

In June 1915 the amount of land under tillage was 83,000 acres greater than 1914. For the DATI this increase was 'not quite as good as could be desired.'<sup>21</sup> The news was not all bad, though, and in November Limerick farmers were praised for having already sowed their winter wheat and for giving over to that 'very valuable' crop more land 'than they devoted to it at any time since the decline of tillage began.'<sup>22</sup> By the time of the 1916 harvest the results relating to agriculture remained mixed. The good news was that there was practically no export of cattle from the south of Ireland, an important

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<sup>17</sup> *Limerick Leader* 4 December 1914.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* 27 January 1915.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* 28 May 1915.

<sup>20</sup> Bolger *op. cit.* p. 285.

<sup>21</sup> *Limerick Leader* 27 August 1915.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* 5 November 1915.

improvement.<sup>23</sup> The tillage question, though, remained far from satisfactory. In Limerick the crops were reported to be doing well but in the country overall the acreage under tillage in 1916 was actually down on the year before.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, the simple encouraging of farmers to till more land was not working. A worsening of conditions during the severe winter of 1916-17 brought matters to a head, food and fuel supplies beginning to dwindle in Ireland, as throughout Europe; food riots and an infamous 'turnip winter' befalling Germany.<sup>25</sup> In response the British government took decisive action and in January 1917, using the Defence of the Realm Act, compulsory tillage was introduced in Ireland. Among other effects this required every landholder with ten or more acres of arable land to till one tenth more on top of what was tilled in 1916, unless that brought the total land tilled to over fifty per cent of the land owned. Furthermore, the Corn Production Act of 1917 set the prices and controlled the export of crops.

The aftermath of the new legislations saw meetings held all over Limerick. There was broad agreement that some spur to redouble the efforts of Irish farmers to till the required land was needed and in Glin one priest even used the Sunday morning pulpit to urge his parishioners to comply with the new orders.<sup>26</sup> Resistance came from the Limerick and Clare Farmers' Association who pointed out how compulsory tillage would exacerbate an already troubling rural labour shortage before concluding at another meeting that it was simply impossible to carry out the new tillage scheme.<sup>27</sup> A meeting of Kilmallock farmers concluded similarly that the scheme was 'not fair or practicable.'<sup>28</sup>

To allay the concerns of Limerick farmers DATI officials visited and lectured on the new food production scheme.<sup>29</sup> In an effort to stave off the labour shortfall Limerick County Council made available to farmers all its employees engaged in road and public works for a month to help them meet the new tillage requirements.<sup>30</sup> Despite these efforts a DATI report in March 1917, which hailed the success of the tillage scheme in twenty-seven of the thirty-two counties, numbered Limerick among the five counties to make only indifferent progress since the scheme's inception.<sup>31</sup> The next month a shortage of ploughs was proffered as a reason for Limerick's failings; a situation the DATI declared had been remedied.<sup>32</sup>

The general picture by the time of the 1917 harvest was reasonably positive. Irish farmers were again being praised. There was a tremendous increase in the acreage under cultivation and the output of corn was 545,000 tons higher than the average annual output

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* 11 August 1916.

<sup>24</sup> Daly, M. *The First Department: A History of the Department of Agriculture*, Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 2002, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Offer, A. *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, pp. 28-9.

<sup>26</sup> *Limerick Leader*, 24 January 1917.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* 2 February 1917.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* 7 February 1917.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* 16 February 1917.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* 5 March 1917.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* 16 March 1917.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* 6 April 1917.

between 1904 and 1913.<sup>33</sup> Recalcitrant landowners remained, however, and in Newcastle West a number of farms were taken over by DATI officials on account of their failure to comply with the tillage orders. For the *Limerick Leader*, the people of the town had ‘no sympathy with shirkers who closed their ears to the call of the country for bread.’<sup>34</sup>

On the labour front important changes occurred in 1917. Rural labourers remained scarce with a loss of workers to munitions factories and other jobs in England. However, those that remained in Ireland began to take advantage of their newfound scarcity value and to organise for better conditions. Land and Labour Associations that had fallen by the wayside were re-affiliated, for example in Mungret and its surrounding districts.<sup>35</sup> Later in the year agricultural workers from all over country would for the first time join in large numbers the ‘One Big Union’, the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, revitalised again after the ordeal of the 1913 Lockout.

