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The Economic Crisis in Ireland in the Early 1780s

Summary

(Ph.D., Dublin, 1982. Raymond Refaussé)

The early 1780s in Ireland were years of great change, and are remembered principally as years of considerable political and constitutional developments. But such developments were inextricably bound up with a series of adverse economic fluctuations which were so acute that they induced one of the most severe economic crisis of the 18th century. These economic fluctuations provided much of the motive force for the radicalism of the times.

Signs of a deterioration in economic life appeared in autumn 1781 as the coincidence of poor export demand for linen and provisions was reflected in bad fairs, the emergence of unemployment in Dublin, and rising autumnal exchanges. The emergent crisis became more evident in 1782 with a fall in the balance of trade in 1782/3 and the maintenance of adverse exchange rates for much of 1782. Linen exports fell sharply, internal demand deteriorated and the harvest failed. Mounting rent arrears and high food and fuel prices increased distress and by late 1782 there was a severe crisis, especially in the north and Dublin, which was deepened in early 1783 by the appearance of a credit crisis. The end of the war, in spring 1783, brought a short lived upturn in economic life, but there was no postwar boom. Rising exchanges in autumn 1783 reflected depression in linen and provisions exports, and with mounting rent arrears, spreading urban unemployment and a second bad harvest, distress was widespread by late 1783. Depression in trade and manufacture together with the need to import grain induced another credit crisis in early 1784 which was more acute and longlasting than that in 1783. The coincidence of the deepest and most widespread distress with the highest exchanges and most acute banking crisis marked the nadir of the crisis in summer 1784. Recovery, although evident from August, was not assured until after the 1784 harvest, although even then its progress was uneven.

The legacy of the crisis was evident from the changes which it wrought in the nature of the Irish economy; in the emergence of a separate regional identity in the N.E. of the country; and in the continued search by the British government for a satisfactory basis for Anglo-Irish relations.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN IRELAND

IN THE EARLY 1780s

by

Raymond Refausse

Ph.D.

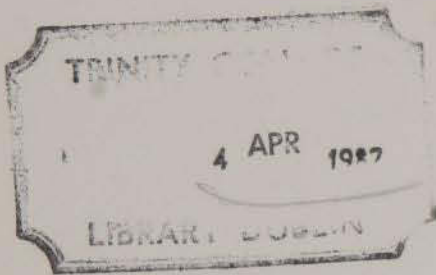
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I declare that what follows is my own unaided work, and that it has not been submitted for a degree of any other university.

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My principal debt, however, is to my supervisor, Professor L.M. Cullen, who has commented patiently, constructively and at length on successive drafts of my work.

ABBREVIATIONS

Abercorn's Agents' Letters	Earl of Abercorn's Irish agents' letters.
Ashton <u>Econ. Fluct.</u>	T.S. Ashton <u>Economic Fluctuations in England 1700-1800.</u>
Ashton <u>Econ. Hist.</u>	T.S. Ashton <u>An Economic History of The 18th Century.</u>
B.L.	British Library.
Blake letter book	Out letter book of Blake, N.L.I. Ms. 9944.
<u>B.N.L.</u>	<u>Belfast Newsletter.</u>
<u>C.E.P.</u>	<u>Cork Evening Post.</u>
<u>C.G.</u>	<u>Clonmel Gazette.</u>
<u>Commons' jn. Ire.</u>	<u>Journals of the House of Commons of the Kingdom of Ireland.</u>
Cullen <u>Anglo-Irish Trade</u>	L.M. Cullen <u>Anglo-Irish Trade.</u>
Cullen <u>Course et Piraterie</u>	L.M. Cullen Ireland and Irishmen in Eighteenth Century Privateering in <u>Course et Piraterie.</u>
Cullen <u>Econ. Hist.</u>	L.M. Cullen <u>An Economic History of Ireland since 1660.</u>
<u>D.G.</u>	<u>Dublin Gazette.</u>
<u>D.J.</u>	<u>Derry Journal.</u>
<u>F.D.J.</u>	<u>Faulkner's Dublin Journal.</u>
<u>F.J.</u>	<u>Freeman's Journal.</u>
Ferguson letter book	Out letter book of Andrew Ferguson, Londonderry, P.R.O.N.I. D.1130
H.C.	House of Commons.
Hardman letter book	Out letter book of Edward Hardman, Drogheda, T.C.D. Ms.4812.
<u>Hib. Ch.</u>	<u>Hibernian Chronicle.</u>
H.O.P.I.	Home Office Papers, Ireland, P.R.O.
<u>I.H.S.</u>	<u>Irish Historical Studies.</u>
J. Andrews letter book	Out letter book of John Andrews.

<u>Jn. R.S.A.I.</u>	<u>Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquarians in Ireland.</u>
<u>L.C.</u>	<u>Limerick Chronicle.</u>
M. Andrews letter book	Out letter book of Michael Andrews.
M/F papers	Massereene/Foster papers, P.R.O.N.I. D.207; D.562.
Moore letter book	Out letter book of John Moore, agent on the Annesley estates, Co. Down, P.R.O.N.I. D.2309/4/4.
N.L.I.	National Library of Ireland.
<u>Parl. reg. Ire.</u>	<u>The Parliamentary Register (Ireland).</u>
P.R.O.	Public Record Office, London.
P.R.O.I.	Public Record Office of Ireland.
P.R.O.N.I.	Public Record Office of N. Ireland.
S.P.I.	State Papers, Ireland.

NOTES

1. Year dates styled 1782/3 refer to the Irish fiscal year ending 25 March.

Year dates styled 1782-3 refer to the calendar year.

2. All imports and exports statistics, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from P.R.O. CUST. 15.

3. All assize of bread statistics are quoted in lbs. oz. drms.

4. Exchange quotations are, on occasions, styled thus:

8 7/8%

i.e. eight and seven eighths per cent.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The early 1780s were years of momentous change in Ireland. In the few short years between 1780 and 1785 the country moved from war to peace, from legislative dependence to constitutional independence, and from economic depression to the brink of prosperity. This period is remembered principally as one of great political and constitutional activity - the war in Europe and America, the winning of constitutional independence, Roman Catholic relief, proposals for parliamentary reform. Contemporary preoccupation with politics was certainly strong and those two great mirrors of public opinion, the press and parliament, reflected this fascination, reporting in great detail and debating at length the course of the war abroad and the activities of the Volunteers at home. Subsequent histories tended to accentuate this emphasis on affairs political and George O'Brien's comments on the 18th century as a whole might have been applied particularly to the early 1780s when he wrote

The eighteenth century in Ireland was conspicuous for so many political events of supreme importance, that it is inevitable that . . . the more prosaic and less picturesque details of the economic condition of the people should be relegated to a secondary position.¹

But the political and constitutional developments of these years, consuming though they were at the time and significant though they came to be viewed, were inextricably bound up with a series of adverse economic conditions which were so acute that they induced one of the severest economic crises of the century. A crisis which produced the largest deficits in the balance of trade to date in the century, a credit crisis so deep and long-lasting that it was not again surpassed until that of 1797, and a food shortage so severe that it rivalled most since the last true famine in the early 1740s and was probably not surpassed until 1799. Such was the power and intensity of these economic developments that they were not merely secondary to the political and constitutional issues of the day, but to a significant degree, provided much of the motive force for the radicalism of these years.

Late 18th century Ireland was predominantly a rural country. With the exceptions of Dublin and Cork, no centre had a population in excess of 80,000, and only Limerick, of the other towns, had more than 20,000. Of the 23 major towns and cities in 1798, 17 were ports, mainly in the south and east, and of the six inland towns only one, Kilkenny, was on a par with the port towns in terms of wealth.² This rural dominance, and the urban bias towards the eastern and southern ports, reflected the nature of the economy. The Irish economy in the late 18th century was predominantly agriculturally based, limited in its output of marketable commodities, restricted in its markets and short of capital. The land was the principal source of wealth and prestige, and from it emanated directly and indirectly the major articles of trade and manufacture. Linen, salt provisions (and the derivatives of hides and tallow) and, to a lesser extent, grain were the only substantial exports. The only other manufactures of significance were woollens, silk, brewing, distilling, sugar-refining, iron-working and glass: none of these had a sizeable export trade and, woollens excepted, all were dependent on imported raw materials. Trade was dominated by the British market, which in 1779/80 accounted for 79% of exports and 74% of imports³ and was, due to the limited resources of Irish merchants, largely financed and directed by English exporters and importers.⁴ However, the growth in foreign trade from the 1730s had ensured a regular surplus of exports over imports, and a deficit in the balance of trade was rare.

Irish trade was heavily orientated towards Britain and this was a reflection not alone of the geographical propinquity between the two countries, but also of the limited amount of Irish capital in trade and manufacture. In general, the resources of Irish merchants, even those engaged in the linen and provisions trades, were small and importers and exporters could undertake only modest commitments on their own account. Merchants in Dublin and Cork, the only two centres with substantial banking facilities, could provide some short-term capital, but for the most part Irish foreign trade was dependent on English credit. This limitation in resources was reflected in the relatively undeveloped nature of foreign trade outside Britain and in the organization of much of Anglo-Irish trade on a commission basis. Irish merchants could not withstand a long lock-up of their capital.⁵

Linen and provisions, as the principal exports, were the cornerstones of the economy. Linen cloth, the product of domestically produced flax, was the largest single export commodity accounting, for example, for 48% of the total value of exports in 1777/8, and thus it was something of a barometer of the state of the economy. It was heavily dependent on the British market, to which it was admitted duty free - in 1778, for example, 99% of linen cloth exported went to Britain - and thus the prosperity of the linen trade was closely bound up with fluctuations in the British economy. The manufacture was strongest in the north-east of the country, but during the 18th century had spread throughout Ulster and was also significant in Leinster and Connaught, and thus was an important source of cash income over a wide area, with spinning supplementing the income of many labouring families and weaving occupying not only the specialist weavers but many small farmers also.⁶

The principal source of income in the vast pastoral reaches of Connaught and Munster was the provisions trade and the demand for beef, reflected by sales at the large livestock fairs such as Ballinasloe and Mullingar and for butter at the markets in Cork and Limerick, determined how much cash would be available in the countryside for the payment of rents and the purchase of consumer goods. In peace-time, the provisions trade depended on demand from the West Indian colonies and from the victualling of ships engaged in colonial voyages, although a little less so in the case of butter, which commanded substantial European sales, especially in Spain and Portugal. In war time, however, increased demand for victualling the navy largely offset any loss of peace-time markets, and the importance of this source of demand is indicated by the fact that Cork was the major supply centre for wet provisions for the British services.⁷

Production for the woollen manufacture also played a significant role in the rural economy. The sale of wool and the spinning of yarn for export and for domestic use provided an important source of income in the south and the west, but the weaving and finishing were predominantly urban activities. Dublin was the centre of the old drapery manufacture, whilst worsted, although important in the capital, was significant also in centres

4

such as Carrick-on-Suir, Bandon and other towns in Co. Cork, the Limerick area and some midland towns. In fact, it was the urban setting of the more valuable branches of the woollen manufacture which was its principal weakness for, afflicted with the consequent high production costs, it could be undersold by English imports. This was particularly so for old drapery and the instability of the manufacture in Dublin was already apparent in the 1770s. New drapery, for which imports were small in relation to output, was less troubled by English competition, but was dependent on the buoyancy of the home market, since it had no significant export trade.

The manufacture of drapery provided the largest single source of urban employment, but the towns, and especially the port towns, had an extensive industrial sector based on imported goods. Silk and cotton production; brewing, distilling and sugar refining; iron making and glass production, all depended either on the import of their basic raw materials or on the import of coal from Britain. Together, they provided a significant source of employment, but all were, in addition to reliance on imported materials, dependent on the home market and were vulnerable to competition from imported British goods.

The production of cereals held an important place in the Irish economy. Bread and oatmeal, along with potatoes, were the basic foodstuffs and the Irish cereal harvest was the principal source for the nation's dietary needs. The country was self-sufficient in oats and although supplementing its production of barley and wheat by import, could, even in a poor year, provide the greater part of domestic requirements. In years of good harvests, the export of the surplus contributed significantly to the balance of trade - in 1776/7, for example, oats and wheat to the value of £46,713 and £35,116 respectively were exported - and even if the lower than usual prices were not welcomed by the farmers, their effects in raising the real incomes of the urban and rural labouring classes stimulated industry. A bad harvest, however, meant a scarcity of food, rising prices and a sharp rise in imports, which depressed incomes, and most importantly, reduced the balance of trade. In such circumstances, credit restriction was inevitable and bankruptcies occurred as the demand

for cash increased.⁸ There was therefore a marked correlation between years of economic crisis and harvest failures and when such a scenario was augmented by depression in linen and provisions, the two principal exports, then a severe crisis was assured.

Thus the Irish economy, heavily dependent on agriculture, limited in its overseas markets, susceptible to competition from imports and short of capital, was potentially vulnerable. Vulnerable especially to adverse economic fluctuations in England, its principal market, and susceptible to the vagaries of the weather, which ultimately determined the success of the harvests. It was concern about this vulnerability, real or imagined, heightened by conditions of deepening economic crisis, which exercised the minds of people and politicians in the early 1780s and allowed the economic fluctuations of the day to play a significant role in shaping political and constitutional developments.

The opening of the 1780s saw Ireland emerging from a period of political turmoil and economic depression which had witnessed a new upsurge in radicalism, largely political in orientation but with strong economic undercurrents - a combination which foreshadowed the developments of the 1780s.

Growing concern about the state of the economy in the 1770s, with falling linen exports and a rapidly mounting national debt, had been sharply accentuated by the opening of war with America. The closure of the American markets in the spring of 1775 had been viewed with trepidation, whilst the imposition of an embargo on the export of provisions in 1776 caused a furore. The war was unpopular on political and constitutional grounds also. The steady flow of emigration to America during the 18th century had forged strong ties of kinship between the colonies and Ireland, and there was much sympathy, especially among northern presbyterians, for the American cause. But, more importantly, the similarities in the constitutional relationship of America and Ireland with Britain were too obvious to be overlooked, and the fear that Britain might subsequently deal with Ireland as she had with America, strengthened support for the colonists. The unpopularity of the war, both on economic and political grounds, provided a focal point for opposition to the

government and under the leadership of the patriot party in parliament and the volunteer movement in the country, a sustained, cohesive anti-government campaign emerged in the final years of the 1770s. The strong emphasis in this campaign on economic affairs, particularly the state of trade and the financial administration, owed much to the depressed conditions in the 1770s, although by late 1778 the opposition to the government, now crystallized into a demand for free trade, had come to represent more a renewed political and constitutional assertiveness rather than a reflection of the state of the economy. Economic recovery had been evident from the autumn of 1778, but by then the demand for free trade had developed a dynamic force of its own and the steady recovery in economic life was obscured by a mounting political crisis, expressed in parliament in heated debate and in the country by a virulent non-importation campaign against British goods, which was enthusiastically supported by the Volunteers. It was only the concession of free trade in 1779 which resolved this crisis.

The success of the patriot cause in the late 1770s clearly owed much to the depth of concern about the economy. The patriot party had been a recognisable grouping since the 1720s, and though its cause had clearly been advancing from the 1760s, the upsurge in support in the 1770s, generally regarded as a decade of economic depression, was scarcely coincidental. Certainly the patriot cause was to flourish in the early 1780s, a period of acute economic dislocation, and the evidence of correlation between the fluctuations in economic and political life suggest that economic considerations were an important motive force in the political and constitutional developments of these years.

Following the concession of free trade, Ireland enjoyed a short period of relative political calm and, despite the efforts of the patriot party to keep the political pot boiling, there was a noticeable reduction in the radicalism which had been so evident in the late 1770s. Having attained the cherished goal of free trade, there seemed a willingness to sit back and await its benefits, and the relative prosperity of 1780/81 contributed to this more relaxed mood.

There were good markets for provisions, grain and wool, and high prices for linens in 1780/1, followed in 1781/2 by the largest export of linen ever. Urban employment was plentiful, food was abundant, and a sharp increase in imports in 1780/1 indicated a strong consumer demand. The granting of free trade removed the need for the non-importation agreements, and with obvious prosperity, especially in the urban textile manufactures, there was little opposition as they were quietly relaxed and soon abandoned altogether. The Volunteers did not immediately seek for another extra-parliamentary medium through which to challenge the government and during 1780, their energies were subsumed by internal division which split "the cautious and the adventurous".⁹ In parliament, the government seemed to have regained control. In the more relaxed atmosphere, the borough owners, under less pressure from public opinion, were ready to accept pensions, places and titles, and thus a government majority was secured. Grattan's failure to gain a majority for his declaration of independence in April 1780, and his subsequent inability to alter the Mutiny Bill, which had returned from England as perpetual instead of annual, reflected directly the renewed strength of government, and indirectly the more passive mood of public opinion.

However, by late 1781, public opinion was again hardening and by early 1782 the patriots were commanding nationwide support for the cause of constitutional independence. Again, as in the 1770s, this upsurge in radicalism occurred against the backdrop of growing economic depression.

Falling demand for linen from late summer and a poor provisions season in the autumn of 1781 led inevitably to some restriction in credit and by October unemployment in the Dublin broadcloth manufacture was causing concern. Exchanges in parliament in November¹⁰ revealed acute differences between the government and the patriots on the state of the economy, the latter representing the country as being in economic decline and expressing concern at the lack of any apparent benefits from the newly won commercial freedom. But the government still had control of parliament and no action resulted. Outside parliament, however, the Volunteers, reinvigorated during 1781 by the threat of invasion, and representing more accurately the mood of public opinion, were pressing

their demands more vigorously. Support for the Volunteers was noticeably stronger in Ulster, where the sharp decline in the linen trade had hit hardest, and this was reflected in a meeting in Armagh in December 1781 which agreed to hold a convention for all the Ulster Volunteer companies at Dungannon the following February. The Dungannon meeting proved to be an outstandingly successful rallying point for the radicals, and the widespread publication of a series of resolutions, which had been unanimously adopted by the meeting, roused the whole country in support of the patriotic cause. Although overtly political, the resolutions also reflected concern about the worsening state of the economy. The resolution that "the Ports of this Country are by Right open to all Foreign Countries, not at War with the King"¹¹ in all probability owed much to the feeling of grievance against the continued embargo on the export of provisions, which had been imposed in 1776; a grievance felt all the more in 1781, a poor year for the provisions trade. There was also a resolution against consumption of Portuguese wines, which reflected the renewed eruption in 1781 of the dispute with Portugal over admittance to its markets of Irish woollens. The re-emergence of support for this cause was undoubtedly a reaction to the reappearance of unemployment in the Dublin broadcloth manufacture.¹²

The introduction in early 1782 of bills to reform abuses in the linen manufacture, to regulate the coal trade, to encourage partnerships and to establish a national bank,¹³ all sprang directly from the economic crisis, but none had the capacity to halt the deepening decline; all, with the exception of the linen bill, were uncontroversial; and only the proposals for a national bank were in any sense radical. Together, they represented considerable attention to economic affairs by the government but, in the atmosphere of political turmoil and economic depression, they were insufficient to pacify public opinion.

The intensity and cohesiveness of Irish public opinion, significantly assisted by a change of government in Britain, forced a relatively swift concession of legislative independence in May 1782. But the obtention of this long cherished goal was not followed by the quiescence which might have been anticipated, and as one historian has observed, "The political unrest that marked the years 1782-84 probably owed something to the continued economic decline."¹⁴

The economic depression continued through the second half of 1782, deepened appreciably during 1783, apart from a short-lived upturn associated with the coming of peace, and reached its peak in early 1784. Post-war depression adversely affected markets for linen and provisions; bad harvests in 1782 and 1783 led to scarcity and high prices of food and the need to import large quantities of grain; and together severely curtailed the prompt payment of rents. The ensuing credit squeeze led to further depression in manufactures dependent on the home market and a consequent sharp rise in unemployment. By early 1784, trade and manufacture were deeply depressed, credit was very tight, unemployment was high and distress was widespread.

The legislative programme of the new Irish parliament to an extent reflected the economic crisis. Measures were brought forward to regulate the food supply by an embargo on export and ultimately by Foster's Corn Law; the Poor Law regulations were revised and adapted; generous financial support was forthcoming for the one bright spark in the economy, the emergent cotton manufacture, and the national bank legislation, which had its genesis before constitutional independence, came to fruition under the new parliament, with the opening of the Bank of Ireland in June 1783.¹⁵ These economic measures were certainly greeted more warmly than those of the old parliament - they were, after all, evidence of Ireland legislating for herself - but in the context of an acute economic crisis they were, in the short term, largely ineffectual. Expectations had been raised by constitutional independence and the inability of the government to solve the economic crisis or effectively ameliorate its results, prompted support for a radical solution - protection - which, if it could not be obtained in parliament, might, as in the case of free trade and legislative independence, be secured through the medium of extra-parliamentary activity. The growing support for such a solution was inextricably bound up with the more overtly political unrest of 1782-34, and provided much of its motive force. As one historian has pointed out

Irish discontent during these years ran in three channels - dissatisfaction with the constitutional arrangements governing Anglo-Irish relations, irritation at the lack of encouragement for economic enterprise, and annoyance at the failure of the representative system to mirror accurately the outlook of the

community. As it was believed that English influence hindered measures for the promotion of Irish prosperity, and as one important reason for obtaining parliamentary reform was to secure a house of commons independent of English control, these three streams of opposition to the established order of things mingled with and reinforced one another.¹⁶

Three major political issues preoccupied Ireland in the years 1782-84 - Roman Catholic relief, the pursuit of further constitutional guarantees, and parliamentary reform. The temper of the country was initially optimistic in the wake of constitutional independence and parliament quickly dealt with the Roman Catholic question. However, by late 1782, the novelty of Grattan's parliament was wearing off, and in an atmosphere of deepening economic gloom, public opinion became increasingly radical.

The Irish parliament had moved speedily in the summer of 1782 to effect a limited measure of Roman Catholic relief. This was a relatively uncontroversial matter, particularly in that it did not extend political power to Catholics, and very much in harmony with the new spirit of the Irish nation. But even such a measure lent itself to an economic interpretation in a period of crisis. In some circles, Roman Catholic relief was looked on as a means of liberating the economic potential of the Catholic community, and Charlemont wondered if it was not a device to enable Protestant gentlemen to draw large rents from their Catholic tenants.¹⁷ Had Roman Catholic relief been effected in a climate of prosperity, it is unlikely that such motives would have been attributed to it.

However, during the second half of 1782, the economic crisis deepened with the decline in the linen trade continuing and with the addition of a new dimension, harvest failure, and this was accompanied by a sudden fall in Grattan's fortunes, as Flood, through the medium of a campaign to secure a formal renunciation by Britain of her legislative superiority, sought to reassume his leadership of the patriot cause. Renunciation, of itself, was not a particularly significant addition to the constitutional gains already made and had received little attention earlier in the year, but by autumn 1782 it had attracted a large, popular following. Recalling that the British parliament, after repealing the Stamp Act, had imposed taxes on America, it was pointed out that the British parliament was still

capable of yielding to demands from English merchants for measures against Irish competition.¹⁸ It was rarely difficult to rouse opposition against English oppression, real or imagined, and in the context of depression and an apparently helpless parliament, the appeal of Flood and the Volunteers was strong.

The Renunciation Act was secured in January 1783 but the more radical temper of public opinion continued and grew in strength during the year, as the economic crisis deepened, and was a significant contributor to the strength of the campaign for parliamentary reform.