The office of the Director of National Service in Dublin advertised across the country for farm labourers and tried to get farmers to fill in forms estimating the number of workers they required to bring in the harvest.<sup>36</sup> In Limerick a scheme was set up to get local juveniles to go and work on farms.<sup>37</sup> But the shortfall remained and Irish workers kept travelling over to England, the *Limerick Leader* reporting in September a two-week long exodus of labourers out of Limerick. This is hardly surprising given that the papers were full of advertistements for work in England, well paid and including travel expenses.<sup>38</sup> Not even the establishment of an Agricultural Wages Board (AWB), part of the Corn Production Act and including a Limerick man, Timothy Raleigh, enticed sufficient labour to the fields. In Limerick there were protests at the rate (22s 6d) fixed as the minimum wage for some districts of the county.<sup>39</sup>

The next year and the labour problem remained near intractable, especially with another increase in tillage ordered, a further five per cent on top of the 1916 total. Farmers went to the Limerick Labour Exchange but found that many of the younger boys who had applications in at the Exchange refused to work in the countryside even at the new reasonable wages. For the *Limerick Leader*: ‘Their parents would be acting in the best interests of these boys ... by inducing them to choose good openings in rural districts instead of “blind ally” employment at far lower wages in the city.’<sup>40</sup>

With so many men still being lured over to work in England, and the threat of conscription now looming, the Limerick and Clare Farmers’ Association passed unanimously in the spring of 1918 a resolution that the agricultural labour available was not sufficient to save the crops planted and sent a copy to the Prime Minister, David

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<sup>33</sup> Daly op. cit. p. 58.

<sup>34</sup> *Limerick Leader* 25 May 1917.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* 16 March 1917.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* 29 June and 16 July 1917

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* 18 May 1917.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* 22 October 1917.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* 29 October 1916.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* 25 January 1918.

Lloyd George.<sup>41</sup> Later in the year Limerick farmers even threatened to down tools in protest against the prices fixed by the Food Controller for the 1918 harvest.<sup>42</sup> However, the harvest was brought in and within a month, as the *Limerick Leader* informed its readers: ‘The last shot has been fired in the world war and the curtain, as a consequence, rings down on the most hideous and horrible drama in human history.’<sup>43</sup>

The end of war did not see the end of compulsory tillage. Nor, at first, did it see the end of rural prosperity. But eventually, as had been prophesied, the relative boom turned to bust and by 1920 Ireland, as well as being in the midst of political and military ferment, found itself mired in economic despair. Compulsory tillage was finally lifted in early 1921 having already become less and less enforceable in the turmoil of the time. On the whole Irish and Limerick farmers made money out of the war but they have since been criticised for responding too lackadaisically at the time to the opportunities presented and failing to create a platform for future prosperity. Unable to make good on the collapse of the Danish and Dutch markets at the start of the war they later lost out to the rise of Canadian and American imports into Britain.<sup>44</sup>

### ***The Harbour and the City***

The port of Limerick was vital to the development of the local economy throughout the nineteenth century. The port facilitated the rise of many of Limerick’s most notable merchant families and businesses. The onset of war in 1914 and, in particular, the new threat of the submarine brought business at Limerick port to a near standstill. German submarines were no phantom threat, the most famous among many victims being the *Lusitania*, sunk in 1915. Their threat was brought even closer to home in March 1916 when the *Arranmore*, of the Clyde Steamship Co., was sunk carrying bacon from Limerick to Glasgow, albeit without loss of life.<sup>45</sup> The whole west coast of Ireland was deemed too dangerous by many commercial shippers, the submarine menace affecting the ports of Galway and Tralee along with Limerick.

Limerick harbour suffered doubly with the war. At first a scarcity of work meant that despite many dockers going off to fight those men that remained still found it hard to get work and so drifted away to other jobs when they could, in Ireland or abroad. This trend continued until the main problem became the scarcity of labour even when ships did come into Limerick. By the summer of 1915 boats that would normally be unloaded within twenty-four hours were taking up to four and even more days with the unsurprising result that owners threatened to stop sending vessels to Limerick. Coal merchants in Limerick wanted to get over the labour shortage by erecting a crane to do the work of the men rather than see trade lost to Waterford or Cork.<sup>46</sup> Another effort to

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* 22 April 1918.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* 21 October 1918.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* 11 November 1918.

<sup>44</sup> Ó Gráda, C. *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 389.

<sup>45</sup> *Limerick Leader* 22 March 1916.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* 14 June 1915.

alleviate the loss of trade came in October 1915 when the Limerick Harbour Commissioners tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the government to set up a sugar depot at Limerick port, the city being one of the largest centres of the sugar trade in the country.<sup>47</sup>

The situation steadily worsened, particularly with regard to the importing of coal. A large meeting took place in February 1916 attended by representatives of the Corporation, Harbour Board, the Trades Council, coal merchants and dock labourers at which depressing figures were given: 'For the first seven weeks of 1913 the imports were 7,634 tons; in 1914, 11,114 tons; in 1915, 10,943, and in 1916, 2,907 tons.' Tempers were frayed and the coal merchants and labourers took pot shots at each other, the workers concerned about what the introduction of a crane meant for their futures.<sup>48</sup>

The dockers got support from the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council who argued the introduction of a crane would be 'a betrayal of the 500 quay labourers who are at present fighting in France and the other fronts.'<sup>49</sup> The Trades and Labour Council, comprised of members of a myriad of societies from the Bakers' Society through the Engineers' Society to the Stonecutters' Society, further stated that with clerks, shop assistants, professionals and tradesmen all guaranteed their positions upon returning from military service, were the dock labourers to be 'the only class to find poverty their reward and their employment gone when they came back from the war.'<sup>50</sup>

The arguments continued and so did the decline of Limerick port. In 1917 further figures revealed the devastating extent. One report showed that only 271 vessels entered Limerick in 1916 against 336 for 1915, bringing a consequent loss of 4,642 tons of cargo. Another report, relating to coal imports also showed a fall, with 3,175 tons coming into Limerick between January and February in 1916 and only 2,843 for the same period in 1917.<sup>51</sup> The work continued to fall away and it could have been no great surprise that it was soon reported that fifty to sixty Limerick workers, mainly dockers, had just left for England.<sup>52</sup>

All through 1917 the scene stayed difficult. More remedial ideas were thought up, such as the creation of a railway link between the harbour and Limerick railway station, but without action and to no avail. Then the situation deteriorated further. First, late in the year, the coal workers at both Limerick docks and railway station went on strike. Then, in early 1918, the dockers turned to sabotage and rolled a lorry-borne electric crane into the Shannon.<sup>53</sup> However, despite all the trouble, as soon as the war was over trade to the port picked up quickly. Within weeks of the cessation of hostilities the local press was reporting a 'gratifying stir in shipping activity in Limerick is just now becoming

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* 18 October 1915.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.* 21 February 1916.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* 1 March 1916.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* 3 March 1916.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* 14 March 1917.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* 20 April 1917.

<sup>53</sup> O' Connor, E. 'Active Sabotage in Industrial Conflict, 1917-23', *Irish Economic and Social History*, Vol. 12, 1985, p. 60.

noticeable. There are at present in port three steamers discharging cargoes, giving employment and helping to stimulate local trade'<sup>54</sup>

### ***Flour Mills***

Limerick's flourmills were among the local industries that had long benefited from the port. It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that Limerick became an important centre for importing and milling wheat, 'foreign imports reaching and surpassing those of Cork from the 1890s.' Limerick milling was associated mainly with two family firms, Russell's and Bannatyne's, while good canal and rail links ensured the wheat was easily forwarded to mills in Galway, Clare and Tipperary.<sup>55</sup> The turn of the century brought a brief decline in Irish milling and in Limerick this period witnessed a concentration of mill ownership, the Goodbody family buying up controlling interests in both Bannatyne's and Russell's, in 1894 and 1903 respectively, although the mills continued to operate under their recognised names. Irish and Limerick milling revived thereafter, until hit by the war.