The desire for parliamentary reform, in the Irish context, was not simply a reflection of the belief that the great families of the land possessed too much political power, although of course this was a significant consideration, but it proceeded also from the fear that Britain, through the influence of the Crown, might still exercise an influence in Irish political affairs which might not always be to the advantage of Ireland - a fear, in short, that the executive power, wielded by the Lord Lieutenant and Chief Secretary, could be used to corrupt the Irish parliament. The desire to limit the power of the Crown proceeded not alone from an understandable sense of national pride, but also from economic motives, for Ireland had "to guard against the jealousy of the commercial part of the British nation."¹⁹ The fears implicit in the campaign for the Renunciation Act were clearly also present in the campaign for parliamentary reform and there can be little doubt that this continued feeling of economic insecurity owed much to the worsening economic crisis. The Volunteers, the prime movers in the matter of parliamentary reform, had, as early as July 1783, expressed the belief that protection was the only method to relieve the "present Distresses of the numerous Poor, dependent on the Manufactures of this Country"²⁰ and with a further downturn in the economic situation in the autumn, demands for protection became insistent, and Volunteer extra-parliamentary activity reached new heights. Provincial volunteer assemblies in September 1783 culminated in a national convention at the Rotunda in Dublin in November and the subsequent presentation to parliament by Flood of a programme for parliamentary reform. Parliament's rejection of the Volunteer reform proposals did not produce the turmoil which might have been expected, largely through the steadying influence of Charlemont, but also

because the extra-parliamentary energies of the Volunteers had a ready outlet in the protection campaign. In pursuit of that goal, radical activity remained high throughout the country through the winter of 1783-4 and reached new heights in the spring of 1784, with the reintroduction of the Reform Bill by Flood in March, and in a violent reaction to the rejection of the protection proposals by parliament in April. The subsequent organization of non-importation agreements, in imitation of the device which had helped secure free trade in 1779, was enthusiastically supported by the Volunteers - the Dublin Volunteers, for instance, resolved in April 1784 not to purchase any articles of clothing not of Irish manufacture²¹ - and throughout the summer these were violently enforced in Dublin through the medium of tarring and feathering recalcitrants. However, there were clear signs of an upturn in the economy, and with a successful harvest in 1784, real recovery was evident. As in 1780, the upturn in economic life was reflected in a decline in radicalism and "from October 1784 excitement in the country, so far as it can be measured by resolutions and meetings, steadily decreased."²²

CHAPTER 2

THE ONSET OF THE CRISIS

- (i) The crisis in perspective
- (ii) The beginning of the crisis: Aug. 1781 - Oct. 1782.
- (iii) Harvest failure: onset of rural and urban crisis:
Oct. 1782 - Jan. 1783.
- (iv) Gloom lifts temporarily: Jan. - Mar. 1783.
- (v) Hungry town and countryside: Ap. - Sept. 1783.

(i) The Crisis in Perspective

The end of the 1770s had witnessed a return to relative prosperity after a period of acute depression which had reached its culmination in the spring and summer of 1778. Despite the intensification of the war in Europe and America, exports held up, while imports, under the influence of non-importation agreements, fell, resulting in a more substantial trade balance and favourable exchange rates. The Dublin on London exchange returned below par in the autumn of 1778 and the following fiscal year, 1779/80, evidenced clear signs of recovery. The balance of trade in favour of Ireland, which had slumped to a mere £24,503 in 1776/7, had by 1779/80 recovered to £884,599, whilst the trend of long runs of high exchange rates, which had been halted in October 1778, did not re-emerge, and the exchange remained constantly below par. William Eden noted in autumn 1779 that the exchange was "remarkably low" and "so much in favour of Ireland", which he attributed to "The non-importation agreements, and the large exports in the provisions trade, and in linens".¹ The state of the woollen industry, a useful indicator of the condition of domestic manufacture, was encouraging - manufacturers were actually competing for hands in Dublin, whilst among the journeymen "everyone now has full Employment and a good Price. . ."² The growing spirit of confidence was enhanced by the grant of free trade, in December 1779, which, contemporaries believed, would assure the economic future of the nation, and thus as a new decade opened,

Parliament was in rapture; the people were in rapture;
Dublin was almost on fire, and a sort of frantic joy
pervaded the nation . . .³

Recovery continued in 1780/1. Despite the appearance of a substantial deficit of £226,996 in the balance of trade, as imports soared from £2,127,579 in 1779/80 to £3,123,031 in 1780/1, while exports fell back slightly from £3,012,031 in 1779/80 to £2,896,035 in 1780/1, it appears that this deficit was concentrated in the first half of the year, did not produce a crisis, and gave way in the second half of the year to markedly improved conditions.

The deficit corresponded to a rise in the exchange between March and August and a fall thereafter. The Dublin on London exchange rose from March in response to the upsurge in imports and a sharp reduction in linen exports; and apart from a brief respite in July, it continued to rise until it peaked in August slightly above par at 8 5/8 - 3/4%.

The major contributor to this trend was the massive 46% increase in imports between 1779/80 and 1780/1, which was largely concentrated in the first half of 1780/1. Ironically, this was the product of the increased Irish prosperity stemming from the successful non-importation agreements of 1779/80. The agreements, by reducing imports from £2,836,802 in 1777/8 to £2,195,935 in 1778/9 and again to £2,127,579 in the following year, had been the reason for the return to healthy trade surpluses and below par exchange rates, and, by excluding British manufactured goods from the Irish market, had provided the stimulus for the resurgence of Irish textile manufactures. The consequent improvement in consumer spending power had initially been patriotically directed by the non-importation agreements into the purchase of goods of Irish manufacture, but this trend in purchasing changed drastically after the grant of free trade in 1780. Non-importation had not been conceived as a permanent phenomenon - it was merely a means to achieve the goal of free trade and once this goal had been secured, the validity of retaining the means rapidly diminished. The result was a return to the well-established preference for British manufactured goods. Imports of old drapery soared from 64,346 yards in 1779/80 to 326,578 yards in 1780/1, new drapery imports rose from 159,428 yards to 433,198 yards and those of manufactured silk doubled from 10,655 lbs. to 22,471 lbs. These three commodities alone accounted for 22% of the increase in the total value of imports in 1780/1, and to a lesser extent there were rises in the import of cottons, hats, stockings, haberdashery, ironware and beer, all articles which were manufactured in Ireland. It was reported in May 1780 that "there are now actually in Dublin above six hundred thousand pounds worth of imported goods, brought here by way of Belfast, Newry, Drogheda, etc."⁴ and import continued at a high level in June, July and August.⁵ However, by September this re-stocking process seems to have been largely completed. Early in the month it was reported that

. . . the Quantity of manufactured Goods imported into this Kingdom from Great Britain these three Months past, is sufficient to supply the Consumption . . . for eighteen Months . . .⁶

and the sharp fall of the exchanges in the second half of the year may have, in part, reflected a waning in importation.

The rising exchanges in the first half of 1780/1 were also a reflection of the low level of linen exports.⁷ Plain linen cloth was still the single most important Irish export and even in a year of reduced output, like 1780/1, accounted for £996,484 out of a total export value of £2,896,035. The fall in linen exports in 1780/1 was much sharper than the overall fall in exports (by £253,309 as against £116,114). This meant that over the year as a whole, low exports in the spring and summer were compensated by a buoyant autumn trade in grain and provisions. However, in the spring and summer the decline in the linen trade was the dominant theme. Exports of plain linens fell from 18,746,902 yards in 1779/80 to 14,947,265 yards in 1780/1. The sharp fall was due to difficulties on the production side in Ireland: the improvement in 1780 in British demand, reflected in a marked rise in English commodity imports from £10.8 million to £11.9 million, should, in the normal course of events, have led to re-stocking by British merchants in Irish linen, all the more so as the linen trade with Britain had fallen continually since 1777/8. Prior to the coming into force of the Linen Act in September 1780, flaxseed supply had depended largely on importation, but the effects of the war had been to dry up transatlantic supplies, by far the major source in pre-war years, and to render the European alternatives uncertain. A collapse in supplies from the East Country saw imports fall from 37,211 hogsheads in 1777/8 to 20,479 hogsheads in the following year, the lowest level for the decade, and this was largely responsible for the significant reduction in the output of cloth in 1780/1, since the shortfall in seed from abroad in the autumn and winter of 1778 could not be compensated by increased sowing of domestic seed in time for the 1779 planting.

But even such amounts of cloth as were available for export could not be sure of reaching market safely or punctually. The years 1780-1

were particularly active for enemy privateers around the Irish coast, as the high level of issue of letters of marque to privateers employed for the purpose of protecting Irish trade, until 1781, suggests.⁸ This dislocation of trade bore down heavily on linen with ". . . its markets which ought to be regular rendered uncertain . . ." ⁹ Contemporary emphasis on the effects of privateering on linen exports may simply be another reflection of the low level of exports, for there is no indication that the import trade was markedly disrupted, although it may be that the well-known seasonal shipping of linen made such trade particularly vulnerable. However, the higher than normal prices in summer, when linen supplies were coming to market, must have partly compensated for the shortfall in supply. John Andrews reported in May 1780 that coarse linens were ". . . very much advanced",¹⁰ while in June ". . . linens of all sorts is greatly advanced and is advancing . . ."¹¹ but the high prices for coarse linen occasioned frequent complaints from British customers, and Andrews was forced to grant abatements.

The upward movement of the exchanges halted in August 1780 and the subsequent sharp fall in the second half of the year indicated a marked improvement in conditions. A more successful export performance and a slowing down in imports effected this recovery.

From a peak of $8 \frac{5}{8} - \frac{3}{4}\%$ in mid-August, the Dublin on London exchange fell to $7 \frac{5}{8}\%$ in September and again to $7 \frac{1}{4} - \frac{3}{8}\%$ in October and thus presented the normally low autumnal profile associated with a successful harvest and the opening of the provisions trade. The autumn and winter were particularly successful for the grain and provisions trades. The former, profiting from a very successful all-round harvest, attained exports to the value of £180,399 compared with £132,077 in 1779/80, with the export of wheat, in particular, rocketing from 9,508 quarters in 1779/80 to 43,977 quarters in 1780/1. In the case of provisions, the value of exports for 1780/1 had risen to £973,596 from £883,538 in the previous year and these official figures did not take into account the admiralty victualling contracts.¹² These were important sources of demand since Cork was the supply centre for the major part of the wet provisions (pork, beef and butter) required for the British

services during the American war.¹³ This increased activity in the provisions trade, reflecting war-time requirements, was most intense after the traditional autumn slaughtering. Good prices for cattle at the Ballinasloe fair in October 1780¹⁴ promised a successful season and this was confirmed in the experience of Edward Hardman, a Drogheda general merchant who dealt extensively in provisions. He noted in November that "Beef was never in such demand in Ireland as it is this Year . . ."¹⁵ whilst pork, in December, "is also in very great demand",¹⁶ and as late as February 1781 Hardman had ". . . as much to do in the making up of pork as I shall be able to execute these two months."¹⁷

It is likely, too, that linen exports improved somewhat in the autumn compared with the spring, attracted by strong demand from Britain, for, despite complaints from British correspondents in September and October 1780 about high prices, there are no indications that the goods were not sold.¹⁸ The sharp drop in the Dublin on London exchange between December 1780 and January 1781 may reflect this improvement.

This improvement in conditions in the second half of 1780/1 suggests that the problems in the balance of trade, which produced the substantial deficit of £226,996, were concentrated in the period up to August 1780. But even within this more difficult period, there was no crisis. The exchange peaked at 8 5/8 - 3/4% in mid-August, barely above par of 8 1/3%, and in a little over a week had returned below par, and there is little evidence of significant contemporary concern about economic conditions. The very existence of a deficit in the balance of trade was itself unusual (in the 103 years between 1698 and 1800, an unfavourable trade balance was recorded on only seven occasions)¹⁹ and the fact that so large a deficit (the most substantial to date for the century) did not produce a crisis emphasizes the buoyancy of the economy. Indeed, economic success and growing prosperity seemed to be the order of the day. In the countryside, the beneficial effects of the excellent harvest were supplemented by the great demand for livestock, whilst the revitalized woollen manufacture created a healthy demand for wool which was evident at the fairs of Mullingar and Ballinasloe in late July and

early August.²⁰ Truly could Blake conclude in October 1780 that ". . . our markets and fairs are as good as ever . . ." ²¹ This agricultural buoyancy, and in particular the success of the harvest, combined with the higher than usual linen prices, may have been significant in offsetting the worst effects of the low level of linen exports, for there was little comment in press or parliament, the two great mirrors of contemporary opinion, to suggest extensive rural dislocation - indeed, the contemporary preoccupation with the course of the war itself implied economic normality. In the towns, food was cheap and plentiful, with the 6d. household loaf in Dublin averaging over 5 lbs. throughout the year, fully two pounds in excess of 1783, a year of harvest difficulty. Employment, too, was clearly plentiful, with the urban textile manufacturers, the leading employers in Dublin, exuding confidence. The silk ribband weavers, "in Consequence of an expected Encrease in Business", decided not to raise their rates,²³ whilst the woollen manufacturers enjoyed "constant Employment".²³ Clearly, the substantial increase in the import of manufactured goods and, in particular, of textiles, had not yet reduced demand for domestically produced goods to the extent of adversely affecting employment. The country was still in the grip of the fervour which had been engendered by the non-importation agreements and, as such, sported an effusive economic optimism, articulated, for example, by the Lord Lieutenant who, in closing the session of parliament in September 1780, spoke of "The Satisfaction with which the Heart of every Irishman must exult at the fair Scene of Prosperity now opening to his Country . . ." ²⁴ Even the absence of a substantial upturn in exports despite the recent obtention of free trade as yet occasioned no adverse comment. No new markets of any significance were opened in 1780/1, despite the granting of free trade, and even the exploitation of existing ones was a problem. The war certainly had a significant effect in inhibiting overseas trade. America was a theatre of war, whilst three of the leading European states, France, Spain and Holland, were actively opposed to Britain. Consequently, transatlantic and European trade was both restricted and hazardous, whilst even that with Britain was uncertain, for "since the commencement of the present unhappy contest this [Irish] Channel has been infested by privateers of the enemy in a manner unknown in former times of hostility . . ." ²⁵ The high level of the issue of letters of marque

from 1778 to 1781 highlights the extent of this problem.²⁶ Trade to Africa had not begun, whilst exports to America were not significant - linen was the most successful commodity, but only totalled 227,408 yards compared with the 14,421,835 yards exported to Britain. The removal of export restrictions on wool, woollen goods and glass had little significant effect. Drapery exports at 286,859 yards for new and 3,740 yards for old were negligible in relation to output, whilst exports of glass were non-existent. On the other hand, the re-opening of the domestic market to British imports had, in fact, returned the country to the pre-non-importation agreements situation of the mid-1770s, and it was soon to become apparent that Irish manufacture was no more able than before to compete with British goods for the home market.

Expansion, however, continued in 1781/2, and this was reflected in the return to a trading surplus, a substantial increase in linen exports and in normal winter and spring exchanges. But, during the second half of the year, there was a marked deterioration in conditions and by the end of 1781 there was clear evidence of substantial dislocation in the economy.

The principal reason for this continued expansion until the early autumn of 1781 was the success of the linen trade.²⁷ The total value of exports rose substantially from £2,896,035 in 1780/1 to £3,400,599 in 1781/2, producing a surplus in the balance of trade of £406,334 compared with a deficit of £226,996 in the previous year; and out of this total export value of £3,400,599, exports of linen cloth accounted for £1,664,686. Cloth exports rose from 14,947,265 yards in 1780/1 to 24,970,303 yards in 1781/2, and since there was a downturn in sales from about August 1781, the greater part of this exportation must have been concentrated in the first half of the fiscal year 1781/2. The strong demand from Britain, which had not been satisfied in 1780 due to a shortfall in production, was evident from the beginning of the 1781 season, when the excellent crop of flax in 1780 ensured a more ready supply of cloth and demand continued high through the spring and summer, exemplified in a report in July, that "The quantity of linens shipped within these last fifteen days from this kingdom, is computed to amount on a modest calculation, to two millions sterling."²⁸

Domestic consumption in Ireland remained high in the first half of the year. Imports fell only slightly, from £3,123,031 in 1780/1 to £2,994,265 in 1781/2, despite the substantial re-stocking of the previous year and the deterioration in consumer spending power associated with the worsening conditions in the second half of 1781/2, and there is no evidence that manufacturers dependent on the domestic market, notably urban-based textiles, did not continue to enjoy, in the first half of 1781, the prosperity which had been so evident in 1780.

The successful export performance and buoyant domestic economy were reflected in favourable exchange rates, with the Dublin on London exchange remaining well below par from March to August 1781.

However, conditions began to deteriorate in the second half of 1781/2, with falling linen sales, a poor provisions season and bad fairs in the country. Despite the fact that imports were falling, the exchanges, which would normally have fallen in the autumn, were on the rise. Indeed, by late 1781 they had risen above par, a rare autumnal occurrence indicative of serious economic disorder. The emergent crisis became more evident in 1782. The balance of trade fell in 1782/3 and the emerging deficit was reflected in the maintenance of adverse exchange rates for much of 1782. Linen exports fell sharply in 1782/3, internal demand deteriorated (reflected in falling demand for domestically produced textiles and in the failure of the import trade to expand significantly) and the 1782 harvest failed. Rent arrears began to mount in the autumn of 1782 while, in Dublin, high prices for food and fuel exacerbated the social dislocation already caused by the downturn in urban textile production. By the end of 1782 there was a severe crisis, especially in Dublin and in the north, which was deepened in early 1783 by the appearance of a credit crisis. However, there was an upturn in the spring of 1783 as the end of the war brought an increase in confidence and a resurgence in export, especially of linen. But disappointment in speculative export to America and a downturn in the British market following similar over-speculation in America ensured that there would be no post-war boom. Falling linen sales were joined by a poor provisions season and depressed conditions in the two staples of Irish trade heralded a deepening of the crisis which was reflected in the rise of the exchanges above par in the autumn of 1783.

In the countryside, a spread of depression to worsted production exacerbated the crisis and rent arrears continued to mount while emigration soared. In the towns, depression deepened and spread to other industries and other centres and in the final months of the year, the demand for protective duties became intense. A further harvest failure in 1783 and the subsequent need to import grain, combined with the depressed conditions in the linen and provisions trade, to produce another credit crisis in early 1784, which was to prove more acute and long-lasting than that of the previous year. The coincidence of the deepest and most widespread distress with the highest exchanges and most serious banking crisis marked the nadir of the economic crisis in the summer of 1784. Signs of an upturn in the economy were evident in August, but it was not until the successful 1784 harvest that recovery was assured, although its progress was uneven, varying from region to region.

(ii) The beginnings of the crisis; August 1781 - October 1782

Signs of crisis began to emerge in the second half of 1781, reflected in falling linen sales from August, a poor provisions season and the first appearance of urban unemployment in October. The exchanges, which normally fell in the autumn, actually rose. The Dublin on London exchange rose sharply in August to $7 \frac{7}{8} - \frac{3}{4}\%$ and, after a brief respite in late September and early October, rose sharply again, passing par in November, normally the most favourable month, and finished the year well above par at $8 \frac{5}{8} - \frac{1}{2}\%$, despite the fact that imports fell in 1781/2.

The downturn in linen exports²⁹ was reflected in the emergence of a campaign to secure improved quality controls on cloth, which first appeared in a memorial of linen merchants to the Trustees of the Linen Manufacture in August 1781. The memorialists stressed "The rapid increase of Complaints from all quarters against Irish linens"³⁰ but this concern with quality was clearly only a symptom of falling sales. The quantity of returns of fraudulent linen remained small in relation to output and would only have been of significance in a period of bad sales. Rather more, it was probably the failure of English demand to maintain a high level, which accounted for the slowing down in exports in the second half of 1781. If consumer demand for linen in England faltered, then the accumulation of unsold linens should be reflected in a slowing down in imports. The general fall in English imports in 1781, after the marked rise of the previous year, so suggestive of restocking, suggests such a trend, a trend which, in the case of linen, may have been delayed due to difficulties of supply in 1780/1.

The decline in exports was accentuated in the autumn by a fall in demand for provisions. It was reported in September 1781 that

The export merchants here complain exceedingly of the little appearance this season of orders of any kind for provisions . . . The slaughter business was high in town at this time last season, but at present there is no appearance of its even commencing . . .³¹

and although the subsequent livestock fairs were good, with that at Ballinasloe ". . . being the best known for many years . . ." ³² it would seem that the confidence of the merchants was not justified, for Blake noted

in December that ". . . there has not been half as much beef made up in Ireland this year as there used to be . . ." ³³ The decline in export demand for beef was reflected in the availability of cheap meat at home, for whereas in May 1781 beef had been fetching 3d. - 4d. per lb. in Kilkenny, by December it had fallen to 2d. - 2½d. and by the beginning of 1782 to 1 ¾d. - 2 ½d. per lb., with similar price levels apparent in Limerick. The capture of St. Eustatius by the British forces in January 1781 and thus the ending of its status as a free port was undoubtedly a blow to provisions exporters for, during the war, British provisions had found their way to markets in the enemy islands and in America through St. Eustatius. ³⁴ This, and further reverses in the West Indies in late 1781 and early 1782, with the capture of the British islands by the French, were deemed to account for the fact that

. . . the demand for beef has very much declined, insomuch, that great quantities remain unsold to the disappointment of the graziers and speculators . . . ³⁵

These conditions probably also accounted for the stagnation in pork, for as Edward Hardman noted in February 1782, "As to pork there has not been a cask made up here this season . . ." ³⁶ whilst in Cork pork, which had been fetching 28/- per cwt. in January 1781, had by June 1782 declined in price to 15 - 18/-. The decline in demand was reflected in the annual export figures for 1781/2, with beef falling from 190,502 barrels in 1780/1 to 155,583 barrels in 1781/2, pork from 106,283 barrels to 84,910 barrels and butter from 264,210 cwts. to 234,058 cwts., but this fall in demand must have been greater when the decline in admiralty contracts, which had reached their peak in 1781, ³⁷ are taken into consideration. Some indication of the significance of admiralty demand may be gleaned in the case of beef, for, whilst the export figures reveal a fall of 18.3%, the number of hides weighed under the auspices of the Cork Committee of Merchants shows a drop of 26.5%. ³⁸

There were short-lived signs of improvement in October. The Dublin on London exchange, which had stood at 8 ¼ - 3/8% at the beginning of September, fell sharply towards the end of the month, to stand at 7 ¼ - 1/8% at the beginning of October, and did not exceed 7 ½% for the first half of the month. This improvement may be attributed to a degree of success at the autumn linen sales - Michael Andrews, for example, claimed to have sold all the linens he sent to the Chester fair ³⁹ - and possibly also to

the initial effects of yet another highly successful harvest in 1781, which increased the value of cereal exports from £180,399 in 1780/1 to £259,540 in 1781/2. But this improvement was short-lived with the exchange rising sharply in the second half of October, to reach 8 - 8 1/8% at the beginning of November, and subsequently passing above par later in the month. This emphasized the limited success of the autumn linen sales - Michael Andrews' success was clearly exceptional and the observation of John Moore, the agent on the Annesley estates in Co. Down, was probably closer to the mark, when he noted that ". . . our linens are in great quantities rejected at the late Chester Fair . . ." ⁴⁰

Indeed, the major significance of October lay, not in the slight improvement in the export trade which had been effected, but in the addition of a new dimension to the growing economic difficulties - the emergence of depression in manufactures which depended on the home market, particularly in old drapery production in Dublin, in the face of mounting competition from imports and tightening internal credit.

The first portents of impending difficulty had been evident in August 1781 with bad sales at the major wool fairs of Mullingar ⁴¹ and Ballinasloe, where, at the latter, ". . . of above 3,000 bags of wool that were at the Fair, not 500 were sold . . ." ⁴² and the logical result of this lack of demand was apparent by early October, when it was reported that

. . . the immense quantities of old drapery that lately have been imported, and are constantly importing into this city, has put an almost total stop to the manufacture of broadcloth here . . . ⁴³

This growing uncertainty in home markets was emphasized by a sudden outburst of concern over export opportunities. The agitation about the exclusion of Irish woollens from Portugal, a situation which had already been in existence since the grant of free trade, was suddenly resurrected in October, ⁴⁴ whilst in November, a downturn in sugar refining, ⁴⁵ itself a further contributor to the re-emerging phenomenon of urban unemployment, added greater piquancy to the discussions over the regulation of the sugar duties, in which the Corporation of Weavers sought to involve itself. Deeming raw sugar to be ". . . a principal Article obtainable on the Return of Irish goods exported . . ." ⁴⁶ the weavers expressed concern that an unsatisfactory regulation of the Irish refinery would ". . . injure, if not destroy our

Trade to the West Indies and blast all the Prospect of Advantage from the Law called 'The Free Trade' . . ."⁴⁷ Had urban textiles continued to command satisfactory home sales, it is unlikely that the weavers would have expended their energies in drawing attention to the problems of the export sector, a market of little importance in relation to output. Contemporaries laid great stress on importation of woollens from Britain as the cause of depression in the broadcloth manufacture. Imports of old drapery had risen sharply in 1780/1 to 326,578 yards from 64,346 yards in 1779/80, and rose again in 1781/2 to 362,831 yards, and it may be that the cumulative effect of these two years' importation made some inroads into the market previously enjoyed by local manufacturers. But it is unlikely, of itself, to have been responsible for the depression in the manufacture in the second half of 1781. The substantial import in 1780/1 had not produced signs of crisis either in the manufacture or on the exchanges and the small further increase in 1781/2 is unlikely to have created such an effect in the second half of 1781. Rather more, it seems likely that the final months of 1781 saw the first indications of a tightening in the credit supply, a feature which the coincidence of the downturn in both linen and provisions, the two staples of Irish trade, in the second half of 1781, could be expected to produce. The introduction of a bill in December 1781, to promote commercial partnerships and the beginning of negotiations which would lead to the introduction of a national bank bill in February 1782,⁴⁸ designed to ". . . inspire a disposition to throw money into commerce . . ."⁴⁹ suggests government concern about a shortage of money and the rise in the number of bankruptcies from 22 in 1780/1 to 29 in 1781/2, after the sharp fall from 60 in 1779/80, seems to confirm the legitimacy of such concern. It is likely that as a result of tightening credit, there was some deflation in the buoyant internal demand which had been so evident in 1780 and the first six months of 1781. The old drapery manufacture, based as it was in Dublin and afflicted by "high costs, inflexible organization and an inelastic labour force",⁵⁰ would have been particularly vulnerable to such a fall in demand.

Thus by late 1781 the new-found prosperity with which the decade had opened had deteriorated, if not to the extent of assuming the appearance of a crisis, at least to the level of engendering general concern about the conditions of the economy. The Lord Lieutenant, in opening the new session of parliament in October, had spoken of

The substantial Effects of those Benefits which the Wisdom and Liberality of the British Parliament have already communicated to this country . . .

which ". . . are already apparent in the Encrease of her Manufactures and the Extension of her Commerce . . ." and went on to confidently predict that

From the Progress which has been made notwithstanding the Obstacles that Industry must have suffered from a War which extends itself over so great a Part of the Globe, it is but reasonable to expect, that every Source of National Employment and Wealth will diffuse itself much wider, whenever the Blessings of Peace shall be restored . . .⁵¹

- a view from which the ensuing addresses did not dissent. However, the trends of the same month served to cast doubt on the belief that events would wait on the end of the war, and by late November divergent opinion was emerging in parliament. Despite the entreaties of John Hely-Hutchinson, the Provost of Trinity College, "to represent the nation as it was - emancipated from unjust restrictions and every day increasing in prosperity and population"⁵² Grattan went immediately to the heart of the matter, pointing out that

On examining the exports of the manufactures of cotton, woollen and linen we shall find the exports of the two former have been next to nothing, and the export of the latter greatly declined; And on examining the import of cotton and woollen, we find the increase prodigious . . .⁵³

and, professing an impatience at the lack of economic progress, observed

I confess the seed of free trade is sown . . . but I desire to know if ministers are acquainted with any chemical process, that can ripen and bring to maturity the fruits of this trade, without waiting the operation of time . . .⁵⁴

Clearly the deteriorating economic situation had, by the end of 1781, gained a general recognition, and it is probable that it was the re-emergence of urban unemployment, a notoriously sensitive phenomenon after the deep distress of 1778, which served to prompt this awareness.

The deterioration in economic life which had emerged in the second half of 1781 became more evident in 1782. The balance of trade fell in 1782/3, with imports rising slightly from £2,994,265 in 1781/2 to £3,007,236 in 1782/3, while exports fell substantially from their much improved level of £3,400,599 in 1781/2 to £2,935,708 in 1782/3, producing another deficit of £71,528, which was reflected in unfavourable exchanges for much of the year. The spring, summer and early autumn saw a consolidation of the growing

crisis as the decline in the linen trade continued, credit supply tightened and urban unemployment increased. In the autumn, there was a marked deepening in the crisis for, despite an improved season for provisions, the continued decline in the linen trade, the failure of the 1782 harvest, rising fuel prices and a worsening credit situation, intensified urban distress and produced substantial dislocation in the countryside.

The deterioration in conditions was, initially, particularly marked in the spring, summer and early autumn of 1782 and was reflected in the Dublin on London exchange, which remained constantly well above par from March until October, reaching a new peak of 9 1/8% in September. A further slump in linen exports and a further tightening in credit, which increased the dislocation already being experienced by the urban textile manufacturers, were the main features of this period.

The depression in the linen trade, evident from mid-1781, deepened and was reflected in the export figures, which evidenced a slump from 24,970,303 yards in 1781/2 to 16,039,705 yards in 1782/3. Demand in Britain continued to be weak and the effects of this were accentuated by problems of production and transportation. Finishing of cloth was dislocated by the action of the northern bleachers during the early weeks of August 1782, when they imposed a ban on buying brown linen and on bleaching as a protest against the new Linen Act; manufacture was inhibited in late 1782 as spinning and weaving were forsaken in vain attempts to save the harvest; and transportation continued to be dislocated by the effects of the war.⁵⁵ The consequent reduction in output probably served to increase the price of brown linen at market (such had certainly been the case in 1780/1, the last period when output was reduced by factors on the supply side), a trend which became marked from June 1782 in anticipation of a speedy conclusion to the war. This would have reduced the attractiveness of Irish linens in Britain, a market where demand was probably low following the enormous speculative purchases of the previous year.⁵⁶ Sales were certainly difficult throughout 1782. In May, John Andrews hoped that ". . . the time is not far distant when our trade shall revive . . ." ⁵⁷ but business remained poor throughout the summer and sales were bad at the important Chester fair in October.⁵⁸

Growing depression was evident also from the stagnation in imports and the falling internal demand for domestically produced goods. Tightening credit had emerged as a matter of concern in late 1781 and conditions clearly deteriorated during 1782, as the linen trade, one of the two staples of Irish commerce, became more depressed. Blake wrote to a correspondent in Bruges in May 1782, "I shall take the liberty of drawing a bill on you for about £500 as cash is grown very scarce here . . ." ⁵⁹ and this shortage of money could be expected to affect both imported goods and those produced locally. Imports, which had been buoyant in 1780 and the first half of 1781, fell in value from £3,123,031 in 1780/1 to £2,994,265 in 1781/2 and rose only slightly to £3,007,031 in 1782/3. For the urban textile manufacturer, the spring, summer and early autumn of 1782 witnessed a marked decline in business and a consequent rise in urban unemployment in late 1781. The broadcloth manufacture, which had been the first of the urban based textiles to succumb to the emergent depression in late 1781, continued to decline. The popular fear, expressed in February 1782, of being ". . . reduced to that extremity of wretchedness which they endured in the year seventy-eight . . ." ⁶⁰ was, by April, deemed to have been surpassed, for

The melancholy decline . . . of the woollen branch is a most alarming consideration; reduced even to such a situation as would render the year 1778 . . . generally desirable at this period . . . ⁶¹

and even allowing for the extravagant language of the day, such comment clearly conveys the sense of a deteriorating situation. Conditions worsened during the summer and low wool prices at the Ballinasloe fair ⁶² offered little hope for an improvement in demand. And so it was - by September the Freeman's Journal reported that

The Liberty parts of this metropolis exhibit a scene of superlative wretchedness, not experienced on any former occasion . . . business having declined in so rapid and alarming a manner, that a total stop was put to almost every loom. ⁶³

It seems likely that unemployment also spread to the silk manufacture during these months. Silk, like broadcloth, was dependent on the home market and vulnerable to imports from Britain and the vagaries of local demand. Imports of manufactured silk had doubled to 22,471 lbs. in 1780/1 and rose again to 25,658 lbs. in 1781/2, while imports of raw and thrown silk, on which the Irish manufacture was based, although rising substantially in 1780/1, fell

in the following year, suggesting falling production in the face of sustained imports from Britain. However, the further fall in 1782/3, coupled as it was with a fall in the import of manufactured silk, suggests a marked weakening in general demand, a trend which could be expected to be felt more by the Irish manufacturers than by their most favourably regarded British counterparts. It was this weakening in general demand, along with scarce credit, which were the vital components in the downturn in urban textile production. As the example of the silk manufacture clearly shows, not only was local production falling, but imports of manufactured goods were also declining. In the broadcloth manufacture, demand for locally produced goods had clearly declined but, as in silk, there were indications, albeit less clear-cut, that the market for imported goods was also in decline. Imports of old drapery did rise again in 1782/3, but only slightly, to 371,871 yards from 362,830 yards in the previous year. Of greater significance was the fact that English merchants felt obliged to offer a year's extension of credit to purchasers in Ireland,⁶⁴ a fact suggestive of growing difficulty in securing sales.

Thus the spring, summer and early autumn of 1782 had witnessed a marked consolidation of the depression which had emerged in the second half of 1781. Irish exports, as reflected in the balance of trade, had fallen alarmingly, whilst the reappearance of urban unemployment in late 1781 had proved to be far from transitory and had increased steadily to the point where ". . . the real distresses of its numerous Artists have at last attracted public attention . . ." ⁶⁵

(iii) Harvest failure; onset of rural and urban crisis, October 1782 - January 1783.

During the autumn, there was a marked deepening in the crisis. The introduction of a new dimension with the addition of rising prices for fuel and, more importantly, for food, following the failure of the 1782 harvest, in this, a period of restricted markets, rising unemployment and falling incomes, exacerbated the mounting urban crisis and contributed to the emergence of rural dislocation. By late 1782, a severe crisis existed, culminating in the clear-cut appearance of a credit crisis in the early months of 1783.

Coal,⁶⁶ the staple urban fuel, tended to fluctuate in price on a seasonal basis, with the higher winter prices falling during the summer as more favourable weather conditions reduced demand and permitted more regular shipments from Britain,⁶⁷ but during the summer of 1782, coal prices remained high. It is likely that the high incidence of privateering around the Irish coast was the main cause. There was heavy ransoming of Whitehaven colliers in both 1781 and 1782⁶⁸ and in June, the Wexford Committee of Merchants noted that "the unprotected state of our coast" worked "to the detriment of trade . . . and in the colliers from Whitehaven and Swansea being deterred from coming hither . . ." ⁶⁹ Thus coal prices were unusually high by September, the normal time for buying in winter stocks,⁷⁰ and therefore an additional burden was placed on urban incomes already significantly reduced by growing unemployment, and on manufacturing costs, so vital in a period of uncertain returns.

Of greater significance was the failure of the 1782 harvest.⁷¹ A wet spring, causing a general failure of the seed oats in the ground,⁷² and the failure of ". . . a great many acres of ground set with wheat",⁷³ followed by a very wet summer and the return of wet weather in autumn, ensured that the run of exceedingly successful harvests would be broken. The prolongation of the harvest season, in vain attempts to salvage the grain, delayed arrival at a definite conclusion about the state of the harvest and September and October were characterized by conflicting provincial reports and rumours of urban forestalling. However, by early November, the extent of the failure was apparent, with

The Irish harvest, particularly of oats, the food of the lower orders of people . . . estimated barely ⁷⁴ sufficient for the consumption of the country . . .

and "increasing distress from the failure of the crops of grain, and of potatoes".⁷⁵ The especially severe failure of the oats crop ensured that conditions would be particularly severe in the northern counties, which were characteristic for their dependence on oatmeal as a staple food, and, indeed, the Lord Lieutenant noted that it was in the province of Ulster ". . . where the grievance really and severely presses . . ." ⁷⁶

A regional aspect to the harvest failure was apparent also in the yield of the wheat crop, which provided the greater part of the cereal supply for the production of bread, the staple urban food. The assize of bread figures clearly indicate that conditions were more favourable in the southern counties. The Belfast and Dublin assizes, following the harvest, did not approach their pre-harvest level, suggesting a shortage of grain, whereas those of Cork and Limerick exhibited an increased post-harvest assize over their pre-harvest figure. Thus, the two areas already most affected by the growing economic crisis, the linen-producing north and the urban textile capital, Dublin, were most immediately affected by the new phenomenon of scarce and expensive food.

The usual reaction to an Irish harvest failure was, of course, a speedy operation to import grain and a consequent sharp rise in the exchanges, but on this occasion the scenario was completely different. Harvests had been bad throughout Europe⁷⁷ and, for the immediate purposes of Ireland, particularly so in England and Scotland, so the frequently used remedy of relief by importation could not be applied. Thus the usual outflow of funds to finance the importation of grain did not occur. But, furthermore, in the period between the harvest and the introduction of an embargo on the export of grain, on 13th November 1782, there was heavy buying of Irish grain by British merchants. The Lord Lieutenant found ". . . commissions for the purchase of grain in this country, particularly from Scotland, almost unlimited in number and really unlimited in price"⁷⁸ and immediately before the imposition of the embargo he noted that ". . . a very considerable quantity [of grain] has already sailed . . ." ⁷⁹ The resultant intensive inflow of funds in the very short period between the harvest and the embargo was reflected in the Dublin on London exchange, with the early September peak of 9 1/8% falling to

8 3/4 - 5/8% in the middle of the month, and dropping sharply again in late October to 8 3/8 - 1/4%, the first time it had been below par since March 1781.

However, despite the implementation of the embargo and the consequent ending of export opportunities for Irish grain, there was no associated return to the high exchanges of the pre-harvest period and the Dublin on London exchange remained well below par throughout the winter of 1782-3. This was due to some extent to the opening of a successful provisions season, but essentially the low exchanges did not indicate an upturn in the economy but, rather more, reflected a deepening depression characterized by a weak demand for exports, a stagnant import trade and a fall in absentee remittances as rent arrears mounted. The profile of the exchanges reflected, too, a foreshadowing of the credit crisis as paper proved hard to sell because of a shortage of cash. Continued decline in the linen trade, uncertainty in provisions, depression in urban textile production and, of course, rising food and fuel prices, all contributed to an intensification of urban distress and the emergence of substantial rural dislocation in the late autumn of 1782 and winter of 1782-3.

The improved demand for provisions was the only chink of light in what was otherwise a very gloomy prospect, but even this light did not burn as brightly as might have been wished. The early indications for provisions had not been promising. No substantial orders had arrived by the beginning of October⁸⁰ and in the middle of the month the Ballinasloe fair proved disappointing, with ". . . great quantities of sheep and black cattle . . . driven home unsold . . ." ⁸¹ However, by mid-November the situation had improved and

The slaughtering goes on briskly at Cork, Limerick, Waterford and this place [Dublin], and the provisions business we hear promises to turn out more favourably than it was first expected . . ." ⁸²

and by January 1783, pork, which had been commanding only 15/- - 18/- per cwt. in the same month of 1782, had risen to 21/- - 22/- per cwt. Beef exports rose from 155,582 barrels in 1781/2 to 212,018 barrels in 1782/3 and pork from 84,910 barrels to 112,396 barrels, but when admiralty demand is considered, it is likely that the overall increase

was of a lesser dimension than the official figures suggest. Beef exports had risen by 36% but the number of hides weighed by the Cork Committee of Merchants had risen by only 24%.⁸³ Admiralty demand had peaked in 1781 and as the war drew to a close, the prospects for the provisions trade grew increasingly uncertain - an uncertainty which had probably been responsible for the late start to the season.

However, the other staple of Irish trade, linen, continued to decline. The obsession with saving the harvest deflected the rural population from manufacture well into November 1782, whilst in Britain, the effect of harvest failure there, in reducing purchasing power, ensured that the already highly priced Irish linens would be even less attractive than before.⁸⁴ No wonder that, in late November, the state of the linen trade was described as ". . . critical and embarrassed."⁸⁵

The continued decline in the linen trade was a significant factor accounting for the worsening conditions in the countryside. It combined with low wool prices and uncertain demand for livestock to limit rural incomes, a trend accentuated, especially in the north, as the effects of harvest failure became more evident. This deterioration in rural conditions was manifested in an intensification of difficulties in the payment of rents and arrears began to mount for the first time since 1778. Lord Abercorn's agent in north-west Ulster noted that, as a result of the downturn in linen production following the harvest failure, ". . . payments [of rent] have been very little"⁸⁶ and early in January 1783, lamented that ". . . the arrears has so much increased in this last year . . ."⁸⁷ The weak demand for wool, evident at the fairs in August 1782, continued and Blake noted in November that there was still little demand for wool,⁸⁸ whilst for livestock ". . . the fairs in the country are the worst ever known . . ."⁸⁹ He concluded that it was ". . . the worst season I ever remember in Connaught and the most difficult to receive rents or any other payments . . ."⁹⁰ In Co. Down, the agent on the Annesley estates advised against rent increases and warned that ". . . the times are critical and the establishment of a good tenantry should not be neglected . . ."⁹¹

Conditions were worse in Dublin, where the effects of deepening unemployment were exacerbated by rising food and fuel prices. The

continued poor demand for wool was reflected in the condition of the broadcloth manufacture. Contemporaries continued to stress the effect of importation, pointing out, for example, that the high level of imported old drapery during October and early November, estimated in the Dublin Journal at 28,361 yards,⁹² ". . . has put an almost total stop to the manufacture of broadcloth . . ." ⁹³ but by late 1782, the crisis, especially in Dublin, had become so severe, with mounting unemployment and rising food and fuel prices, that demand must have been very weak. In such circumstances, the significance for local manufacturers of importation would have been slight. Of deeper significance was the worsening credit crisis, the effects of which were probably reflected in the failure of the committee, formed at the beginning of November, to purchase and export old drapery, to effect any relief, and by the end of the month

The manufacturers in the broadcloth business are in such distress, that it is apprehended thousands will be in a short time reduced to beg . . .⁹⁴

Little improvement seems to have been effected during the remainder of the year and by the beginning of 1783 "Few looms are kept in employ".⁹⁵

An additional facet was added to the growing urban crisis in this period, with the emergence of a downturn in brewing and distilling. Output of spirits, small beer and ale all fell in 1782/3.⁹⁶ The shortage of raw materials following the failure of the Irish harvest, accentuated in the case of brewing by the failure of the English hop crop,⁹⁷ was the major cause, thus placing the downturn from late 1782. This fall in output, combined with the effects of falling purchasing power, was reflected in the inland excise values, which fell from £103,290 in 1781/2 to £90,875 in 1782/3 - the first fall since 1778/79.⁹⁸

This picture of deepening urban unemployment was further coloured by the rising prices of food and fuel. In January 1783, ". . . coals are kept up to their present enormous price . . ." of 25/- per barrel,⁹⁹ whilst the 6d. household loaf had fallen to 3.8.0 compared with 4.12.2 in the same month of 1782.

The deepening of the depression throughout 1782, and particularly since the autumn, culminated in the clear-cut appearance of a credit crisis in early 1783. Tightening credit supply had been a major contributor to the growth of the crisis since its first emergence in late 1781, as adverse trends in foreign trade, notably the coincidence of

depression in both linen and provisions, the two staples of Irish trade, halted the expansion in the Irish economy. The incidence of bankruptcies had begun to rise again during 1781/2 but government intervention through the Partnerships Act and the opening of negotiations for a national bank had proved unsuccessful in attracting money into commerce.¹⁰⁰ Credit tightened markedly in 1782 as depression continued in the linen trade and internal demand, both for imported and domestically produced goods, declined, reflected in growing urban unemployment and the extension of credit to Irish purchasers by British merchants. By May 1782, the shortage of cash had become acute and was accentuated in the autumn by rising prices for food and fuel and a further decline in internal demand as urban conditions worsened and dislocation emerged in the countryside. Mounting rent arrears in the autumn made the Dublin banks less liquid and, by reducing demand for absentee remittances, helped maintain the apparently favourable exchanges, which, in fact, concealed the presence of a credit crisis. Blake wrote in December of his reluctance to accept a bill due to "the badness of the times here and that there is no certainty of getting cash from the country"¹⁰¹ and in early January 1783 he remarked of a friend,

. . . he is looking out to borrow money to answer some demands and settle himself in a house and land that he has taken in the country but the times are so bad that he can't get it if his father does not advance it for him . . .¹⁰²

The re-emergence in early January of demands for a general absentee tax¹⁰³ indicates some popular concern about financial affairs and suggests that the credit crisis, which had, hitherto, in the public mind, been largely an undercurrent in the development of the economic crisis, was gaining a more general recognition as a prime component in the crisis. By the second half of January, the situation had hardened appreciably and Blake wrote to London that "I never knew the times here so bad and our bankers won't discount one another's acceptances . . ."¹⁰⁴ The Governors and Directors of the newly established Bank of Ireland, the subscription lists of which had been closed on 6 December 1782,¹⁰⁵ were urged to speedily open an office for discounting bills, since

Already much inconvenience is experienced by houses who cannot get good bills they hold discounted, which not only distresses them but many hundreds in an inferior line dependent upon them . . .¹⁰⁶

(iv) The gloom lifts temporarily; January - March 1783

However, in the midst of this deepening gloom, news of peace engendered a much needed mood of fresh optimism. A preliminary settlement with France and Spain, to complement that with America which had been reached in November 1782,¹⁰⁷ was effected in January 1783¹⁰⁸ and although definitive treaties were not signed until September,¹⁰⁹ a delay which, in some instances, inhibited post-war recovery,¹¹⁰ by late January the peace appears to have been imbued with a sufficient aura of certainty to stimulate economic life. Government debentures, although still below par, rose from 90 in December 1782 to 95 in January 1783 and remained at this level for the first three months of 1783, whilst bank stock, although not quoted until April 1783, benefited from the spillover from the stock market recovery evident in England in 1783,¹¹¹ and was in great demand. It was reported in early February that

Bank stock in London having risen to such an amazing height on account of the peace, orders have come here this day to purchase stock in the Irish bank . . .¹¹²

Great expectations were entertained about the prospects for Irish trade with the coming of peace, for

During the War little Benefit arose from our Possession of an Extension of Commerce, from the Danger of surrounding Enemies . . . The happy Hour is now at hand when we may become an opulent and flourishing People . . .¹¹³

Grattan, in 1781, had sought a catalyst to bring the fruits of free trade to maturity. Peace, it was generally believed, would produce such a consummation. The export trade in books, butter, candles, cheese, horses, soap and tallow¹¹⁴ was expected to increase significantly, while, from America, it was predicted that lumber, timber, flour, rice, wax, furs, beaver, oil, wool, dying woods, indigo, flaxseed, liquorice, barley, ashes, starch, iron and silk¹¹⁵ would be obtained and, of an immediate benefit would be an ". . . abundant supply of bread, corn, and flour . . . which . . . will . . . reduce the staff of life at least fifty per cent to the great and seasonable relief of the poor".¹¹⁶ But above all, it was anticipated that peace

. . . must be propitious in a peculiar Degree to the Welfare of this Nation, as the Americans must stand in very great Need of our low priced Cloths and Linens . . .¹¹⁷

Post-war exportation proceeded speedily and high activity in the first half of 1783 was reflected largely in the 1783/4 trade figures. Exports to America rose in value from £163,246 in 1782/3 to £421,743 in 1783/4, an increase as large as the total increase in exports over the same period and, together with increased demand from Britain, largely accounted for the substantial rise in the total value of exports from £2,935,708 in 1782/3 to £3,400,050 in 1783/4. But this expansion did not prove as sustained as had been anticipated. Disappointments in speculative export to America and a depression in Britain, following disappointments in similar ventures to America, were reflected in a general downturn in exports from the middle of 1783.