Long dependent on imported American wheat the Limerick mills were naturally affected by the fall in the harbour's trade, a shortage of flour being reported in several parts of Ireland during the war. Equally to the detriment of the mills were wartime government orders and controls, in particular restrictions on trading distances. The two big Limerick mills had depots all over Munster and into Connaught but could not during the war use or capitalise upon them fully. To allay the problems caused by the new controls the period 1914-18 saw the renovation of many of the smaller country mills that had fallen out of use over the previous decades. The DATI encouraged these efforts to make areas self-sufficient but although perhaps over two hundred such mills were put back to work it was reported that many were of the 'rattletrap variety.'<sup>56</sup> With the end of the war most of these small mills disappeared again as quickly as they had re-emerged. But the bigger Irish mills did not recover from the blows of wartime controls. Competition from English mills became too strong during the 1920s and in 1929 Goodbody's sold up to Ranks, a British company.

The flourmills were not the only Limerick industry to feel the pinch of war. With attention focused on essential trades such as transport and food production the confectionary industry throughout Ireland suffered. In Limerick the Stewards biscuit factory at Bedford Row had to cut nearly a hundred jobs in the summer of 1916.<sup>57</sup> Building work in Limerick also disappeared at the start of the war, as it did throughout Ireland and Britain, and the city quickly became a very sorry place in which to live, the pressure of high prices and high unemployment hitting especially the ordinary workers and the poor, one reporter commenting in February 1915: 'Here in Limerick there are many who are able and willing to work walking around without anything to do while

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<sup>54</sup> *Limerick Leader* 27 November 1918.

<sup>55</sup> Bielenberg, A. 'A Survey of Irish Flour Milling, 1801-1922', *Irish Flour Milling: A History 600-2000*, Bielenberg, A. ed., Lilliput Press, Dublin, 2003, p. 75.

<sup>56</sup> Jones, G. 'The Introduction and Establishment of Roller Milling in Ireland, 1875-1925', *ibid.* p. 128.

<sup>57</sup> *Limerick Leader* 16 June 1916.

there are hundreds, if not thousands, of others in a parlous condition owing to the exorbitant prices of food and fuel.’<sup>58</sup>

### ***Bacon Factories***

The home to several bacon curers of world renown - such as Matterson’s, O’ Mara’s, and Shaw’s - Limerick’s bacon trade was also impacted on by the war, negatively in the main, although Denny’s won substantial war contracts to supply the British army. Denny’s, founded in Waterford in 1820, had from 1872 a factory in Limerick and was by the time of the First World War the largest bacon curer in Europe.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, the years leading up to the war had seen a noticeable decline in the pig industry in Ireland, the ‘decrease in the supply of pigs available to the bacon curers’ resulting in a Commission being set up to inquire into the industry’s problems.<sup>60</sup> The war seemed to revive the pig trade at first. Pigs, like all farm animals, were fetching better prices than had recently been the case and this encouraged their rearing. However, this was not necessarily good news for Limerick’s curers as with higher prices available in England than in Ireland the export of pigs grew exponentially during the first years of the war, denying the curers their most basic raw material. In 1914, 57,000 pigs were sent abroad while the number for 1915 was 100,000. This rose again to 145,000 for just the first eight months of 1916.<sup>61</sup>

A further blow to the Limerick curers came in 1917 when the Food Controller fixed the prices of agricultural goods and set the maximum price of English bacon at 150 shillings per cwt but that of Irish bacon at only 140s per cwt, thus encouraging the continuance of the trend to export. The *Limerick Leader* railed against this ‘monstrously unjust’ discrimination against the Irish produce that threatened the entire Irish bacon industry ‘of such vital interest and importance to Limerick city and county ... with serious if not disastrous consequences.’<sup>62</sup> These fixed prices ensured pigs continued to depart Ireland and left Limerick, the ‘chosen home of bacon-curing,’ to suffer the consequences. The Limerick Pork Butchers’ Society pointed out that in the fifteen weeks up to 17 January 1918 more than 60,000 pigs were exported to England ‘to the detriment of Irish bacon curers of Limerick, Cork, Waterford, and Dublin, and the workers employed by them, not to speak of the grave injustice to the country in sending food from our shores during the present crisis.’ The *Limerick Leader* reported that where previously the number of pigs killed in Limerick stores was often between 400-500 a day the same establishments had become ‘practically idle, getting only 18 or 20 pigs some days.’<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* 24 February 1915.