Irish merchants had been quick to respond to the challenge of trans-Atlantic trade. The more adventurous, or far-sighted, had evidently been preparing for the opening of the American market, probably since the signing of the peace preliminaries at the end of November, for it was reported in early January that

. . . when the . . . happy Event [peace] is certainly known, two large Vessels will immediately set out for Philadelphia and Charlestown, and be laden with assorted cargoes from hence.¹¹⁸

But, in general, it was following the peace with France and Spain that renewed economic activity became notable. On 1 February 1783, the Lord Lieutenant, Temple, requested information from London on the legal position of trading with America, since the Irish merchants were eager to seize an early advantage,¹¹⁹ and he reported the following day that

. . . two vessels have been already entered for exports to America, and professed to clear for Philadelphia, notwithstanding that no assurance can be given them of any compact, which regulates admission . . .¹²⁰

As early as February, the *Maria* was advertised to sail for Philadelphia,¹²¹ but there is no subsequent confirmation of this, and it seems more probable that it was mid-March before sailings to America began.¹²² However, even at this advanced date, Irish merchants were ahead of their British counterparts,¹²³ who had to await the repeal of prohibitory legislation which did not apply to Ireland.¹²⁴

The export figures for 1783/4 revealed an increase in a wide variety of articles - linen, new drapery, silk and worsted yarn, in textiles; soap, candles, bacon, butter, beer and shoes, in agriculturally based goods; and other miscellaneous articles such as glassware, hats, wrought iron and ironware. However, linen, worsted yarn and butter apart, the quantities involved were small, suggesting little more than a modest participation in early, speculative, assorted, post-war cargoes.

Linen was the most successful post-war export and the trade reacted swiftly to the new peace-time conditions.¹²⁵ Brown linen prices had been high during the winter, in anticipation of peace, but with the effecting of a preliminary settlement in Europe, there was a sudden and substantial upward movement in prices of, and demand for, linen. John Andrews noted in February 1783 that "Linens of all sorts since the peace have got up at least 10 p ct in the brown markets . . ." ¹²⁶ and good sales were reported at the Dublin hall.¹²⁷ Transatlantic exports of linen rose from 225,195 yards in 1781/2 to 632,100 yards in 1782/3, with those to America, in particular, rising from 126,620 yards to 402,033 yards, the greater part of which represented the first fruits of the post-war export trade in March 1783. The full extent of the post-war upturn in the linen trade was reflected in the 1783/4 trade figures, which revealed an increase in the export of plain cloth from 16,039,705 yards in 1782/3 to 24,961,898 yards in 1783/4, and since there was a contraction in demand in the second half of 1783, the greater part of this exportation must have been concentrated in the period March to July. Activity was high in the manufacture in the spring and summer,¹²⁸ with much of the impetus for this activity springing from a desire to make a speedy impact on the newly opened transatlantic market, exports to which rose in 1783/4 to 3,540,700 yards compared with an insignificant 632,100 yards in the previous year. Export to Britain, however, although less frenzied, was more substantial and recovered well from 15,212,469 yards in 1782/3 to 21,128,150 yards in 1783/4.

For the provisions trade, the other staple of Irish foreign trade, there was to be no opportunity to speedily dispose of their post-war stocks on the open market. The Dublin merchants requested the removal of the export embargo on salt provisions in April, since

. . . the victualling of His Majesty's fleets and armies during the war has taken off the greater part of the provisions made up in this Kingdom, but as peace renders such supplies nearly unnecessary this country must have recourse to foreign markets for the sale of the provisions now on hand . . .¹²⁹

But it was September before the embargo was removed,¹³⁰ a delay which was probably the consequence of the protracted peace negotiations.

But more disappointing was the failure of the woollen manufacture to prosper with the opening of the American market. The initial signs had been hopeful. By early February, peace had caused a rise of 2/- to 3/- per stone in wool prices,¹³¹ whilst in manufactured goods it was reported that there had been a rise of 2/6 per pair of blankets, 2/- per yard in coarse woollens and 2d. per yard in flannels, which, it was confidently predicted, would act as a spur to manufacture and agriculture.¹³² Opinion was clearly sanguine about export opportunities and woollen goods figured prominently in reports of commodities being entered for export. During February, Aldermen Darragh and Horan were praised for the ". . . considerable quantity . . ." of old and new drapery which they had entered for New York,¹³³ whilst Barnaby O'Reilly was lauded for the 6,000 yards of stuffs and poplins entered for Philadelphia.¹³⁴ These initial forays in post-war trade were reflected in the export figures for old and new drapery to America. Both rose, the former from 3,601 yards in 1781/2 to 23,873 yards in 1782/3 and the latter from 23,801 yards to 113,602 yards, but the total exports, at 40,589 yards for old and 538,061 yards for new, remained slight in relation to output. The declaration in April by both the woollen and worsted manufacturers that "since the conclusion of the peace a stagnation of business has been very forcibly felt"¹³⁵ clearly indicated that little benefit had been obtained from the American market. Exports of old drapery actually fell in 1783/4 to 35,329 yards from 40,589 yards in the previous year, with the much vaunted trade to America increasing only from 23,873 yards in 1782/3 to 28,450 yards in 1783/4. New drapery exports did increase, from 538,061 yards in 1782/3 to 666,298 yards in 1783/4, but in the context of an estimated total output of 9 million yards, this was insignificant.

(v) Hungry town and country; April - September 1783

The post-war upturn in exports seems to have done little to alleviate depression. Although the export trade had increased significantly in the first half of 1783, the returns were evidently not sufficiently large, swift or certain to prompt a recovery in the Irish economy. The two commodities expected to benefit most from the re-opening of the trans-atlantic trade, linen and old drapery, illustrated, in different ways, the inability to effect a recovery based on the stimulation provided by exports.

In the woollen manufacture, the fact that there was stagnation in April, so soon after the re-opening of trade, suggests that the exportation in March had not been of sufficient volume to re-stimulate production and that no substantial new orders had been forthcoming. It was lamented in April that

From the accounts that were published a few weeks since of the many entries made at our Custom House of numerous articles for exportation, it must give great pains to every well wisher of the prosperity of his country to perceive that entries do not daily increase . . .¹³⁶

and it seems that old drapery manufacture succumbed very readily to this early waning in export zeal. The caution of the exporters was largely the product of uncertainty about the American market and hence emphasized the speculativeness of the whole venture. Merchants unused to a substantial delay in receiving market information, news of their sales or their returns, were naturally reluctant to set further business in hand before learning the fate of their first consignments, but it was June 1783 before news arrived of the sales of the early Irish exports.¹³⁷ Furthermore, uncertainty about the course of the peace negotiations, a significant factor in slowing down the English trade revival,¹³⁸ was probably a contributory factor.

Export demand for linen held up longer, until the middle of the year, but the returns seem to have had little effect in reducing distress. Of greater significance in determining the impact of depression at this stage was the serious state of the food supply. Certainly, the north, which might have been expected to benefit most from the upturn in the linen trade, gave no impression of being better off, as the food shortage worsened during the spring and early summer.¹³⁹

The failure to stimulate recovery through export was reflected in a further tightening in the credit crisis and in the deterioration in conditions in both town and country. A sharp fall in government debentures from 95 in March to 82 in April suggested that the confidence which had pushed up debentures in January had rapidly evaporated, and the growing shortage of money was emphasized by Blake, who noted in April 1783 ". . . there never were worse times here than this season, money scarce and payments in the country intolerably bad . . ." ¹⁴⁰ a theme which he reiterated in May, observing that ". . . money is so scarce and the bad payments from the country, makes it impossible to get it discounted . . ." ¹⁴¹

In Dublin, the failure of the upturn in the export trade to stimulate local manufacture and thus increase consumer spending power, so clearly reflected in the continued stagnation in the old drapery manufacture, was evidenced also in the spread of depression to the worsted manufacture and in the deepening dislocation in silk production. The stagnation of business since the peace experienced by the worsted manufacturers was the first indication of substantial dislocation in this sector. Rising yarn prices after the peace, in a period when domestic demand was already weak, due to growing unemployment and the effects of the harvest failure, had a serious effect on the manufacture's competitiveness. Exports of yarn rose sharply in 1783/4 in response to the demands of the reviving English manufacture and the resultant rises in price and growing scarcity of yarn, by increasing the cost of the finished goods, made sales more difficult. Export of new drapery did increase during 1783/4, to 666,298 yards from 538,061 yards in 1782/3, but this was slight in relation to output and no real substitute for an improvement in domestic purchasing power which the post-war export drive had failed to supply. Thus the early months of 1783/4 saw both wings of the woollen manufacture in a state of disarray reflected in an estimated 30,000 people in Dublin in distress because of the decline in the industry. ¹⁴² Conditions worsened also in the silk manufacture which, too, was largely dependent on the domestic market and, despite the opening of a subscription for distressed silk weavers, by July a total suspension of the looms was reported. ¹⁴³ There was further contraction also in brewing and distilling as grain supplies tightened after the harvest failure. Output of spirits, small beer and ale all fell during 1783/4 for the second successive year. ¹⁴⁴ Alongside the deepening employment crisis ran a worsening in the food supply. The prevailing

high import duty on grain when under 53/4 per quarter had discouraged any substantial spring importation and by May the Lord Lieutenant reported that ". . . There does not remain a supply sufficient for the demand of the kingdom for more than two months . . ." ¹⁴⁵ The assize of the 6d. household loaf in Dublin in May, at 3.11.1, was far short of the ". . . ten pounds of bread for a shilling . . ." ¹⁴⁶ which it was believed would have been available had importation been allowed, whilst potatoes ". . . still here at 4s. 6d. per hundredweight . . . add much to the distress of the poor inhabitants . . ." ¹⁴⁷ By June, the situation had worsened. The assize had fallen to 3.5.6 and it was estimated that the distresses of the working manufacturers were increasing, judging by the numbers begging in the streets. ¹⁴⁸

Conditions were severe in the countryside also, where the post-harvest food crisis was the predominant theme. The situation was particularly bad in the north, where the harvest failure had been most severe. The agent on the Annesley estates in Co. Down reported in May that

I never saw so great and so general distress in this country as prevails just now, owing to the scarcity and advanced price of the necessaries of life . . . ¹⁴⁹

whilst his counterpart on the Co. Fermanagh estates of the Earl of Abercorn noted in April that "Provisions are very dear . . . 10 pounds of oaten meal sells at 1s. 10d., the middle price of which used to be 10d. . . ." ¹⁵⁰ and prices continued to rise, reaching 2/- by early June. ¹⁵¹ Indeed, by June, widespread charity was the order of the day. The archbishop of Armagh contributed £100 to buy meal, ¹⁵² Trinity College provided £200 to be distributed for the relief of the undertenants on their Ulster estates, ¹⁵³ whilst the Earl of Abercorn's ". . . innumerable works feeds hundreds every day . . ." ¹⁵⁴ In fact, June proved to be something of a flashpoint, confirming the view of the Privy Council that by then ". . . in all parts of the kingdom the prices are so extremely high that the industrious poor cannot long support their families by their labour . . ." ¹⁵⁵ The appearance of food riots in such geographically diverse centres as Trillick, Gorey, Gorteen and Kilcock ¹⁵⁶ confirmed that the food crisis had not only worsened in the areas most obviously affected after the harvest failure, but had spread into areas which had initially suffered little dislocation. This was particularly the case in the south and west where, evidently, the increased demand for worsted yarn had not generated sufficient employment to counteract the rising food prices and where little confidence could be

engendered about the immediate future, with uncertainty in the post-war livestock trade while the embargo on the export of provisions remained.

Thus, by June, it was evident that there was a widespread food crisis and the new Lord Lieutenant, Northington, on examining the corn and potato returns prepared for Temple, his predecessor, was ". . . convinced . . . beyond a doubt of the serious and alarming distress of the country . . .",¹⁵⁷ a conclusion shared by the Privy Council, which recommended the setting aside of the import duty and the implementation of an import bounty to last until the end of September.¹⁵⁸ The remainder of June and early July were characterized by frequent reports of arrivals of cargoes of corn and meal, and falls in the market, but such reports were evidently little more than indicators of the desperation with which the situation was being viewed. The import bounty was slow to take effect at retail level and the food crisis proved more protracted than the instigators of the bonding scheme had anticipated. During July, importation of grain, notably from the Low Countries and France, began, following the relaxation of the import controls in June.¹⁵⁹ However, such import appears to have been neither significant nor substantial until September. Not until September was there a significant increase in the assize of bread and a general reduction in the market price of grain, an improvement in conditions preceded in the middle of August by a sharp rise in the exchanges above par, suggestive of an intense outflow of funds, such as substantial imports of grain would have required. The total value of imports, other than grain, rose only slightly in 1783/4, to £3,121,860 from £2,975,722 in 1782/3, emphasizing the stagnant nature of domestic demand, but the total value of imports, encompassing the dramatic rise in the import of grain (wheat imports rose from 833 qts. in 1782/3 to 49,206 qts. in 1783/4 and flour from 4,350 cwts. to 75,561 cwts.) increased from £3,007,236 in 1782/3 to £3,343,032 in 1783/4. The greater part of this grain import took place after June 1783 and this contributed substantially to the high autumn exchanges.

The crisis in the countryside deepened - poor fairs and depressed manufacture ensured a further decline in rural incomes, which, stretched by the demands of a deepening food crisis, were inadequate to meet rent payments, and thus arrears continued to mount during the summer and early autumn of 1783.

It was late July before rural meal prices peaked on the Abercorn estates¹⁶⁰ and throughout the month charity and relief works continued to dominate the rural scene. Abercorn's agent reported that ". . . the poor seem every day to be more and more distressed . . ." with numbers of people actually kept from starving by relief works.¹⁶¹ Earl Fitzwilliam laid out £200 in buying grain for the support of the poor on his Co. Wicklow estates,¹⁶² and similar ventures were undertaken by Henry Sandford in Castlerea¹⁶³ and the Countess of Darnley in Co. Meath.¹⁶⁴ Significant price falls did not occur until August, with the first benefits of the harvest and late September before any evidence of recovery appeared. This protracted food crisis placed a heavy burden on rural cash incomes. The ability to pay high prices for meal and grain had been speedily eroded. In June, Abercorn's agent had noted that there was neither money nor credit available to buy meal¹⁶⁵ and the continued dependence upon charity in this and the succeeding months suggests a worsening in rural solvency. Clearly, rural employment, notably production for the summer brown linen markets and weaving of worsted yarn for export, were far from sufficient to offset the effects of the food crisis. Indeed, export demand for worsted yarn had weakened due to the malaise in Britain, and this combined with the continued depression in domestic woollen production to further reduce rural incomes by ensuring low wool prices, as was evident at the fairs in August. This decline in rural solvency was reflected not alone in the inability to purchase food, but also in growing problems with rent payments. John Moore, the agent on the Annesley estates in Co. Down, had warned his employer in May that, on account of the high price and scarcity of food, a large arrear must be expected,¹⁶⁶ and it was noted in Connaught, in June, that there was great difficulty in getting in rents "in these very bad times . . ."¹⁶⁷ Abercorn's agent, writing in September, blamed the £2,000 increase in the arrears over the previous twelve months, on the high price of corn, which

. . . undoubtedly greatly benefited those of the tenants who had to sell, but they are very few compared with those who were obliged to buy, what would barely sustain them, but for ready money . . .¹⁶⁸

The urban crisis was, if anything, more severe, for, despite some slight relief from imports, the food crisis proved as protracted as in the countryside and the employment problems were considerably worse,

for not only was there a deepening of distress in Dublin, but severe dislocation emerged in the provincial urban centres of the south.

The sporadic nature of import under the bonding scheme was of very limited effect and was not reflected in the bread assizes, which fell again in July in all the leading centres. The situation was worst in Dublin, where the 6d. household loaf weighed only 3.3.4 and where potatoes were being retailed at ". . . so enormous a price . . ." as 10/8 per cwt. Conditions were also severe in Belfast and Kilkenny, which had assizes of 3.8.5 and 3.9.3 respectively, and these two centres, together with Dublin, experienced their lowest assize for the whole crisis in this month. However, the situation was better in the south, with the leading centres, Cork and Limerick, enjoying assizes well in excess of 4 lbs. Despite more sustained importation in August and the first effects of the harvest, the assize was slow to respond, and the Dublin Journal expressed concern in mid-August that ". . . the loaf had yet received little addition of weight or quality . . ." ¹⁶⁹ It was September before there was any substantial improvement and the Dublin, Belfast and Kilkenny assizes all rose to above 4 lbs. in that month.

The crisis in both town and country combined to spread and sustain emigration. The halt to emigration since 1775, ¹⁷⁰ occasioned by the war, had created a backlog of potential emigrants who eagerly awaited the peace, for, as one observer noted in June 1872, "our people adore the manly firmness and courage of their relations in America, and when a peace is established will flock there in thousands." ¹⁷¹ But, by the time emigration was possible, after the signing of the peace preliminaries in January 1783, a severe crisis in employment and food supply was apparent and the prevailing harsh economic conditions must have been a significant contributor to the upsurge in emigration which emerged in February 1783. Emigration seems to have been particularly marked initially in the north and in Dublin, the two areas from which one might expect the necessary degree of affluence to promote emigration in normal times, but also the two areas most seriously affected, initially, by the growing crisis. It was reported in early February that

Ships are already put upon this ruinous traffic [emigration to America] from all the northern ports, and it is thought will be all crowded . . . ¹⁷²

whilst in Dublin it was noted that "There is a sort of emigrating madness existing at the present time, in this city . . ." ¹⁷³ But although the extent of the contribution of the economic crisis to the immediate bout of post-war emigration is elusive, it is probable that the numerical intensification of, and the geographical spread in emigration throughout the spring and early summer of 1783 was a direct response to the growing harshness of the economic environment. In April it was reported that there was a ". . . madness for emigration . . ." in ". . . many parts of the kingdom" ¹⁷⁴ and by the beginning of May, emigration was noted to be ". . . increasing to an alarming degree," ¹⁷⁵ whilst in Dublin, in July, sailing costs, which in April had varied from 10 guineas to £20, had risen to 15 to 30 guineas, ". . . so numerous are the adventurers going out now . . . from this port to America . . ." ¹⁷⁶ It was believed that "The dearness of provisions, and the stagnation of trade at home, must certainly increase this rage for emigration" ¹⁷⁷ and the Earl of Abercorn concluded in July that his tenants ". . . are right, not to stay to be starved . . ." ¹⁷⁸

Thus the spring and early summer of 1783 produced no post-war boom and the upturn in exports which did take place provided insufficient stimulus for manufacture to effect a recovery in employment and offset the effects of a deepening food crisis.

CHAPTER 3

THE DEEPENING OF THE CRISIS

- (i) Deepening crisis: Sept. 1783 - Mar. 1784.
- (ii) Nadir of crisis: Mar. - Aug. 1784.
- (iii) Recovery: Aug. 1784 - Jan. 1785.

(i) Deepening of crisis : September 1783 - March 1784

Conditions worsened appreciably in the autumn and winter of 1783. By autumn 1783, falling demand for Irish goods in America and Britain had intensified distress, especially in the towns, while a disastrous season for provisions and another unsatisfactory harvest ensured that the customary autumnal relief would not obtain.

Disappointment in speculative export to America and a downturn in the British market, following similar disappointments among British merchants, caused a decline in Irish exports from the middle of the year. It seems that there was a contraction in American demand in the second half of 1783. Writing in June, an American merchant predicted that trade would be slow following

. . . the amazing influx of goods from almost every part of the world . . . under an idea of the country's being in great want of goods, when in fact the country was full at the conclusion of the war . . .¹

a development likely to inhibit exports. But of greater significance was the slowing down of the post-war recovery in Britain. Autumn saw the appearance of a financial crisis following over-speculation in the American market, and the course of British stocks, which had begun to fall from July 1783,² would seem to back-date this decline to summer. The result was a slowing down in the circulation of money and a hampering of the process of recovery.³ This downturn in demand was particularly reflected in the linen trade. Abercorn's agent, in October 1783, observed that ". . . last summer, our brown markets kept up very well, but the sales at market, were as I hear not by any means answerable to it . . ." ⁴ a trend confirmed by the correspondence of John Andrews which, after a period of marked post-war optimism, had, by July, returned to the theme of abatements and lower than anticipated prices. The emergence of a campaign in late 1783 to secure additional duties on the export of linen yarn in an attempt to reduce production costs and thus increase the competitiveness of cloth exports,⁵ is strongly suggestive of growing difficulties with sales. For the urban textile manufacturers, the downturn in the American market was of especial significance, for it had represented the only alternative to the depressed domestic market.

The Dublin broadcloth weavers pointed out in September that subscriptions to aid export had not been successful and the depression in silk and new drapery clearly indicated that overseas demand had made little impression on the prevailing malaise. In November, some 5-6,000 were unemployed in the silk manufacture whilst by August, the Dublin worsted manufacture was almost totally suspended, and during the summer depression spread to the provincial urban centres, which had previously proved less vulnerable - manufacturers were said to be starving in Bandon, whilst in Cork it was reported that there was more unemployment than usual at the end of the summer.⁶

The most significant indicator of the worsening urban conditions was the emergence in the second half of 1783 of a campaign to secure additional duties on imported manufactured goods - in effect, a demand for protection. By mid-1783, it was apparent that there was to be no recovery based on post-war exports and the consequent reduction in expectation due to a return to dependence on the domestic market caused the condition of the urban manufacturers to appear in a much more serious light. The worsening employment situation readily revealed the failure of the various voluntary subscriptions, bounties and relief schemes and concentrated attention on what was believed to be the basic problem of the urban manufacturers - the inability to compete with imported British goods. From July, the Volunteers were advocating protection as the only method of relieving unemployment and by November, parliament was being vigorously petitioned by the manufacturers.⁷ The speedy development of the protection idea from being one plank in the platform of a radical minority to becoming the major demand of the urban manufacturing classes was indicative, not only of the failure of the government to produce an alternative policy, but also, and more importantly, of the severity of the crisis. Furthermore, another facet of the development of the campaign reflected accurately the reality of the urban crisis in that, although the general theory of protection was that "duties should be laid on the importation of all manufactures, as may suffice to give a decided preference to those of Ireland . . .",⁸ which John Foster believed would primarily affect British woollens, beer, cottons and mixed manufactures, glass, printed and stained linens, refined sugar and ironware,⁹ as early as September, the campaign had become dominated by the silk and woollen

manufacturers and, in effect, had become an attempt to solve the ills of the urban textile manufacture, the largest urban employer.¹⁰

Autumn brought a disastrous season for the provisions trade. Exports in 1783/4 of pork and beef (and of the derivatives of hides and tallow) fell - to 52,912 barrels from 112,369 barrels in 1782/3 in the case of the former and to 126,531 barrels from 212,018 barrels in 1782/3 in the case of the latter - and there was only a small increase in butter exports. These were the lowest figures for pork since 1774/5 and for beef since before 1764. There had been some concern since the peace about the transition from war-time to peace-time markets while the embargo on export continued in force and this was still the dominant theme immediately prior to the opening of the season. Blake observed of beef in late August that it ". . . is likely to be low this season as we shall have no great demand for our fleets, who took away all our choice heavy beef. . ." ¹¹ and the advertising in September of the sale "by auction" of 7,000 barrels of pork and 3,500 barrels of beef from the army victualling stores ¹² emphasized the difficulties of the transition. However, the removal of the embargo in mid-September ¹³ had little effect in stimulating the trade, as was evidenced by the state of the Ballinasloe Fair in the following month, at which ". . . sheep and black cattle sold considerably under the prices given last year. Several parcels of each were drove home unsold." ¹⁴ Pork, in Limerick, which had been fetching 19/- - 21/- per cwt. in January 1783 (after the delayed beginning of the 1782 season), was in the same month of 1784 producing only 16/6 per cwt., whilst on a retail level, beef, which had been selling in Kilkenny at 3d. - 4d. per lb. in the spring of 1783, had by December fallen in price to 1½d. - 2d., with similar prices recorded in Limerick. The provisions trade in peace-time depended essentially on the West Indies markets ¹⁵ but in 1783/4, the first year of peace, export of beef, butter and pork to these markets all fell. The protracted peace negotiations may have been responsible to some degree in hampering the re-establishment of commercial contacts, but of greater significance was the emergence, for the first time, of competition from north American. ¹⁶ Butter was the only commodity of the three to increase in export and significantly it was less dependent on the transatlantic market ¹⁷ and demand from the European nations recently engaged in war was sufficient to offset the effects of the declining West Indies trade.

An additional dimension was added to the already grave situation by the renewed necessity for substantial grain imports following another unsatisfactory harvest in 1783.¹⁸ The 1783 harvest was, at first appearance, a success, with the wheat and barley crops being largely gathered in before the appearance of wet weather, the effect of which on the oats crop caused little initial concern, and this was reflected in the satisfactory bread assizes in the final quarter of 1783, with the 6d. household loaf in Belfast, Dublin, Kilkenny, Cork and Limerick being well above 4 lbs. However, by late January 1784 there had clearly been a marked deterioration in the food stocks and the Lord Lieutenant reported that, whereas the price of corn was "very moderate" in the south, prices increased going north, with oatmeal, the staple food in Ulster, reaching levels in excess of the post-1782 harvest failure situation. The compounding of this problem by the demands of the distillers for oats since barley supplies were exhausted, the damaging of the potato crop by the long period of severe weather and, especially, the continued export demand for oats, prompted the introduction of an embargo on the export of oats, oatmeal and barley on 27 January 1784. The thinking behind the embargo had been that ". . . the north will receive a supply from the south",¹⁹ but the reluctance of the southern population to accede to this policy was evidenced in early February 1784 by the use of physical force to prevent the internal movement of grain.²⁰ The re-emergence of food riots, for the first time since the acute food crisis preceding the relaxation of import controls on grain in June 1783, emphasized the seriousness of the food situation, even in the southern centres where corn was alleged to be most favourably priced. The success of the southern population in preventing the internal movement of grain is reflected in the low number of coasters arriving in Dublin in late January and early February and in the consequent necessity of a resumption of substantial grain imports, clearly apparent in the reappearance of regular cargoes of grain in Dublin from mid-February, which was a significant factor in the rising spring exchanges. This was in marked contrast to the previous year, since the inability to import grain after the harvest failure of 1782 had been a factor in keeping the exchange low in the spring of 1783.

The addition of a bad provisions season and the resumption of substantial grain imports, to the already depressed conditions in the linen trade, heralded a deepening of the crisis and this was reflected in rising exchanges in the autumn of 1783 and spring of 1784 and in the most serious and most lasting credit crisis. Falling demand for linen from mid-1783, a disastrous season for provisions and the beginning of imports of grain in February 1784, combined to induce the credit crisis. Delayed payment of rents by those who had been drained of cash in 1783 also contributed and, in fact, the credit crisis was to last longest in those regions where recovery was weakest and arrears most stubborn, producing a marked dichotomy between the south (and west) and the north (where the strong recovery in the linen trade fuelled a speedier upturn in economic life), in 1784. The credit crisis was also predictable, in that it had been foreshadowed by the events of late 1782 and early 1783.²¹ Adverse economic conditions in autumn 1782, with harvest failure, depression in the linen trade and a delayed beginning to the provisions season, had tightened credit markedly and a discounting crisis was evident by January 1783. However, the substantial grain exports before the imposition of the embargo in November 1782, a relatively brisk provisions trade late in the season, the inability to import substantial quantities of grain before June 1783 and an upsurge in optimism because of the re-opening of trade with America, served to ease conditions somewhat in the spring of 1783. But the autumn of 1783 was bad on all fronts and thus a really severe and prolonged discounting crisis was inevitable in early 1784.

The Bank of Ireland, in response to worsening economic conditions, had decided in November 1783 to gradually reduce the number of bills under discount²² and with the failure of the situation to improve, decided to reduce discounts still further, in January 1784.²³ Conditions evidently worsened during January and at the end of the month an irate merchant, addressing himself to the Governor and Directors of the Bank of Ireland, observed

. . . you declare your intention of discounting all good bills at two months notice . . . Good heavens, how you have deceived the public! there has been within these last three weeks, the most unexceptionable bills refused,²⁴ and of course, the trader thrown into great difficulties.

Blake's business, which was dependent largely on cash from Connaught, was almost at a standstill by early 1784, with the provisions trade depressed and rent arrears mounting. He wrote to a correspondent in London in February, "My not having anything to do for some time in the City deprived me of the pleasure of writing to you . . ." ²⁵ and later in the same month, he explained to Maurice Blake "I have honoured Mr. Foster's Bill . . . as it was in your favour but if you was not engaged I really wo^d not pay it the times so bad and cash so scarce." ²⁶ By the end of March he seemed almost resigned and exhausted, writing ". . . nothing new here the times in the country very bad . . ." ²⁷ The Dublin on London exchange not only rose in the autumn of 1783, in contrast to the normal trend, but rose above par in August, reaching $8\frac{1}{2}\%$ in September. The return below par in October was short-lived and November, normally the most favourable month of the year, brought a rise in the exchange to $8\frac{5}{8}\%$. The exchange rose again in February, to $8\frac{1}{2}\frac{7}{8}\%$, and by March had reached 9%. Mounting rent arrears in late 1783 and early 1784 should have tended to ease the pressure on the exchanges, since there was not the same volume of remittances to absentee landlords in Britain. The fact that this did not occur, reflects both the low level of exports and the beginning of large imports of grain. The banks were made less liquid by a combination, on the internal front, of a slow inflow of cash with trade and manufacture depressed and rent arrears mounting, and on the external front, by the remittances of funds outwards to pay for increased grain imports. The gap between the London and Dublin exchange rates, normally about 1%, did not close, as was sometimes the case under pressure of demand for scarce bills on London, suggesting a very depressed market in which demand for paper of any sort was limited. Not surprisingly, bankruptcies rose in 1783/4, for the third successive year, to 49, the highest annual total for the crisis, having stood at 36 in the previous year.

The re-opening of parliament in October 1783 provided a forum for the discussion of the state of the nation and the marked attention devoted to the economic situation reflected the force with which the effects of the crisis were being felt. A protracted debate on the economy, in which members spoke of the prodigality of government expenditure, ²⁸ the growth in the national debt, ²⁹ the failure of free trade to stimulate manufacture ³⁰ and

. . . the farmer ruined by calamitous times . . . the lower order of people starving . . . the avenues to the capital . . . beset with starving manufacturers . . .³¹

resulted in December in ". . . a motion for retrenchment yielded to almost without a debate . . ." ³² and culminated in the presentation of a bill for retrenchment of the national expenses. ³³ The re-emergence of concern about remittances to absentee landlords (usually an indicator of severe economic disorder), which prompted the issue of an updated edition of Thomas Prior's List of the Absentees of Ireland, ³⁴ also climaxed in December with the presentation of a bill to tax absentees. ³⁵ The fact that both these bills were defeated in no way reflected an easing in the situation.

In the countryside, the crisis became more widespread so that, together with the incidence of urban dislocation, distress was, by the early months of 1784, clearly nationwide, whereas earlier difficulties had centred on Dublin with the provincial areas suffering only periodic dislocation.

In Ulster, the beneficial effects of the 1783 harvest seem to have been slight. Although Abercorn's agent had reported in late September that the tenants were beginning to recover, ³⁶ as late as January 1784, the Annesley tenants in Co. Down were still recovering from the effects of the food crisis of the summer of 1783. ³⁷ and by late January 1784 it was clear that food prices were again dangerously high in Ulster, where oats and oatmeal were reported as being higher in price than in the previous year, ". . . in the course of which the scarcity nearly approached to a famine . . ." ³⁸ The continued malaise in the linen trade ensured that there would be no substantial rural incomes with which to offset the increasing prices for food and thus mounting rent arrears and increased distress were inevitable. Abercorn's agent expressed concern in December about ". . . the charges that I have been obliged to make for lost arrears . . ." and went on to observe "I am sure there must be more . . .", ³⁹ while Annesley's agent reported in January 1784

I am now endeavouring to get in the last May rents, but as the people still labour under the consequences of last summer's famine and unavoidably contracted debts at that period, I am obliged to receive apologies . . .⁴⁰

In Connaught, adverse trends in cattle and wool had a severe effect. Prices had been low at the wool fairs in August 1783⁴¹ as depression in both wool and worsted production reduced demand, while the recession in provisions was reflected in poor livestock sales in October.⁴² Furthermore, the severe winter weather, the effect of which was especially marked among the Munster farmers,⁴³ probably added to the difficulties of those dependent on the cattle trade. In January 1784, John Blake reported that there was a year's rent in the tenants' hands⁴⁴ and at the end of March, Blake noted ". . . the times in the country very bad."⁴⁵ In Munster, depression in worsted combined with the worst season during the crisis for the provisions trade, and with the effects of the food shortage, to produce substantial dislocation in an area which had hitherto escaped the worst effects of the developing economic crisis. The spread of depression in worsted production to the southern centres in the second half of 1783⁴⁶ and the consequent fall in local demand for worsted yarn was reflected in the export figures, with exports of worsted yarn rising, as was usual in a time of depressed internal demand, from 66,677 sts. in 1782/3 to 100,390 sts. in 1783/4, in an attempt to compensate for the reduced domestic requirements. The appearance of food riots in February 1784⁴⁷ suggested a worsening in the food supply in the south, apparently the most favourably placed area after the 1783 harvest, and this had a serious effect on the Munster farmers. The interruption of the movement of food supplies by the mobs hindered southern farmers in getting their grain readily to market and taking advantage of the higher prices outside the region. Their other source of cash income, the livestock trade, already seriously dislocated by depression in the provisions trade, was further dislocated in the early months of 1784. The long period of frost and snow, by inhibiting the use of winter and early spring pasture, had placed unusually severe pressure on the stocks of hay which, by March, was selling at ". . . the enormous rate of 4s. a hundred. . ."⁴⁸ and this was responsible for the early appearance of large numbers of cattle at Smithfield market.⁴⁹ The result of high feeding costs and the early marketing of inadequately prepared cattle was exemplified by the case of the farmers of the Golden Vale, who

. . . by their cattle this year . . . are very great losers (sic) and must chiefly pay their rents by the sale of grain and potatoes . . . but the mobs at Clonmel, Carrick and Waterford have stopped the export of these articles . . . by which the farmers must be undone, the landlords loose their rents . . .⁵⁰

In the towns, the effects of the continued acute depression in employment, exacerbated by rising fuel prices and a worsening food supply, ensured an intensification of urban distress, which, in Dublin by early 1784, was the deepest of the crisis.

Depression in employment in urban textile production continued through the autumn and winter of 1783. Some alternative employment was provided by the cotton manufacture, expanding under the aegis of substantial government support. Comerford and O'Brien, for example, had already, by November 1783, removed many weavers from Dublin to Balbriggan, and in the previous month Robert Brooke's scheme to bring Dublin weavers to Prosperous had begun.⁵¹ But the scale of such operations was small in relation to the employment problem in the metropolis, and in February 1784, it was reported that the manufacture of wool, worsted, silk and mixed goods

. . . not only in the city and liberties adjoining but in every part of the country where manufactures have been established, are in some places in a very declining state, and in others nearly annihilated . . .⁵²

The worsening employment situation was reflected particularly in the sustained demands for protection, which by early 1784 had become insistent. The Dublin Journal opined in early February that the need for protection was demonstrated

by the extreme degree of misery and wretchedness that universally prevail throughout the kingdom, particularly in this ill-fated metropolis⁵³

and the widespread acceptance of this thesis was amply demonstrated at a meeting of Dublin citizens later in the month, at which it was concluded

. . . that to give immediate relief to the industrious poor . . . it is absolutely necessary laws should be passed . . . to protect our domestic industry, by such duties as will give a decided preference to our own fabrics.⁵⁴

This growth in popular clamour was clearly voiced by the Lord Lieutenant at the end of February, when he wrote that

The most difficult subject which is likely to be introduced is that of Protecting Duties, which is much more earnestly called for from the distresses which are brought

upon the poor and especially the manufacturers by the extraordinary inclemency of the season.⁵⁵

Indeed, the appearance of a spell of unusually severe winter weather in late December 1783, which lasted in the north until mid-February 1784,⁵⁶ certainly exacerbated the already acute urban distress. Manual work was limited, alternative work in the countryside was restricted and coal prices rose, as was reflected in the need to subsidize coal prices in both Dublin and Cork in the first quarter of 1784.⁵⁷ The introduction of the embargo on the export of oats, oatmeal and potatoes in January 1784 had clearly indicated a worsening in the food supply, especially in the north, and this was reflected in the towns. Oatmeal in Londonderry had risen to 17/11½ per cwt. in February 1784, compared with 15/4 in the previous year, and in Belfast, peaked in March at 15/10. In Dublin, the 6d. household loaf fell below 4 lbs. in February and remained below this weight until after the 1784 harvest, and at 3.12.3, only slightly exceeded the 3.9.4 of the previous year but was substantially lighter than the 4.14.4 of February 1782 (i.e. following the last successful harvest in 1781). Only in the southern centres did the food supply continue favourable, with the loaf in both Cork and Limerick remaining well above 4 lbs.

In Dublin, in January, the combination of unemployment and high food and fuel prices was reported to have induced "a greater degree of distress at present in this city, than at any period for a series of years"⁵⁸ and the House of Industry noted a rapid increase in the numbers applying for external relief. It was estimated in February 1784 that 50,000 people were in real want and the continual reports of the exhausting of parochial funds throughout February and March emphasized the increasing need for relief.⁵⁹ In the provinces, urban unemployment, which had become noticeable during the summer of 1783, was rife by early 1784. In Cork, where the parish returns revealed some 21,000 distressed poor,⁶⁰ manufacturers were reported to be begging in the streets and similar conditions obtained in Limerick, Bandon and Waterford.⁶¹ However, it is likely that the lot of the unemployed in the southern provincial centres was less severe than that of their counterparts in the metropolis, due to the comparatively moderate price and ready availability of food.

(ii) The nadir of the crisis : March - August 1784

The crisis deepened further in the spring of 1784 and reached its nadir in the summer, reflected in the coincidence of the most general distress, the highest exchanges and the most acute banking crisis. Despite an upturn in export demand for linen and a fall in imports, credit continued to tighten and the exchange remained above par until early August, due largely to the effects of substantial imports of grain. Sustained emigration throughout the spring and summer emphasized the severity of conditions in both town and country.

Export of plain linen cloth, which had risen substantially in 1783/4, rose again in 1784/5 to 26,677,647 yards from the 24,961,898 yards of the previous year. This was the first time since 1775-76 that linen exports had risen in two successive years and the total for 1784/5 was the largest export total to date for the century. Strong demand was evident from the beginning of the spring season, with contemporary reports laying great emphasis on ". . . the considerable export of linens now taking place to the American ports . . ." ⁶² However, although there was an upturn in demand from America in the spring and summer after a period of uncertain markets since mid-1783, the contemporary emphasis was misleading, for over the year 1784/5, exports of plain linens to North America fell from 3,372,912 yards in 1783/4 to 2,384,679 yards. Of greater importance was the steady expansion of the British market as British commercial life recovered from the reverses of late 1783, and this was reflected in the increased exports to Britain from 21,128,150 yards in 1783/4 to 23,904,514 yards in 1784/5. John Foster noted that the summer linen markets in the north had been "remarkably good", ⁶³ business was brisk at the White Linen Hall in Dublin despite the opening of a new hall in Newry during the summer, and newspaper reports indicate regular shipments of cargoes of linen throughout the spring and summer. ⁶⁴

Despite the continued strong demand for grain, the total value of imports fell in 1784/5, largely due to the implementation of non-importation agreements from the spring of 1784. Imports fell from £3,343,032 in 1783/4 to £3,056,394 in 1784/5, with particularly sharp falls in the import of woollen goods - new drapery imports fell from 323,217 yards to 140,620 yards and old drapery from 351,844 yards to 156,772 yards.

As early as April 1784, the Dublin Volunteers had resolved not to purchase any article of clothing which was not of Irish manufacture⁶⁵ and this was speedily followed by a host of similar non-consumption and non-importation resolutions from parishes, guilds, clubs and societies, not only in Dublin, but in such geographically diverse locations as Cork, Limerick, Kilkenny, Sligo and Belfast. However, whilst it is clear that in the course of the year the non-importation agreements significantly reduced imports, it seems likely that their initial effect was more limited than had been anticipated, as is suggested by a campaign of tarring and feathering of recalcitrants in Dublin, which lasted until August.^{65a}

The improved export performance of linen and the fall in imports largely accounted for the return to a healthy surplus in the balance of trade in 1784/5. With the total value of exports rising to £3,779,560 in 1784/5 from £3,400,050 in 1783/4 and the total value of imports falling to £3,056,394 from £3,343,032 there was an impressive surplus of £723,176 compared with a modest surplus of £57,018 in the previous year. But the evidence of the exchanges (the London on Dublin exchange remained above par until August) suggests that it was not until late summer that the balance of trade was in surplus - not, that is, until the prospects of a good harvest were sufficiently strong to obviate the need for continued large imports of grain.

The insufficiency of the 1783 harvest, revealed by the need for an embargo on export in January 1784, and the failure to achieve a satisfactory redistribution of regional surpluses, forced an increasing dependence on imported grain, as the domestic stocks declined through the spring and summer. As early as March, in reaction to ". . . our present high prices . . ."

. . . considerable quantities of foreign wheat are . . . now actually shipping in different parts of Holland and the Low Countries from this port [Dublin] . . .⁶⁶

and these proved to be the forerunners of considerable imports from Britain, especially after the enactment in May of Foster's Corn Bill,⁶⁷ which eased the restrictions that had been such a hindrance to import after the 1782 failure. During the year 1784/5, 37,626 qts. of wheat and 109,876 cwts. of flour were imported, compared with 49,206 qts. of wheat and 75,561 cwts. of flour in the previous year, and with 833 qts. of wheat and 4,350 cwts. of flour in 1782/3, that is in the last year unaffected by harvest failure. The marked success of the 1784 harvest

makes it unlikely that there was much importation after August, and thus, the substantial import of grain and flour was probably concentrated in the spring and summer of 1784.

The effect of heavy importation of grain in such a concentrated period was clearly reflected in the exchanges and in the state of credit. Despite the upturn in the linen trade, the reduction in the import of manufactured goods and the continued tardiness in paying rents, the exchange remained high, falling only to $8\frac{7}{8}\%$ and $8\frac{6}{8}\%$ in April and May 1784 respectively, from the 9% of March. However, with increased importation of grain following the implementation of Foster's Corn Law in May, the exchange rose again above 9% in late May, before peaking at $9\frac{1}{4} - \frac{5}{8}\%$ in early June, the highest figure for the crisis, and remained above par until early August. The intense outflow of funds was reflected also in the state of credit. In June, the month in which the exchange had risen markedly in response to heavy importation, credit tightened further. The Bank of Ireland refused all bills not maturing within 31 days and, where possible, refused to discount any bill, where such could be done discreetly,⁶⁸ causing Blake to complain that ". . . neither our National or other banks discount . . ." ⁶⁹ The effect of this, according to the Belfast Newsletter in early July, was that ". . . the credit of the kingdom has never been brought to a more distressing situation . . ." ⁷⁰ By the beginning of August, the Bank was still being criticised for "the bad effects of their present conduct in the non-acceptance of drafts and notes at a longer time than 21 days . . ." ⁷¹ The culmination of this trend was the collapse of Warren's Bank in Cork in August. At a meeting of "three hundred of the principal merchants, traders and inhabitants" of Cork in late July, it was resolved

. . . in a perfect confidence of the security of the bank of Messrs. Warren, Bernard and Co. that the holders of their notes should not, during the present scarcity of specie in that city, call on them for payment, for the space of four months, of any sum exceeding ten guineas ⁷²

but by early August, the failure of the bank was being reported,⁷³ with, in some quarters, the blame being put upon the Bank of Ireland.⁷⁴ But it would seem that the financing of the 1783 election⁷⁵ and perhaps the effects of the post-war slump in the provisions trade, had left the bank in a weak position which was exposed by the shortage of cash and tightening of credit during the summer of 1784.

In the towns, conditions were severe. A slight improvement was effected in Dublin due to the non-importation agreements, but in the southern centres, there was a marked deterioration in the quality of urban life.