<sup>59</sup> Prendergast, F. ‘The Decline of Traditional Limerick Industries’, *Made in Limerick: History of Industries, Trade and Commerce*, Vol. 1, Lee, D. & Jacobs, D. eds., Limerick Civic Trust, Limerick, 2005, p. 11.

<sup>60</sup> *Limerick Leader* 23 November 1914.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* 15 September 1916.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* 16 March 1917.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* 8 February 1918.

Better news arrived in March 1918 when the Food Controller revised upwards the price of Irish bacon while another order prohibited the export of live pigs except under license from the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction.<sup>64</sup> But with prices still higher in England a black market in the pig trade emerged and in October a public meeting was held in Limerick over this practice that was ‘to the detriment of the Irish bacon industry, and in a marked degree to the Limerick bacon curing industry which gives employment to a large number of men and women in the city.’<sup>65</sup> Even as the war ended problems remained, some employees of the Limerick bacon curers going on strike over wages in mid-November. There was also concern over whether the pig industry would return to its pre-war decline. For the curers 1918 ended reasonably, at least, when in late December the government restrictions were removed and they could move on unencumbered by artificial controls.<sup>66</sup> By the late 1920s Limerick’s bacon factories were fairly buoyant again, terminal decline only setting in from the 1960s.

### *Military Contracts*

The war brought naturally a torrent of war and munitions contracts in Britain but Ireland, especially outside of Belfast, saw just a trickle’s worth. Those War Office contracts that came went mainly to the textile and clothing trades. Limerick got a share of these, the Limerick Clothing Factory producing uniforms for the British, Australian and American armies. Other companies in Limerick to receive war contracts included Denny’s, McMahon’s timber yard, and the tobacco manufacturer Spillane’s.

It was the more profitable munitions contracts that city and business leaders throughout Britain and Ireland particularly eyed up, or else the establishment of shell and other war related factories in their locales. On this front the summer of 1915 held some promise for Limerick. First a deputation from the Limerick Industrial Association (founded 1903) went before the Limerick Chamber of Commerce and urged that they work to have munitions ‘made in Limerick by local skilled men instead of having the men and work sent away to England.’<sup>67</sup> Next the Limerick Industrial Association organised a Citizens War Munitions Committee, the first of its kind to be established in Ireland, and entered into a correspondence with the Ministry of Munitions, forwarding to the Director General of Munitions ‘detailed descriptions of the machines and tools now actually in use in the various foundries, engineering works, garages, etc. of Limerick.’ In turn they asked to be provided with ‘official specifications of all species of war munitions’ required.<sup>68</sup>

Matters progressed well, a Captain Kelly of the Ministry of Munitions visiting Limerick and a delegation of the local Munitions Committee going to England to meet with more officials.<sup>69</sup> Later a Captain Downie of the then just established Irish branch of the Ministry of Munitions came down from Dublin and was shown around the foundries and

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* 27 March 1918.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* 2 October 1918.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.* 30 December 1918.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* 5 July 1915.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* 14 July 1915.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* 28 July 1915.

engineering works of the city by MP Riordan, Honourable Secretary of the now re-named Limerick War Munitions Committee. Downie was impressed with the modern plant and machinery he found in Limerick and saw no reason why much munitions work could not come to the city.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, the efforts exerted bore fruit and in a letter to the *Limerick Leader* Riordan announced that the first war munitions contract for Limerick, valued at over £4,000, had been placed with the engineers Messrs JP Evans & Co. of Thomas Street.<sup>71</sup> Within a month Riordan was writing again, giving notice that the Admiralty had sent to the Limerick War Munitions Committee ‘samples of a table letter basket made of white willows and a sample anchor buoy made from oak and bound by six iron hoops, the whole being encased in a cage of hemp and wire ropes.’ Riordan felt sure the manufacture of such articles would be within the scope of Limerick’s ‘basketmakers, coopers and ship chandlers’ and advised that anyone wanting to tender for their construction could inspect the samples at his office.<sup>72</sup> It was here, however, that the hopes of making Limerick a centre of munitions work began to fade. No buoys or baskets were made for the Admiralty; indeed no more munitions work came to Limerick at all.