By May 1784, some employment was being generated in the Dublin broadcloth manufacture, due to the effects of the non-importation agreements, and by July this had been extended to the narrow worsted weavers in the metropolis.⁷⁶ However, this upturn in employment was not as far-reaching as had been anticipated and neither were its effects as beneficial as might have been wished, as was reflected in the appearance of additional voluntary relief schemes. In July, a committee of subscribers published premiums for the relief of the poor unemployed manufacturers,⁷⁷ while during the spring and summer, the Committee for the Relief of the Poor were offering a 6% bounty to stimulate the Irish woollen manufacture.⁷⁸ Broadcloth was obviously best suited to benefit from the non-importation agreements, since imports accounted for a substantial proportion of consumption and thus their reduction could be expected to stimulate domestic production in order to make up the deficiency. This was not the case in silk and worsted manufacture. Silk, although suffering directly from importation, had other problems, mainly related to a reduction in the size of the market due to competition from cotton-based alternatives, and thus a fall in import could not guarantee a speedy return to substantial production, especially in view of the large stock of unsold goods which had been accumulated. By mid-June, silk production was still severely depressed, with the looms "'almost suspended",⁷⁹ and at the end of August, the Dublin Journal expressed regret at "such a dullness prevailing in the silk manufacture . . ."⁸⁰ In the case of worsted, imports were small in relation to output and thus the effect of their reduction was minimal. Worsteds producers required an increase in domestic purchasing power and this occurred only to a very limited extent in the spring and summer of 1784. Some benefit did accrue from the improved position of the broadcloth weavers and this probably accounted for the increased employment already noted among the Dublin narrow worsted weavers, but in the provincial centres where worsted production was more substantial, the effects of such increases in purchasing power would have had a very limited effect. In

May, in Limerick, the principal woollen drapers met to consider the ". . . present Calamitous State of the Poor Manufacturers";⁸¹ in Cork, it was reported in June that there were "thousands of weavers . . . actually starving for want of employment"⁸² and in July it was claimed that, despite the non-importation agreements, "numbers of journeymen remain yet unemployed in consequence of the stagnation".⁸³ Furthermore, much of the benefit, in terms of increased purchasing power which accrued from the improved employment situation, was eroded by the continuing food crisis.⁸⁴ Despite the embargo on export and the substantial imports of grain and flour, the supply of bread and oatmeal continued to deteriorate. In Dublin, the 6d. household loaf, although fluctuating from month to month rather than exhibiting a steady reduction in size, remained under 4 lbs. until the harvest, while in Limerick and Cork the assizes worsened appreciably, dropping under 4 lbs. in May and June respectively, for the first time during the crisis, and reaching their lowest point in August. In the north, where oatmeal was more significant, prices in Belfast and Londonderry continued at high levels, with no fall below the prices current at the time of the implementation of the embargo until July, and no substantial price fall until after the harvest.

In the countryside, as in the towns, conditions were severe. Even in the north, where rural cash incomes were largely obtained from the now buoyant linen manufacture, rents were still difficult to collect. James Hamilton, the agent on the Trinity College estates, wrote to the College bursar in June 1784 apologising for the delay in remitting rents "which the situation of the country from the difficulty of getting money as well as bills prevented me."⁸⁵ while the agent on the Annesley estates in Co. Down, in collecting the November 1783 rents in June 1784, emphasized that "on account of the high price of every necessary of life, we must proceed slowly . . ."⁸⁶ However, conditions were worse in the south and west, where the traditional sources of cash - the woollen manufacture and livestock production - did not enjoy the same prosperity as the linen trade. The poor wool fairs at Mullingar⁸⁷ and Ballinasloe⁸⁸ confirmed the limited effect of the non-importation agreements in stimulating the woollen manufacture. The effects of the continued depression in the worsted manufacture was, to some extent, offset by spinning for export, which was an important activity in Munster. The total of 94,729 stones in 1784/5 was the second highest quantity of worsted yarn exported during the decade to date, being bettered only by the 100,564 stones of the previous year. The profits

from livestock production had been severely reduced by adverse weather conditions. The hard winter had placed a greater than usual pressure on supplies of hay and straw and with the failure of the spring grass, the shortage of provender became acute.⁸⁹ In early May, hay was selling at the "extraordinary price" of £7 per ton and very little of it to be had.⁹⁰ The result was high cattle mortality, especially in Co. Kerry, which "has suffered severely; insomuch that Ld. Kenmare was obliged to borrow money in Cork for his subsistence . . ."⁹¹ The consequent reduction in cash incomes was acutely reflected in difficulties with rent payments. In late April, Lady Midleton was complaining of the arrear on her newly purchased estate,⁹² and despite the sanguinity of her agent regarding speedy payment, he had to report in July that the rents "have not come in so briskly".⁹³ The undertenants on the Trinity College estates at Glanerought [sic], in late June, faced with heavy rents, cattle losses and "the want of the common necessaries of subsistence" among their tenants, implored the charity of the Provost and the Board "at this melancholy time when famine and mortality are ravaging amongst us. . ."⁹⁴ The response from the College stressed the necessity of punctual payment of rent and backed this up with the promise of a strict ejectment policy.⁹⁵ It seems likely that conditions remained severe in Connaught also. Blake had reported at the end of March that "the times in the country very bad"⁹⁶ and following his assessment of the wool fair in August as "a very bad one for prices and payments",⁹⁷ John Blake reported himself "very uneasy" about the collection of rents in November.⁹⁸

The severity of conditions in both town and country was emphasized by the continuation of substantial emigration throughout the summer of 1784. Emigration, as might be expected, was high in spring, since the opening of the season presented the first opportunity after the dreadful winter of 1783-84 to quit Ireland. Concern was expressed at ". . . the emigrations taking place in the southern parts of the kingdom . . ."⁹⁹ and at the "appearance of a very alarming emigration . . ." from Belfast,¹⁰⁰ while it was estimated that ten vessels more could be filled from the city and county of Dublin.¹⁰¹ Indeed, it was even rumoured in late April that a bill would be introduced into parliament to prevent emigration to America.¹⁰² The continuation of such emigration into the summer of 1784

suggests that little had occurred to convince contemporaries that a significant improvement in their lot was at hand. In June, the Cork Evening Post reported that emigration had reached "an alarming height" and urged a lowering of rents,¹⁰³ while in July, emigration from Belfast and Londonderry "goes on with unabated force. . ." ¹⁰⁴ and at the beginning of August, from Galway, sailed

a great number of passengers and redemptioners, who have gone in quest of that employment which the distressed situation of their native country cannot afford them . . . ¹⁰⁵

The volume of emigration itself suggests acute economic dislocation, but the geographic spread of this emigration and the diversity of emigrant types - tradesmen, tenants, passengers, redemptioners - emphasizes the widespread nature of the dislocation.

A plentiful harvest was being forecast in the June and July months, indeed with optimism by successive day market in July, and exporting confidently. In early August, that view was given a greater appearance of a plentiful year. . . . The confidence was evidently shared by the government, which voted on 10 August 1784 to repeal the embargo on the export of oats, wheat and barley which had been in force since January 1784. . . . It is probable, therefore, that there was, in August, an easing in the otherwise substantial import of grain and oil in anticipation of a successful harvest. The harvest fulfilled all expectations, and not only provided the need for continued import but also permitted the resumption of export trade in grain, particularly in oats to Britain. Indeed, an unusually successful year was being reported by the "prolific quantities of oats and meal of oats, daily shipping . . . for Scotland, Ireland and the other parts of the Kingdom" . . . 27,000 quarters of oats and 47,000 barrels of meal were reported in 1784/5, compared with 26,000 quarters of oats and 10,000 barrels of meal in 1781/2, the last year unaffected by harvest failure. That it is clear that there was a substantial increase in the grain trade in 1784/5, the greater part of which must have occurred after the 1784 harvest.

The beneficial effect of grain exports on the balance of trade was emphasized by depressed exports of provisions, and in November 1784, the low rate of exchange was attributed to "the vast quantities of butter,

(iii) Recovery : August 1784 - January 1785

The autumn of 1784 brought a distinct improvement in the Irish economy. There was a marked upturn in exports, an easing in the credit crisis and a reduction in the levels of distress in town and country, albeit one which varied in pace in different parts of the land. The Dublin on London exchange, which had dropped below par briefly at the beginning of July from $9\frac{1}{4}\%$ in June, before rising again later in the month to almost 9%, returned again below par in early August and remained there until the end of the financial year 1784/5. This resulted from an improved trade balance due to good markets for linen, renewed demand for provisions and, initially, the success of the 1784 harvest.

A plentiful harvest was being forecast from June¹⁰⁶ and contemporary opinion, infused with optimism by successful hay making in July,¹⁰⁷ was asserting confidently, in early August, that there "was never a greater appearance of a plentiful year . . ." ¹⁰⁸ This confidence was evidently shared by the government, which acted on 10 August 1784 to repeal the embargo on the export of oats, oatmeal and barley which had been in force since January 1784.¹⁰⁹ It is probable, therefore, that there was, by August, an easing in the hitherto substantial import of grain and meal in anticipation of a successful harvest. The harvest fulfilled all expectations, and not only obviated the need for continued import but also permitted the resumption of an export trade in grain, particularly in oats to Britain. Indeed, so immediately successful was this, that by early November concern was being expressed at the ". . . prodigious quantities of oats and meal of oats, daily shipping . . . for Scotland, Lancashire and the other parts of the English coast".¹¹⁰ 77,866 quarters of oats and 47,939 barrels of meal were exported in 1784/5, compared with 86,670 quarters of oats and 10,637 barrels of meal in 1781/2, the last year unaffected by harvest failure. Thus it is clear that there was a substantial resurgence in the grain trade in 1784/5, the greater part of which must have occurred after the 1784 harvest.

The beneficial effect of grain exports on the balance of trade was supplemented by improved exports of provisions, and in November 1784, the low rate of exchange was attributed to "the vast quantities of butter,

beef and oats now shipping from all our ports to Great Britain . . ."¹¹¹ Butter exports, which had not been subject to the same adverse post-war fluctuations as beef and pork, rose again in 1784/5, for the third successive year. As before, British demand, accounting for over half the export total, was the most significant factor and heavy purchasing had been in evidence from late June.¹¹² But, in addition, 1784/5 saw an increase in the export of beef and pork, particularly the former, and of its derivatives, tallow and hides. Beef exports rose from 126,531 barrels in 1783/4 to 136,651 barrels in 1784/5 and pork from 52,913 barrels to 58,446 barrels, and although these figures did not approach the war-time levels of 212,019 and 112,369 barrels for beef and pork respectively in 1782/3, nevertheless the increase was a welcome boost in an important sector of the economy, which had been seriously dislocated by the return of peace. Despite a "languid" beginning to the season in October,¹¹³ demand picked up considerably from November. Contemporary opinion attached much significance to rumours of a war between Holland and Germany,¹¹⁴ but, in fact, exports to Europe fell during 1784/5, and of greater significance was increased demand from Britain, where there was "a brisk trade . . . for victualling",¹¹⁵ and from the West Indies, where it seems that dissatisfaction with supplies from America had prompted a return to more traditional sources of supply.¹¹⁶

But, as before, the foundation of the improvement in the balance of trade was the continued success of the linen trade. Throughout the autumn and winter, demand in the Ulster markets was brisk, with those at Belfast and Newry, especially, attracting British buyers,¹¹⁷ and the success of the linen trade was such that an English merchant could write in November

the situation of trade between the two countries, is so much in favour of Ireland, that there is a constant flow of money into that country . . . it is a most fortunate circumstance for Ireland, and she is solely indebted for it to her linen manufacture. . .¹¹⁸

The rise of the exchange in January and February 1785 may have been the result of a fall-off in demand towards the end of the year 1784/5, the initial effects of which may have been concealed by the upturn in the export of grain and provisions in the autumn. Certainly, there had been little demand for Irish linens at the Chester fair in October 1784¹¹⁹ and there were indications, too, of uncertainty in the London market.¹²⁰ However,

activity in the manufacture remained high, with markets in Ulster continuing to meet the fullest expectation,¹²¹ and it seems unlikely that there was any significant interruption in the economic recovery which had been evident since the 1784 harvest.

The improvement in rural incomes effected by the increased demand for the above-mentioned agricultural products and manufactured goods was reflected in prompter payment of rents. On the Duke of Devonshire's estates in Co. Cork the arrears, which had increased each year since 1781, fell in 1785¹²² and the occurrence of a similar trend on the estates of Lord Weymouth in Co. Monaghan¹²³ and on the Earl of Fitzwilliam's estates in Cos. Wicklow, Kildare and Waterford¹²⁴ indicates a wide geographic spread to this phenomenon. In Ulster, James Hamilton of Brown Hall was able to remit the November 1784 rents from the Trinity College estates, to Dublin in January 1785, whereas those for the previous November had not been remitted until June 1784,¹²⁵ and even on the Munster estates, where the undertenants had been severely pressed in June, there is no evidence that the threatened policy of ejection was subsequently required.¹²⁶ Only in Connaught does there seem to have been little progress. John Blake's difficulties in collecting rents around Tuam in November 1784,¹²⁷ were echoed in a letter in the following month, which concluded ". . . such is the times in Connaught, that there is scarcely any money to be got out of it . . ." ¹²⁸ These continued difficulties in Connaught indicate the modest nature of the recovery in the demand for wool and livestock.

The resultant inflow of funds from overseas trade, and on the internal front from the improved payment of rents, was reflected in an easing in the credit crisis. In August 1784, the Daily Committee of the Bank of Ireland was empowered to accept bills payable within two months,¹²⁹ having previously been refusing those of longer duration than twenty-one days.¹³⁰ The success of Irish exports through the summer must have increased confidence in the Irish economy, but it is likely that the timing of the easing in credit controls was influenced by the certainty of a very successful harvest and the consequent beneficial effects on imports, exports and domestic demand. The success of the harvest and the continued improved performance of exports prompted greater confidence in trade. In September

it was reported that the fall in the price of bank stock

. . . so far from creating any alarm, is an occasion of joy, as it is known to proceed from a number of people selling out, in order to vest their capitals in trade . . . ¹³¹

Bank stock fell from £111 at the beginning of September to £107.10.0 in October and to £107 in November, and the fall in debentures from £90 in August to £89 in September and again to £88 in October may have proceeded from the same cause. By the end of the year, conditions had so improved that the Bank was discounting all bills of unquestioned scarcity. ¹³² This improving situation was reflected, too, in a fall in the number of bankruptcies in 1784/5 to 45, from the peak of 49 in the previous year - the first break in the upward trend since 1781/2.

Conditions in town and country reflected the recovery in Irish economic life but served to emphasize that there was no dramatic, nationwide outburst of prosperity. A swift and substantial upturn in Ulster was not paralleled in the south and the west, where recovery, certainly in the case of Munster, was inhibited by a local prolongation of the credit crisis, while in Dublin, the beneficial effects of the improving trade and credit situation in the country percolated only gradually into metropolitan business circles.

However, in the case of the food supply, there was a speedy resolution of the crisis throughout the country as was reflected in the ready availability of bread and oatmeal. By the beginning of October, the 6d. household loaf in Dublin, Cork and Limerick at 3.13.6, 4.15.4 and 5.4.0 respectively was in excess of any assize since January, and continued increases raised it to 4.8.3, 5.4.0 and 5.12.6 respectively by March - levels not experienced since early 1782. In the north, oatmeal had fallen to 9/10 and 11/6½ per cwt. in Belfast and Derry, having stood in excess of 11/- and 14/- respectively before the harvest, and by March 1785 these prices had been further reduced to 9/1 and 10/8. In addition, potatoes were cheap and plentiful throughout the winter, having, for the most part, been removed from the ground before the severe frosts of December 1784, ¹³³ thus avoiding the disasters of the previous year and ensuring ". . . an uncommonly cheap winter . . ." for rural dwellers. ¹³⁴ An indication of

how thoroughly resolved the food crisis had been was reflected in a newspaper report in November complaining of the rise in the price of tea, "which is now become a necessary of life to almost every class of society . . ." ¹³⁵ There had been no evidence to suggest that the fluctuations in the price of tea had been considered of any significance during the two years of harvest failure.

Recovery was speediest and most substantial in Ulster. As early as October 1784 John Foster, returning from a tour of the province, painted a glowing picture of northern prosperity:-

. . . everything wore the appearance of perfect Content and Industry . . . every Man happy in his harvest - the Oats more plentiful than usual and the Flax exceeds far in Quantity and Quality the produce of any former Year. The Summer Markets for the Linens has proved remarkably good too, so that they have everything to make them practically happy . . . ¹³⁶

The linen trade, the principal source of income in the province, had been thriving since the opening of the season in 1784 and a general recovery was delayed only by the continued problems with food supply, as high prices, particularly for oatmeal, offset much of the benefit derived from the improved demand for linen. The speedy resolution of the food crisis by the successful harvest of 1784, accompanied as it was by the continued prosperity in the linen trade, ensured an early recovery. The new linen halls in Belfast and Newry continued to attract cloth from a wide area - for the Belfast market in September 1784, goods were received from Antrim, Down, Tyrone, Armagh, Derry, Cavan, Louth and Monaghan ¹³⁷ - and thus the success of the markets ensured a wide distribution of the benefits. Sales at the halls in late 1784 were continually reported as exceeding "the most sanguine expectations", whilst the spread of local markets throughout the north in the early months of 1785 also bore witness to the vitality of the linen trade. ¹³⁸ In addition, the northern farmers benefited from the emergence of an export trade in live cattle from the eastern ports of Ulster to Britain, especially to Scotland, which reached significant proportions by the end of 1784. In December, concern was expressed at the damage to the provisions trade occasioned by such export ¹³⁹ and it was reported at the end of the month that 35,500 head of cattle had been exported to Scotland in the last two months. In fact, only 22,241 cows and bullocks were returned as having been exported during

1784/5, but this was by far the highest number during the decade to date (the next highest was the 6,836 of the previous year) and represented a significant additional source of income in a province where the demands of the provisions trade were, as yet, not large. The speed of the recovery in Ulster was reflected in the early fall-off in emigration. By the beginning of October 1784, it was reported that ". . . the rage of emigration from the northern ports is of late considerably damped. . ." ¹⁴⁰ Reports had been reaching Ireland of the shocking conditions under which indentured servants were carried to America and of the poor prospects which they faced on their arrival, and these were deemed to be the reasons for the downturn in emigration. ¹⁴¹ But the servant trade had been in decline from 1783, due to the availability of less troublesome fare-paying passengers, ¹⁴² and thus it is more likely that the fall-off in emigration in the autumn of 1784 was a direct reflection of improving conditions at home.

In Dublin, the resolution of the urban crisis was a more gradual affair for, although the successful harvest brought a speedy end to the food crisis, the benefits accruing to urban employment from the improvement in the export trade were largely secondary - the export revival was based on rurally produced goods and thus urban manufacturers, dependent as they were on an upturn in domestic demand, had to await the effects of the export revival percolating through the community. However, recovery, although less dramatic than that in Ulster, was, nonetheless, evident, for although the silk manufacture continued to languish, there was further improvement in the woollen manufacture, a modest expansion in cotton and signs of an upturn in distilling.

The woollen manufacture was clearly benefiting from the upturn in demand. In late August, the Dublin woollen weavers were "busily employed", both for home consumption and for export to America, ¹⁴³ and the ending of the campaign of violence to enforce the non-importation agreements suggests an easing in urban employment problems. ¹⁴⁴ Indeed, by early September, the Lord Lieutenant felt confident enough to opine that

. . . ye affairs of this country begin to wear a more tranquil and favourable aspect and a general aversion for all the desperate views of ye factious parts of this metropolis appears universally to obtain . . . ¹⁴⁵

and by the beginning of February a new optimism was apparent in the woollen manufacture, with the "degree of respectability and increase" ". . . which has been produced by the virtuous determination of a number of the inhabitants to give a preference to the national production . . .", having, it was believed, laid ". . . the foundation for a hope that the distresses of those engaged in the woollen line will be considerably diminished in the future."¹⁴⁶

But the improving domestic purchasing power brought little benefit to the silk manufacture, which continued to suffer from the twin evils of a falling market and a continued preference for imported goods. By October, there was such a "dearth of business" that the few who were employed were subscribing to a fund to assist the emigration of their less fortunate colleagues.¹⁴⁷ Some of the unemployment in silk may have been offset by a modest expansion in the cotton manufacture, reflected in the increased import in both cotton wool and cotton yarn in 1784/5. As early as May 1784, there had been a move from silk to cotton in response to the growing Irish preference for cotton-based goods,¹⁴⁸ and the effect of the non-importation agreements, which reduced the import of cottons and calicoes significantly in 1784/5, combined with a recovery in purchasing power, may have accentuated this trend.

Distilling evidenced the first signs of recovery after two successive years of falling production, with a slight increase in output from 1,436,502 gallons in 1783/4 to 1,450,415 gallons in 1784/5, but brewing remained depressed, with the output of ale falling in 1784/5 for the third successive year.

This gradual recovery in urban life was apparent in the lower levels of distress during the winter of 1784/5. The number of inmates in the Dublin House of Industry, which peaked at 1626 in February 1785, in fact exceeded the highest monthly total for the previous year, but those relieved at the House in 1784/5 represented more the whole, rather than a small part of, the urban distressed - despite the severity of the weather and the high price of coals, soap and candles, there is no indication that the resources of the House of Industry were supplemented by the vast array of parochial, private and personal charities which had been such a feature of the previous two years.

In the south, however, recovery was particularly slow and, despite a revival in the grain trade, an upturn in demand for provisions and a modest improvement in the woollen manufacture, economic activity in Cork remained depressed until the new year of 1785, due largely to the failure of Warren's Bank.

The success of the harvest and the lifting of the embargo on export had re-activated the grain trade and by November there was "a ready sale and a high price" both at home and abroad, for tillage farmers, for, because of the great demands for export, "the price is kept up to a profitable medium for the farmers' benefit . . ." ¹⁴⁹ In the export sector, the major benefits seem to have been reaped by the farmers of the south for, although there was grain and meal exported from the ports of Ulster, and even some from the western counties, the trade was dominated by Drogheda, Youghal, Cork and Waterford.

Livestock production continued to be dominated by the fluctuations in the provisions trade and thus the upturn in demand for beef and pork after the disaster of the previous season was an important constituent in improving rural conditions. After an unpromising beginning to the season, improved demand from Britain and the West Indies and speculative preparation for further European hostilities were reflected in "very brisk slaughtering at Cork and Waterford . . . and other capital ports . . ." ¹⁵⁰ in November and the appearance of large markets in Dublin in November and December, where sales appear to have been reasonable. ¹⁵¹ The rising demand for pork was especially significant for the poorest rural classes, since

. . . the feeding of pigs this year is in greater abundance than for many year past . . . every cabin can rear a pig or two whose abilities cannot reach to higher farming . . . ¹⁵²

However, the disappointing start to the season, reflected in a poor cattle fair at Ballinasloe in October ¹⁵³ for the third successive year, foreshadowed the decline in the importance of the beef trade in the second half of the 1780s and 1790s, as it failed to recapture its peace-time markets. This weak demand for provisions was reflected in the growth of a direct export trade in live cattle to Britain, especially from the ports of the north-west of the country.

There were signs, too, of a modest recovery in the woollen manufacture. During August, the establishment of "woollen manufactories" in several parts of Munster¹⁵⁴ not only increased employment but also increased demand for wool (itself an important source of income), which had been conspicuously poor at the fairs in July and August.¹⁵⁵ It is likely, too, that the final months of 1784 and early months of 1785 saw some increase in local demand for worsted goods as the effects of the recovery filtered through the community, and the fall in the export of worsted yarn from 100,563 stones in 1783/4 to 94,729 stones in 1784/5 may be an indication of a modest advance in this direction.

However, the full effects of this upturn in economic activity were not immediately apparent in Cork, where the confidence expressed in the ability of Warren's Bank to speedily solve its problems proved to be misplaced. Despite re-opening for business in early September,¹⁵⁶ the bank was again forced to close towards the end of the month,¹⁵⁷ and at a meeting in October, debts to the public of £247,328 were disclosed and a proposal made to discharge them in two years.¹⁵⁸ The resultant depression of local credit and its effect on trade was reflected in the abrupt slump of the Cork on London exchange, which fell from 8½% in September to 6% in October and again to 5½% in November, and in the observations of such as Thomas Fuller, an agent for the Munster estates of Trinity College, who wrote in early December, that

. . .the fealer of our great bank here has flored all the people of this town, and the many fealers that is happening every day on acc^t of it has stop^t all credit here . . .¹⁵⁹

It was January 1785 before there were signs of general recovery in Cork. In that month, the Cork exchange rose to 7¼% (and for the remainder of the year exhibited a similar profile to the Belfast and Dublin exchanges), whilst the parochial committees felt confident enough to hold over the balance of their fund until a time of greater scarcity.¹⁶⁰

Thus by early 1785, recovery was widespread and this time it was not illusory for, despite some short-term uncertainty, reflected in a return to high exchange rates in the late spring and early summer of 1786, from mid-1786 the exchanges rarely strayed far from par, reflecting a succession

of healthy trade surpluses. The continued increase in linen exports, a successful grain trade and a steady demand for provisions, complemented at home by strong domestic demand for the produce of the woollen, brewing and glass manufactures, ushered in for Ireland a new period of comparative prosperity with which the era of 'Grattan's Parliament' came to be synonymous.

The prevailing opinion in 1790 was that the prosperity of Ireland was due to the liberal trade policy of the British Government, which had been adopted in 1785. It was generally believed that the removal of the duties on Irish linen exports to the British market, and the consequent increase in the quantity of linen exported, had been the principal cause of the prosperity of Ireland. It was also believed that the liberal trade policy of the British Government was the principal cause of the prosperity of the British Empire.

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CHAPTER FOUR

HARVESTS

The economic crisis was at its most intense in the years 1782 to 1784 when the prevailing malaise in manufacture and commerce was accentuated by unsatisfactory harvest conditions. The harvest of 1781 had been good, bidding to rival, if not exceed, that of 1780, a year in which substantial export had been possible, and these two years of plenty, by banishing the unpleasant memories of 1778 and 1779, had infused contemporary opinion with renewed optimism. Such optimism was to be speedily shattered by the events of the succeeding two years.

Unusually inclement weather throughout most of 1782 led to a severe failure of the grain and potato crop in that year and the consequent problems of food supply were exacerbated by difficulties in securing adequate alternative stocks through importation due to the European nature of the failure and to the prevailing restrictive legislation. The failure had a marked regional aspect with conditions being much worse in the north and this was highlighted by communal disorders in the south to prevent the redistribution of regional surpluses. This popular action combined with an inadequate governmental response ensured that there would be little respite before the next harvest. The 1783 harvest, although an improvement on its predecessor, was, nevertheless, imperfect and after a short period of post-harvest improvement there was a general deterioration in stocks of both grain and potatoes during the early months of 1784 so that, despite substantial importation, by the summer crisis conditions were evident throughout the country. The crisis was solved only by the exceedingly abundant harvest of 1784.

The basic cause of the harvest failure in 1782 was adverse weather conditions. The spring was severe - frost and snow were still in evidence in the north during March and the subsequent months leading into early summer were unusually wet throughout the country. As early as April, Edward Hardman, a Drogheda merchant extensively experienced in the grain trade, noted:-

At present every kind of grain is advancing . . . whether it is owing to a general panic occasioned by the very unseasonable weather we had I cannot say but I am inclined to think it so and that it is rather from apprehensions of scarcity next year than from any real deficiency at present. . . .¹

A period of settled weather in June gave rise to popular optimism that the crops would recover from the backward beginning but such sanguinity was by no means unanimous. Hardman sounded a more realistic note when writing in July:-

In many parts of this country we have the finest appearance of the crop in ground but I much fear that the wet grounds will produce very little this year. The constant rains we had in spring and the beginning of summer retarded the sowing in such places beyond the usual time and when they were sown they were in bad condition to receive the seed and will I believe turn out very poorly. . . .²

His concern was reflected in the movement of prices which revealed a marked upward movement in Dublin wheat and oats prices from May, which by July represented a 35% increase in wheat and a 16% increase in oats prices over the levels of the same month of the previous year. Purchasing of oats for Scotland had begun in July and this served to inflate prices, particularly on the east coast.³ At Drogheda, oats which in 1781 had sold in the pre-harvest period at around 8/- per barrel, were in the same period in 1782 commanding up to 9/6.⁴ The return of wet weather heightened concern and the incessant rains of August prompted the offering of public prayers in the chapels of Kilkenny

to avert the wrath of heaven so fully experienced in the long continuance of bad weather, and to implore from the Divinity fair weather, for the preservation of the fruits of the earth. . .⁵

However, the wet weather continued into the harvest season so that by September the wheat and barley crops were flattened while the oats remained green and clearly in need of a good late season.⁶ The necessary improvement in weather conditions clearly did not materialize for by October, Hardman noted that in many places the oats remained uncut⁷ and at the beginning of November he estimated that there was still three to four weeks' work left in the country.⁸ On the Earl of Abercorn's estate in

north-west Ulster, it was estimated that the season had been extended some two months in an attempt to save the crops.⁹ The effect of this battering by the elements was all-embracing with grain, straw, hay and potatoes all being adversely affected. The failure of the harvest was immediately reflected in low post-harvest bread assizes, the failure of the usual substantial post-harvest moderation in grain prices, and in rising potato prices in the autumn. The Dublin assize of bread for the 6d. household loaf, which had fallen to 3.10.3 in April 1782, had risen to only 3.12.7 by October, and fell thereafter, compared with a post-harvest assize of well over 4 lbs in 1781. In Dublin, wheat fell from 30/- per barrel in September to 27/3 in October but was on the rise again from the following month, whilst oats continued to rise in price throughout the final quarter of the year. Potato prices, which had exhibited their usual profile in 1781, with, for example in Kilkenny, a fall from a peak of 2½ per stone in July to 1½ in September, rose in the autumn of 1782 with the pre-harvest peak of 1½d in May, rising to 2d in September, and again to 2½d by November. The imposition of an embargo, in November 1782, on the export of

. . . potatoes, and all manner of corn, grain, flour and meal whatsoever, and also all corn, grain, flour and meal whatsoever, baked or made up into bread, biscuit, starch, or in any other manner . . .¹⁰

clearly confirmed the reality of the failure, and the extensiveness of the food supply which was encompassed by the embargo is indicative of the wide-ranging harvest failure which was believed to have taken place.

Furthermore the 1782 failure in Ireland proved to be part of a wider phenomenon extending over much of western Europe,¹¹ so not only could Ireland expect no speedy relief through import but was, itself, an area to which British merchants quickly turned for supplies, and the frantic attempts at importation from Ireland¹² were clearly factors which heavily influenced the Lord Lieutenant towards imposing the embargo. The situation in Scotland was, if anything, worse than in Ireland with fears of an actual famine,¹³ and England, whilst not so severely pressed, clearly had no redundancy for export.¹⁴ Conditions in Europe seemed little better since by December, Ostend, the port to which Ireland might have looked for aid,¹⁵ was shut, and, in any case, in the pre-December

period there was little likelihood of purchasing sufficient stocks for Ireland when the English ports were also open for importation.¹⁶ Only the Baltic ports offered relief¹⁷ but since it was November before the true seriousness of the situation was revealed, there was scant hope of obtaining supplies before the winter made Dantzic inaccessible.¹⁸ And, of course, Ireland, through her intimate constitutional relationship with England, was at war with the north American colonies. This inability to immediately supplement the inadequate domestic harvest with imported grain, was reflected in the trade figures for 1782/3 which reveal that only 856 qts. of oats, 833 qts. of wheat, 142 barrels of oatmeal and 4,350 cwts. of flour were imported. Furthermore, the temptation to export was considerable since there were attractive financial considerations to act as a prompt. The demand for Irish grain was so great that profits to Bristol, Liverpool and Greenock on wheat and barley were estimated at 25% to 45% above the prices on the east coast of Ireland,¹⁹ which were themselves considered high, and orders were received from Scotland to purchase without limitation.²⁰ But, in addition, the existing legislation encouraged export. As Temple pointed out

. . . the bounty price had been legally fixed throughout the kingdom in the month of October, and notwithstanding the circumstances have so materially altered, no legal power exists to withhold the bounty till the next quarter session holden in January.²¹

Thus Ireland was trebly unfortunate - the domestic harvest had failed, there was little hope of relief through importation, and extensive demands from abroad were being made on her already depleted stocks.

However, conditions were not universally bleak, for there was a regional aspect to the failure, with conditions particularly bad in the north but less severe in the southern counties.

It would seem that the north of the country had been most affected by the harvest failure. Temple, the Lord Lieutenant, observed that Ulster was

. . . the most populous, the most turbulent, and at the same time the district most unfortunate in their harvest . . .²²

and James Hamilton, the agent on the estates of the Earl of Abercorn in north-west Ulster, concluded that

Our harvest was very bad, our grain, straw and hay damaged much and our whole time taken up from the first of the harvest till November in trying to save it.²³

This picture of a bad harvest in the north is further substantiated by the speedy implementation of voluntary subscriptions in Belfast²⁴ and Londonderry²⁵ in October and November 1782 respectively, to import meal and sell it cheaply to the poor. Furthermore, an especial significance attached to the failure in Ulster since the oats crop was the most defective. Primate Hugh Boulter, writing of the crisis in the late 1720s, had described oatmeal as "the bread of the north"²⁶ and some fifty odd years later this was still the case. But the developments in that fifty year period had complicated the situation further, for Ulster, while continuing to be a substantial consumer of grain, had been gradually becoming a less significant producer, as more of its population was being drawn into manufacturing. Thus a situation had developed in which

the manufacturers and the poor of the province of Ulster have been frequently distressed by the high price of oats there, from the want of a sufficient quantity thereof being raised in the said province . . .²⁷

Ireland, as a whole, was a net exporter of grain, but developments in Ulster had been running counter to the national trend. Thus, for the north, the situation was especially severe, for not only had the inherently inadequate local harvest failed but swift relief through importation seemed well-nigh impossible, whilst redistribution of stocks from other parts of the country was, at best, uncertain.

Conditions, however, do seem to have been less severe in the southern counties. Certainly the grain harvest in the south was not decimated like that in the north. A correspondent from Wexford, noted in September 1782:-

I am happy to find the harvest in a much better condition than I had expected in so unfavourable a season.²⁸

Furthermore, in October, Hardman had mooted a scheme for buying oatmeal in Dungarvon and Ross for export, which he had anticipated being able to buy for about 9/- per barrel.²⁹ Such a suggestion at a period when it was clear that there had been widespread harvest failure, itself is suggestive of better conditions in the south. Prices in Cork do, however, suggest that the oats crop had not yielded well, as had been the case elsewhere in the country, for there is no post-harvest fall in price and a similar trend

is apparent in potato prices. But there does seem to have been an abundance of wheat, a fact readily apparent from the assize of bread figures. In the months following the failure of the harvest, the Belfast and Dublin assizes continued on a steady decline, indicative of a shortage of grain, whereas the Cork assize, from September until the end of the year, exhibited an increased assize over its pre-harvest figure. A similar trend is apparent in Limerick also. The fact that the southern assizes do not rise to the level of the post 1781 harvest situation serves to emphasise that the harvest had yielded significantly below normal, but still substantially better than in the remainder of the country. The post 1782 harvest peak in the Cork assize was 4.11.3, significantly above the 3.12.7 in Dublin or 4.1.7 in Belfast, but appreciably below the post 1781 harvest peak of 5.11.6. It would seem, too, that there was an adequacy of bread in the western counties since in January 1783, 9 lbs. of household bread could be had in Galway for one shilling.³⁰

Government action, after the 1782 failure became apparent, was swift. A proclamation of the embargo was issued on the 13th November³¹ and every collector was warned of the new situation by express in the early morning of the 14th.³² The immediate implementation of the embargo was strict and even cargoes which had already been loaded and cleared were stopped. Despite a petition of merchants to the government, this decision was not rescinded even though it was claimed that the quantities involved were not substantial.³³

Clearly the fundamental purpose of the embargo was to keep a sufficient supply of corn within the country but the corollary was equally important - the hope that on achieving such a sufficiency, in a situation without the liberty to export, prices would be forced down. There was certainly no immediate slump in prices and as Hardman speedily realised, the embargo need not prove detrimental to the grain trade since

. . . if . . . the prices do not come down so as to open the ports we shall be certain of finding a market that will at least save us at home.³⁴

Prices did fall, but not to the extent that had been anticipated, as Hardman readily appreciated when assessing the situation in January 1783:-

Prices are still very high but not so high as they were when immense orders were executing for every kind of grain. The embargo was intended to bring down the prices and it answered that intention but not so much as was expected.³⁵

Wheat in Dublin was 27/9 per barrel in January 1783 compared with 30/- in September 1782 and 22/3 in January 1782; a situation in line with Hardman's conclusion. The ending of export demand had moderated prices but this could not compensate for the lack of a substantial harvest. Less success appears to have been attained in the control of the price of oatmeal and the embargo could not moderate the prevailing high prices (oatmeal, which in September 1782 in Dublin had been fetching 11/6 per cwt., had by January 1783 risen to 13/6), suggesting, perhaps, the disproportionate degree to which the oats crop had been affected.

The continuance of distilling put an additional strain on the grain supplies. Irish law did not permit the distillery to be suspended except by bringing in a bill to that effect,³⁶ an option which could only be availed of when parliament was in session. What was undertaken, however, was a campaign against illegal distilling. This had been sought from late 1782 and was eventually put into practice early in 1783. It was particularly marked in Ulster where the military were used.³⁷ Whilst such a campaign may have restricted illegal distilling on a localized basis, it is unlikely to have made a significant contribution in national terms to conserving grain supplies, and certainly was a poor substitute for the suspension of commercial distilling.

In the absence of relief through importation, the effectiveness of the embargo depended upon the premise that there were sufficient stocks within the country for the requirements of the whole population and the means to satisfactorily redistribute such. The failure of the embargo to bring down prices to the extent which had been anticipated served to cast doubts upon the validity of this premise and the fall in the volume of corn coming to Dublin on the bounty in 1782/3 lent further weight to such doubts. Land and canal carriage of grain, meal and malt fell sharply from 335,749 cwt. in 1781/2 to 156,376 cwt. in 1782/3, while that of flour fell from 445,873 cwt. to 288,954 cwt.³⁸ There was also a fall, although a much less marked one, in coastways carriage with grain, meal and malt falling from 288,787 cwt. in 1781/2 to 267,895 cwt. in 1782/3 and flour from 30,875 cwt. to 25,566 cwt.³⁹ Temple had observed in November that the harvest

. . . was barely sufficient⁴⁰ for the consumption of the country at the hard price . . .

and the upward movement of prices in the spring and early summer of 1783 suggested that the official estimates of food stocks had been too sanguine.

From April 1783 prices were rising alarmingly. In Dublin, wheat prices in April rose to 31/- per barrel (a level which had marked the pre-harvest peak in 1782) and by June had reached 33/3, whilst in Kilkenny, wheat which had been 24/2 per barrel in April, was by June fetching 33/4, compared with 28/9 in the previous year. Rising wheat prices were reflected in falling bread assizes, and by June the Dublin, Belfast and Kilkenny assizes at 3.3.4, 3.8.5 and 3.9.3 respectively, were well below the levels for June 1782 which had been 3.12.3, 4.13.3 and 4.3.4. Oatmeal in Dublin was at 13/9 per cwt. in March 1783, compared with 7/9 in the same period in 1782, and had by June risen to 19/-, whilst in Londonderry, in the same month, it was even higher, at 21/5½ per cwt. Potatoes, which had been rising steadily in price since the autumn of 1782, were by May 1783 in Kilkenny commanding 44d per cwt., compared with 12d in the previous year (in fact the highest price for potatoes in Kilkenny since at least the late 1760s)⁴¹ and in the following month reached 50d in Dublin and 58d in Londonderry. Conditions remained comparatively more favourable in the south, although even here, there were indications of a worsening in food stocks. Certainly there was still an adequacy of wheat. In June 1783 wheat in Cork and Limerick, at 28/4½ and 25/- per barrel respectively, was significantly below the 33/3 per barrel in Dublin, whilst the assize of bread at 4.5.4 in both centres was not far removed from the levels which had obtained in the previous June (4.10.17 in Limerick and 4.6.0 in Cork), and well above the 3.3.4 in Dublin. However, rising prices for oats and high prices for potatoes suggested a worsening of conditions, even in the south. By June, oats in Cork had risen to an average of almost 25/- per Cork barrel, from a little over 19/- in March, compared with a pre-harvest peak of 19/3 in 1782, whilst potatoes, at 42½d and 36d per cwt. in Cork and Limerick respectively in June 1783 were appreciably higher in price than in the same month of the previous year, when they had stood at 14½d and 14d per cwt. respectively. The worsening of conditions in the south was also reflected in the appearance of food riots in June 1783, suggesting considerable local concern about food stocks. In Gorey, mobs forced local farmers to bring their grain to town,⁴² and in Youghal, a cargo of meal, believed to be freighted for Scotland, was seized and sold at public market.⁴³ Indeed the month of June seems to have been something of a

major flashpoint. In Co. Tyrone, the high price of oatmeal and a scarcity of it at market had prompted several Volunteer corps to persuade local farmers to bring their stocks to market, and the refusal of a Co. Tyrone farmer to accommodate the Trillick Volunteers resulted in two Volunteers being shot dead and the farmer and his son being wounded,⁴⁴ whilst in Co. Mayo two people were shot dead in an affray involving the alleged forestalling of potatoes.⁴⁵ Clearly, by June 1783, there had been a marked worsening in the food stocks, even in the southern counties where conditions, initially, had been much more favourable.

That the food stocks situation had become so critical, serves to highlight the restrictive nature of the legislation governing the grain trade. An embargo had been necessary to prevent exportation of grain in 1782, an exportation which, even in the wake of a severe harvest failure, was still encouraged by bounties. But this of itself was insufficient for it depended on the premise that there were sufficient stocks of food within the country, and the very limited effect of the embargo served to call that theory into question. What in fact was needed was an incentive to import, but the existing legislation did not permit of this. In the previous session of parliament an additional duty of almost 17/- per quarter had been imposed on the import of wheat which was not from Great Britain, while the price did not exceed 53/4 per qt.,⁴⁶ a price which as Temple pointed out ". . . would starve all the lower orders in Ireland."⁴⁷ The effect of this legislation was evident in May 1783, when a vessel from Ostend, loaded with wheat, had been forced away to Liverpool, due to the prohibitory nature of the import duties.⁴⁸ The Lord Lieutenant succinctly described the situation thus:-

. . . the fears which at present strike the mind, are, that the duty being so high, the stake is too great for merchants to hazard importation upon speculation, and that by the time the price of corn shall rise so high as to exonerate the importation from the duty before mentioned, the evil will be too far advanced, and the relief arrive too late.⁴⁹

To their credit, the Privy Council recognized the legitimacy of the Lord Lieutenant's fears, and on the 9 June 1783 resolved

. . . that in all parts of the kingdom the prices are so extremely high that the industrious poor cannot long support their families by their labour, that in the northern parts there is not a supply adequate to the consumption from this time to the getting in of the coming harvest, and that the most extreme distress is to be

apprehended, unless measures be speedily taken for the relief of the people by the importation of corn and grain from foreign parts, it is the opinion of this Board under these circumstances of evident necessity that it will be expedient if the Lord Lieutenant shall be pleased to signify to the Commissioners of His Majesty's Revenue his desire, that they do forthwith give directions to the several port collectors to accept bonds from the importers of foreign corn or grain, ground or unground for the payment of the additional duties imposed thereon, upon the faith of government that it shall be submitted and earnestly recommended to the legislature of this kingdom, at their next meeting to remit and cancel such bonds. . .⁵⁰

To this was appended an import bounty scheme for wheat, oats and barley and the whole package was to remain in operation until 15 September 1783.

In a matter of days the resolution of the Privy Council was put into effect by an official proclamation and was greeted enthusiastically since not only would it permit a supply through importation but would also, popular opinion believed, force farmers and millers to bring their supplies speedily to market since the prevailing high price must be reduced as importation increased.⁵¹

The proclamation had some immediate speculative effect and prices dropped during June. Considerable falls in price were reported in Dublin,⁵² whilst in the north it was noted that the price of oatmeal and flour had fallen considerably. In Belfast oatmeal had fallen to 20/- per cwt. from the very high price of 35/10,⁵³ and in Newry from 25/- to 18/- per cwt.⁵⁴ At Strabane, prices were similar with oatmeal selling at 2/1 for 10 lbs. but the fact that few tenants had cash with which to buy it, serves to put the prices into a more realistic perspective.⁵⁵

But the measure provided no real short-term relief, for importation to replenish the depleted domestic stocks could not be speedily organised, since as was pointed out

It is unfortunate that the resolution of our privy council for giving relief to this kingdom, in respect to a supply of corn, has been so long delayed. From the Baltic we cannot expect any, as the orders which our merchants might send to Dantzic, or other parts equally distant, could not be executed so as to arrive before our own harvest is gathered in, which, if we have the same favourable weather we now enjoy, will in all probability be greatly advanced in five or six weeks hence; so that all our hopes are from such casual supplies as may be procured in the ports of France and the Low Countries.⁵⁶

Thus prices continued to rise. Oatmeal prices rose in Kilkenny, Dublin and Londonderry in July to 17/-, 20/- and 23/4 per cwt. from the June levels of 16/6, 19/- and 21/5½ per cwt. respectively; wheat rose in price in Dublin from 33/3 per barrel in June to 36/6 in July, and in Kilkenny maintained its high June level of 33/4; and the assize of bread in Belfast, Dublin and Kilkenny reached its lowest point for the whole crisis in July at 3.8.5, 3.3.4 and 3.9.3 respectively. Oatmeal in Cork continued to rise and the assize of bread declined, although in both Cork and Limerick the assize remained over 4 lbs. No regular market quotations are available for the west but the fact that Galway, which in January 1783 had 9 lbs of bread for 1/-, had by July a 6d household loaf of only 3.4.0 and ". . . the inhabitants of that Town . . . in great Distress for Bread and Corn . . ." ⁵⁷ whilst in Roscommon oatmeal was selling at 16/- to 17/- per cwt., ⁵⁸ suggests that there had as yet been little beneficial effect from the new legislation.