Ireland on the whole fared poorly with munitions contracts. Limerick, however, was left even more bereft than its neighbours. Waterford and Galway, along with Cork and Dublin, at least got National Shell Factories. The *Limerick Leader* blamed a lack of a spirit of enterprise among its populace for the city’s failings.<sup>73</sup> This, however, is too harsh a judgement and weight must be given to factors outside the control of Limerick’s business community, Emmet O’Connor writing, for instance, that Unionist and British ‘employer determination to freeze nationalist Ireland out of lucrative war contracts kept the south de-industrialized.’<sup>74</sup> A writer to the *Limerick Leader* saw equally sinister motives at work, describing the practice of conscription ‘by the effective method of [either] starving or joining the army’ as ‘the political motif [*sic*] in not giving this country her fair share of war orders,’ even as representatives of ‘the large English munitions factories’ arrived in Limerick to induce the men over, leading ‘Limerick girls ... also ... to believe money can be picked up on the floors of English shell factories as easily as shells from the Irish sea-shore.’<sup>75</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

Boom or bust, Limerick had its share of both during the First World War but regrettably more of the latter. While the farmers in the county fared reasonably, and some even did very well, still they had to work hard to meet the onerous demands of the compulsory

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.* 30 August 1915.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.* 8 September 1915.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.* 1 October 1915.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.* 17 April 1916.

<sup>74</sup> O’ Connor, E. *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-1960*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1992, p. 96.

<sup>75</sup> *Limerick Leader* 10 November 1916.

tillage orders of the latter years of the war, orders that were passed for the benefit of Britain and not Ireland. Wartime decision-making was done in London with British interests to the fore and it has been estimated that for 1918 the extra food produced in Ireland saved the British taxpayer more than £1.2 million.<sup>76</sup> The situation in Limerick City was far graver, almost unremittingly bleak. In this regard Limerick was similar to France where the people of the countryside fared far better a fate than their fellow-citizens in the often demoralised cities.<sup>77</sup>

A handful of war contracts came to Limerick City but their impact was well negated by widespread profiteering and excessive costs of food, fuel, and services. A meeting of the Town Tenants' League in February 1915 complained of prices 'far-reaching for the ordinary working man to cope with'; meat, sugar and bread up ninety per cent since the war's start, and coal more expensive than in Cork, 45s per ton compared with 34s 6d.<sup>78</sup> In November 1916 a letter writer protested the almost 'prohibitive' food prices, warning starvation 'lies before the workers in the city during the coming winter.'<sup>79</sup> Later that month readers were urged to give all they could spare to the local Fuel and Blanket Fund given the inordinately high proportion of poor in the city.<sup>80</sup> In the summer of 1917 a shop on Mungret Street was besieged by women as the sugar supply fell to near nothing, the police having to intervene and ration the sugar out among the baying crowd.<sup>81</sup> A couple of months later a Cooked Food Depot was set up to feed the poor.<sup>82</sup> Adding to all this penury was a prevailing climate of industrial unrest as from late 1917 through to the end of the war and beyond Limerick, like much of Ireland, witnessed a wave of strikes, everyone from doctors to dockers and plumbers to bakers going out and many more threatening to follow in the pursuit of better wages to match the vastly increased cost of living.

One glimmer of light in the long, depressing days of war, however, were the picture shows that defied the odds to do a roaring trade; a number of Charlie Chaplin films and DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* proving especially popular.

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<sup>76</sup> Daly op. cit. p. 58.

<sup>77</sup> Smith, L.V. Audoin-Rouzeau, S. & Becker, A. *France and the Great War, 1914-1918*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 66.

<sup>78</sup> *Limerick Leader* 15 February 1915.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* 10 November 1916.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* 20 November 1916.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.* 18 May 1917.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.* 1 August 1917.