However, by August 1783 there were signs of a more general improvement. Wheat prices fell in Dublin from 36/6 in July to 34/3; oatmeal prices fell in Dublin from 20/- per cwt. to 18/9, and in Londonderry from 23/4 to 19/7; and there was an upturn in the weight of the 6d household loaf in both Dublin and Belfast. The "casual supplies" ⁵⁹ from France, Spain and the Low Countries, were now in evidence and the first fruits of a successful potato harvest in 1783, evidenced for example in Londonderry with a fall from 68d per cwt. in July to 40d in August, would have taken some pressure off the grain supply. By September a widespread, substantial reduction in prices was apparent. Wheat in Dublin had fallen sharply in price, from 34/3 in August to 23/3, and at 24/6 in Cork, 25/10 in Kilkenny and 26/8 per barrel in Limerick there was a marked uniformity in prices over much of the country. The assize of bread had risen to over 4 lbs. in all the major centres, whilst in Belfast, it was reported at the end of August that there was such a glut of flour that it could not be sold at any price, and cargoes were being sent south to Dublin. ⁶⁰ Oatmeal had fallen to 14/- per cwt. in Londonderry, from 19/7 in August, having stood as high as 21/5½ in June, whilst potatoes, at 16d in Kilkenny, 28d in Limerick and 36d in Londonderry, had moderated appreciably in price. The opening of a substantial import from eastern Europe, and the early effects of

what promised to be a successful domestic harvest, combined to improve conditions considerably, so that by September 1783 prices of grain were in general lower, and the weight of the loaf greater than in the same period of the previous year - that is on the verge of the confirmation of the 1782 failure. However, the government remained cautious and it was late October before the embargo on export was rescinded.⁶¹

Thus the proclamation of June 1783 had only a limited success in tiding the country over until the beginning of the 1783 harvest. The bonding scheme had served initially to lower prices but this trend was not sustained during the summer and it was late August before substantial imports of grain were being effected. However, there is little doubt that much of its impact was lost by the lateness of its implementation. As early as January 1783 contemporaries had recognised the limited effect of the embargo,⁶² and had the government acted then to encourage importation in the spring, the late spring and summer might well have been somewhat more comfortable for the Irish population.

The 1783 harvest had been a long heralded event and reports had been pouring in from all parts of Ireland of the prospects for an abundant harvest. Dry, seasonable weather was in evidence from the beginning of March⁶³ and the good prospects for the harvest, forecast from early May,⁶⁴ seemed justified by the continuance of fine weather through the summer. The resultant early season enabled the barley harvest to begin as early as the end of July⁶⁵ and during August the reaping of wheat got under way.⁶⁶ There was, however, an abrupt change in the weather at the end of August and a period of rain and storms seemed to hold scant promise for the end of the harvest.⁶⁷ Fair weather returned in mid-September but not before the harvest had been significantly damaged. The wheat and barley crops seem, for the most part, to have been successfully gathered in before the weather turned, although the latter appears to have yielded poorly, but the oats were damaged and the quality of the hay was significantly impaired.⁶⁸

The 1783 harvest failure seems to have been largely concentrated on the oats crop, a fact itself almost guaranteed to cause disproportionate distress in the north and this assumes an added significance when

viewed in terms of the legacy of poor stocks remaining from the previous year. The oats crop had been badly damaged in 1782 and during the course of 1783 oats and meal had proved more difficult to import than wheat and flour - only 142 barrels of meal had been imported in 1782/3. Importation, following the introduction of the bonding scheme in June 1783, had served to moderate prices but the fact that in 1783/4 only 6,000 qts. of oats and 2,000 barrels of meal were imported serves to indicate how important the need for a good harvest in 1783 had become.

The deficiency in the oats crop was quickly evident. As early as November 1783 prices began to rise in Londonderry, from the post-harvest low of 12/6½ per cwt. in October to 15/9½, and by December prices in Belfast at 13/4, in Dublin at 11/6 and in Kilkenny at 9/9, all evidenced a rise above their post-harvest low. The benefits of the more successful grain harvest in 1783 were apparent outside Ulster with the assize of bread in Dublin and Kilkenny not only in excess of 4 lbs. but also in advance of the levels of the previous December, and the rising prices of oatmeal in these centres, where it was not the staple food, emphasizes the severity of the failure of the oats crop. Conditions were clearly worst in the north, for not alone were oatmeal prices highest there but already by December 1783 the price in Londonderry at 15/9½ per cwt. was in advance of the December 1782 price of 14/5½, whereas the prices in Dublin and Kilkenny, although rising, were still below their December 1783 prices of 14/6 and 13/- respectively. The severe shortage of meal in the north was reflected also in early pressure on potatoes, which in Londonderry had risen sharply in price in November to 44d. per cwt., from 28d. in October, a level which had not been attained in the previous season until March 1783, whereas in the other major centres, where grain was still plentiful, prices remained moderate, having, for example, reached only 16d. per cwt. in Kilkenny in January 1784. By the beginning of 1784, the severity of the situation in the north was readily apparent, even to the government, and Northington, the new Lord Lieutenant, summed up the position thus in January 1784:-

Within these very few days I received information that the price of oats and oatmeal, upon which the lower class of people in the north chiefly subsist, has increased to an alarming height, and is now higher than at the same season in the last year, in the course whereof the scarcity nearly approached to a famine. At Londonderry the price of oatmeal according to

the best accounts is from 17s to 18s the hundred weight. The price is gradually less at the several parts in the north as they are situated nearer to Dublin and in this metropolis the middle price of oats in the last week was 11s 4d the barrel.⁶⁹

Further pressure was put on the already inadequate grain supply in the north by an apparent inadequacy in the barley harvest. This crop, along with others, had yielded poorly in 1782, and imports had clearly failed to sufficiently build up stocks, for by January 1784 the distillers had exhausted the supply and were turning to oats as a substitute,⁷⁰ thus seeming to vindicate the earlier caustic comment of the Earl of Abercorn

The failure of the distillery is one of the blessings that Ireland can never hope to attain.⁷¹

The final straw, however, was the resumption of orders for exportation. Northington noted in January that

Orders have been received here for the purchase of oats to be exported. Upwards of sixteen hundred barrels have been sent from hence, and in the last week they were bought in this market at 12s per barrel.⁷²

and he reported that one house had remitted £5,000 to a bank in Dublin to hasten shipping.⁷³

In the face of these conditions - a scarcity of oatmeal for domestic consumption and competing demands for such oats as were available from local distillers and British merchants - a proclamation was issued on 27 January 1784 placing an embargo on the export of oats, oatmeal and barley.⁷⁴ The narrower terms of reference of this measure and its later implementation, when compared with its predecessor in November 1782, are indicative of the more limited nature of the 1783 harvest failure.

The fundamental premise behind the embargo was, again, the belief that there were sufficient stocks of grain within the country to satisfy the needs of all, but on this occasion the addition of a clause prescribing penalties for those found guilty of hindering the redistribution of grain from one part of the country to another, evidenced the intention of the government that there should be no repetition of the mob action of the previous year which had done much to reduce the effectiveness of the embargo and the bonding scheme. The Lord Lieutenant evidently believed

that the more favourable harvest conditions outside Ulster had created a surplus which was available for redistribution, and he reported in January 1784 that the price of corn in the south was "very moderate" and deemed it likely that the north would receive a supply from the south.⁷⁵ Prices were clearly more moderate going south - in January oatmeal was in excess of 17/- per cwt. in Londonderry, 12/8 in Belfast, 12/- in Dublin, 9/9 in Kilkenny, 9/- in Wexford and 7/8 in Cork, whilst wheat was 28/4 per barrel in Belfast, 27/3 in Dublin, 25/10 in Kilkenny and 25/- in Limerick. Such favourable conditions did not, however, lead to southern opinion coinciding with the views of the Lord Lieutenant on the desirability of regional transfers of grain, for the early months of 1784 witnessed a series of popular disturbances aimed at preventing the transference of quantities of grain and potatoes to other parts of the country. It was reported in February 1784 that

. . . the mobs at Clonmel, Carrick and Waterford have stopped the export of these articles [grain and potatoes] to the metropolis and the northern parts of Ireland . . .⁷⁶

and such activity was still in evidence in March.⁷⁷ Prices were still relatively favourable in the south, with the assize of bread in Cork, Limerick and Kilkenny in excess of 4 lbs in March and oatmeal at 11/- per cwt. in Kilkenny appreciably below the prices current in Belfast and Londonderry, as too were the prices of potatoes, at 26d and 32d per cwt. respectively in Limerick and Cork compared with 44d - 50d in Londonderry. However, local opinion was clearly much less sanguine than the government about the extent of the food stocks in the south and it may be that the experience of the previous year in which the initially more favourable situation in the southern counties following the 1782 harvest failure had, to a large extent, been eroded by June 1783, fostered fears of a repetition of such a trend. Food stocks in the south, based at least on the prices, were certainly appreciably lower in early 1784 than they had been in early 1782. In March 1782 wheat in Cork and Limerick had been 23/3 and 19/2 per barrel respectively, producing an assize of bread in excess of 5 lbs, while potatoes had been fetching 14½d and 14d per cwt. respectively. By March 1783, following the 1782 failure, wheat prices had risen to 28/- and 27/6, producing an assize lower on average by about 1 lb, and potatoes had risen in price to 34½d and 24d, prices which were comparable to those which

obtained in March 1784 with wheat at $26/1\frac{1}{2}$ and $25/5$ and potatoes at 32d and 26d. Clearly the combined effects of importation and the 1783 harvest had not restored the stocks of grain and potatoes in the south to a normal level, and it may be that a natural concern about the lower than usual stocks was exacerbated by fears of a marked deterioration in such stocks in the spring and summer, similar to that which had occurred in 1783.

The effects of the food riots in the south were evident in the intensification of the scarcity in Dublin and in Ulster. By March, oatmeal prices in Dublin at 13/9 per cwt. and potato prices at 48d per cwt. were considered high, and this was deemed to be because

the mobs lately at Clonmel and Waterford (and apprehensions of the same at Youghal and Cork) prevented the free shipping of these articles to the metropolis. . .78

In Ulster, prices were even higher with oatmeal in Belfast fetching 15/10 per cwt., and 17/10 in Londonderry.

However, from the spring the pattern changed, for prices in the north, which in January 1784 had been in excess of the previous season, eased a little and did not subsequently attain the pre-harvest peak of 1783; whilst in the south, prices, which in early spring 1784 had continued below the levels current in spring 1783, rose sharply from late spring, and by late summer Cork and Limerick were experiencing their worst food shortage of the whole crisis. It seems as though, at least in part, the easing of conditions in the north was at the expense of the more favourable conditions in the south.

In the north, oatmeal prices peaked in Londonderry in February 1784 at $17/11\frac{1}{2}$ per cwt. and in Belfast in March at 15/10. There was no subsequent dramatic fall in prices, or even a gradual fall, but rather a fluctuation from month to month, suggesting an irregular inflow of supplies which provided some immediate relief, but which was never of sufficient quantity to produce a sustained improvement.

Prices of wheat per barrel

		Belfast	Londonderry
1784	March	15.10	17.9½
	April	14. 6	-
	May	15. 4	17.3
	June	14. 0	17.9½

However, conditions were clearly better than in the previous year when oatmeal prices had risen steadily throughout the spring and summer, peaking at 23/4 per cwt. in Londonderry in July 1783, a price markedly in excess of the 1784 peak of 17/11½ in February. This easing of the pressure on the grain supplies was reflected too in potato prices which in Londonderry had peaked in July 1783 at 68d per cwt. but which in 1784 rose only to 52d per cwt.

A similar profile was apparent in Dublin. Oatmeal prices peaked in March 1784 at 13/9 per cwt. compared with a 1783 peak of 20/- in July, and wheat prices peaked in April at 30/9 per barrel compared with 36/6 in July 1783. The subsequent months saw the same up and down movement in prices as was the case in Ulster.

However, in the southern counties, the initially more favourable conditions deteriorated markedly from the late spring. Prices in early spring were, on the whole, more favourable than in the previous year. Wheat prices at 26/1½ per barrel in Cork and 25/5 in Limerick in March 1784 compared favourably with 28/- and 27/6 respectively in March 1783, and produced a larger bread assize in both centres, whilst, in Cork, potatoes at 32d per cwt. compared with 34½d, and oats at 17/9 per barrel compared with 19/4½, further emphasized this more favourable situation. However, in late spring/early summer there was a sharp escalation in prices in the south. Wheat, at 26/1½ per barrel in Cork in March, rose to 29/9 in May before peaking at 31/3 in June, whilst in Limerick prices rose even more sharply from 25/5 in May to 33/9 in June. By June, wheat prices in both centres were in excess of the pre-1783 harvest peak, and were higher than in any of the other major urban centres. The assize of bread had fallen below 4 lbs in both centres by June, and continued to fall, reaching its lowest level for the whole crisis in August at 3.12.4 in Cork and 3.11.2 in Limerick. Oats in Cork, at 17/9 per barrel in April, had risen to 24/- by May and remained above 20/- until August, although they did not reach the 1783 peak price of 30/6. Potatoes, in

Limerick, rose sharply from 30d per cwt. in April to 46d in May, the first time they had exceeded 40d during the crisis, and remained above 40d until after the grain harvest, although in Cork, prices were more moderate and did not exceed a peak of 39d in May. The variable price of potatoes and the lower peak price of oats in Cork may reflect some measure of success for the popular unrest aimed at preventing the redistribution of these commodities. However, although there had clearly been a marked deterioration in conditions in the south, in comparative terms, the situation in the south was little worse than elsewhere in the country. The assize of bread in Limerick and Cork was slightly in excess of that in Dublin; wheat prices, although higher than in the other urban centres, were not substantially so (Dublin 30/6; Cork 31/3; Belfast 28/4; Kilkenny 30/1; Limerick 33/9) whilst potatoes, even at 46d per cwt. in Limerick, were still below the 50d current in Londonderry. In fact the situation in the southern counties, although representing a marked deterioration since the early spring, and although appreciably worse than in the previous year, was similar to conditions elsewhere in the country, and thus, even at its worst, had not been as severe as conditions experienced elsewhere in the country after the 1782 harvest failure.

The easing of conditions in the north and in Dublin was effected by importation and by a redistribution of food stocks from the south. Import of grain in 1784/5 was again substantial with 109,876 cwt. of flour and 37,626 qts. of wheat coming into the country, the greater part of which had probably arrived before the successful 1784 harvest. The greatest proportion of this imported grain, over 23,000 qts. of wheat and almost 90,000 cwt. of flour, went to Dublin, the leading port of the country and the largest centre of concentrated distress, whilst almost 12,000 qts. of wheat and almost 6,000 cwt. of flour were imported into northern centres. Redistribution of grain and potatoes from southern centres also played a part. Coasting of barley and wheat to Dublin had been in evidence from February 1784 and by the second half of March the Dublin port returns indicate a much greater volume of oats, oatmeal and potatoes being landed from coasters, a trend which was very strong in April and May, before gradually declining in June and July.⁷⁹ Unfortunately no ports of origin are quoted but it seems likely that a substantial proportion of this coasting trade would have come from the southern ports. Certainly the Dublin figures are in line with those

from Belfast, which reveal a marked concentration of imported oats and meal from southern ports in April.⁸⁰

It seems likely that this redistribution contributed significantly to the marked deterioration in food stocks in the south. The natural decline in stocks during the spring and summer would obviously have been accelerated by the internal redistribution, and furthermore, unlike the north and Dublin, the stocks in the south were not being significantly replenished by imports - only 1,637 qts. of wheat and 7,959 cwt. of flour were imported into southern centres in 1784/5. Thus, the sharp rise in prices in southern centres from May, and the decline in coasting to Dublin by June, suggest a marked decline in food stocks in the south and the concurrence of these two developments is unlikely to have been coincidental.

However, the food crisis throughout the country was solved by the 1784 harvest. Reports had been pouring in throughout the summer of the probable abundance of the forthcoming harvest and reaping began in August in perfect weather. Confidence in the outcome was sufficiently high for the Lord Lieutenant to lift the embargo on export and this was duly announced by a proclamation of 10 August.⁸¹ This confidence proved not to have been misplaced and by October a general fall in prices was apparent. Wheat prices in Dublin fell from 29/9 per barrel in September to 24/6 in October, from 25/7½ to 24/4½ in Belfast and from 33/9 to 20/10 in Limerick; by November the assize of bread was well above 4 lb. in all the major urban centres and above 5 lbs. in Cork and Limerick; and oatmeal was at 9/10 and 11/6½ per cwt. in Belfast and Londonderry respectively, the lowest level since the onset of the crisis in the later centre. Prices had not fallen to the levels which had obtained following the last successful harvest in 1781 (wheat in Dublin in October 1781 was at 21/9 and the weight of the loaf some six ounces heavier) but prices in 1781 had been particularly low following two very successful harvests, whereas the two years preceding the 1784 harvest had seen a devastation of Irish food stocks. However, conditions continued to improve during the autumn and winter and by January 1785 prices were similar to those which had obtained in January 1782. The resumption of an unimpeded grain trade confirmed the success of the harvest and 39,956 barrels of wheat

and 155,732 barrels of oats were exported in 1784/5 compared with 874 and 11,441 barrels respectively in the previous year.⁸² There was no repetition during 1785 of the escalation in prices which had marked the two previous years and the increasing sense of a return to normality was emphasized by a second successful harvest in 1785.

The linen manufacturers, by far the first manufacturers in Ireland in the late 18th century, experienced acute fluctuations in the demand for their goods in the early years of the 1780s before emerging as a sector of established prosperity from 1785/6. However, demand in overseas markets was reduced in the early years of the 1790s, both the largely self-sufficient and the export-oriented sectors. The primary cause of the 1790s downturn was the early 1790s, although increased difficulties in supply and manufacturing techniques also contributed to depression in the industry.

Linen production was primarily for the export market and thus the basic fluctuations in the fortunes of the industry are reflected in the annual export figures. The manufacturers had been gradually recovering from the acute slump of the early 1780s and by 1785/6 exports had recovered to 11,545,702 yards, valued at 15,500,000 yards in 1785/6. However, this proved to be the peak of the recovery, for exports fell to 10,500,000 yards in 1786/7 and again to 10,000,000 yards in the following year, before dropping dramatically to 14,000,000 yards in 1788/9, the lowest exports total since 1782/3. A recovery, equally as dramatic, was effected in the following year, with exports amounting to 14,000,000 yards for the first time since 1782/3, only to be followed by a further slump to 10,000,000 yards in 1792/3, before staging a sustained post-war recovery from 1793/4.

The linen manufacturers were the first major sector of the economy to exhibit clear signs of stagnation. Exports of plain weave cloth fell sharply to 14,000,000 yards in 1780/1 from the 14,700,000 yards of the previous year, and the fluctuations of the 1780s, of which the linen trade was one of the principal determinants, suggest that the major effects of this drop in exports were felt in the period up to around 1785. The Dublin and London exchange rates steadily rose from March 1780, apart from a brief interruption in the trend in July, and reached their peak in August at 5 1/2 - 3/4. This fall in export was probably in large measure due to the effect of the major determinants of the linen trade, the location of the market by war.

CHAPTER 5

LINEN

The linen manufacture, "by far the first manufacture in Ireland"¹ in the late 18th century, experienced acute fluctuations in its fortunes in the early years of the 1780s before embarking on a period of sustained prosperity from 1783/4. Uncertain demand in overseas markets and problems in the supply of raw materials, both due largely to the impact of the war, were the primary causes of the indifferent export performance in the early 1780s, although internal difficulties of credit supply and manufacturing technique also contributed to depression in the industry.

Linen production was primarily for the export market and thus the basic fluctuations in the fortunes of the manufacture are readily apparent from the annual export figures. The manufacture had been gradually recovering from the acute crisis of the early 1770s and by 1777/8 exports had recovered to 21,945,729 yards, having stood at 16,916,674 yards in 1773/4. However, this proved to be the peak of the recovery, for exports fell to 18,836,042 yards in 1778/9 and again to 18,746,902 yards in the following year, before slumping dramatically to 14,947,265 yards in 1780/1, the lowest export total since 1764/5. A recovery, equally as dramatic, was effected in the following year, with exports exceeding 24 million yards for the first time since 1770/1, only to be followed by a further slump to 16,039,705 yards in 1782/3, before staging a sustained post-war recovery from 1783/4.

The linen manufacture was the first major sector of the economy to exhibit clear signs of dislocation. Exports of plain linen cloth fell sharply to 14,947,265 yards in 1780/1 from the 18,746,902 yards of the previous year, and the fluctuations of the exchanges, of which the linen trade was one of the principal determinants, suggest that the major effects of this drop in exports were felt in the period up to autumn 1780. The Dublin on London exchange rose steadily from March 1780, apart from a brief interruption in the trend in July, and peaked above par in August at $8 \frac{5}{8} - \frac{3}{4}\%$. This fall in export was due primarily to lower output, with the effect of this major determinant being exacerbated by the dislocation of the market by war.

Although impossible to quantify, it is clear that there was a marked fall in the amount of cloth produced in 1780/1. This was caused by a shortfall in the supply of flax in the autumn of 1779, which was reflected in the cloth output in 1780/1. Prior to the 1780 Linen Act, the supply of flaxseed depended largely on importation, but the situation was disastrously affected by the war, which cut off transatlantic supplies after 1776, and after mid-1778 rendered the European alternatives uncertain. Before the outbreak of hostilities, transatlantic supplies had dominated Irish flaxseed imports, accounting, for example, for 38,806 hogsheads, in 1774/5, out of a total of 40,219 hogsheads, but such imports fell sharply after 1774/5 and had ceased altogether by 1777/8. The total volume of imports was initially maintained by transferring to European supplies, but the vulnerability of this alternative source was acutely demonstrated in 1778/9, when a sharp fall in the supply from the East Country saw the total imports fall from 37,211 hogsheads in 1777/8 to 20,419 hogsheads in 1778/9, the lowest level for the decade. Furthermore, a feature of the change from American to European supplies had been a marked diminution in quality.² The acute shortage of flax for weavers in 1780 was, therefore, in large measure a consequence of the exacerbation of the problems in the supply and quality of flaxseed occasioned when France entered the war in July 1778. The problem must have been particularly acute in the 1779 sowing season, as the shortfall of seed from abroad in the autumn and winter of 1778 could not be compensated by increased sowing of domestic seed in time for the 1779 planting. The growing dependence on home-produced flaxseed after 1778 prevented any further problems in the supply of flax. Although the import of seed fell again in 1779/80 to 19,561 hogsheads, with the added disadvantage that about half of this total was considered bad quality,³ the sharp rise in output, reflected in the export of 24,970,303 yards of cloth in 1781/2, clearly indicated the increased significance of home produced seed. Under the 1780 Linen Act, the bounties which had been used to encourage the import of flaxseed were transferred to the promotion of domestic production and the consequent strides made in the home supply were reflected in the fact that, although there was a bad harvest in 1781 - John Blackhall, one of the most avid supporters of the new policy, experienced "a vast loss of seed" in 1781 due to "the extreme badness of the weather"⁴ - and no significant rise in imports, yet the output of cloth in 1782/3 was not inhibited, reflected by another high export total

of 24,961,898 yards. Obviously, with a reduction in both the quality and quantity of seed for sowing in 1779, there would be less flax and thus less cloth. This shortage of cloth was reflected in the increasing price of linens during 1780. Thomas Greer noted in April that "brown linens are advancing in price . . ." ⁵ and John Andrews, writing in July, deemed coarse linens to be "very high", at least $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per yard dearer than the last season. ⁶

However, even such cloth ~~was~~ was produced for export was not certain to reach market safely or punctually in the prevailing war-time conditions. Interruption of transatlantic and European trade was an obvious product of the war, but even the British trade, although not so dramatically affected, was undoubtedly inhibited by the threat of enemy privateers. The long voyage from Dublin through the English Channel to London was especially hazardous and was, for the most part, forsaken in favour of the shorter sea voyage to the west coast of England and subsequent overland route. However, even for such a short voyage, naval protection was essential, but due to the strain of fighting both an American and a European war, such protection was not as prompt or as extensive as was wished. The situation was well illustrated in a petition from the merchants and traders of Dublin in March 1780, who complained that

in former times of war regular convoys were usually appointed by the Admiralty for the vessels bound for the port of London, Bristol and other ports of England. But during the present hostilities your petitioners have not been so fortunate, the few convoys they have had being far from regular . . . which has caused great delays and disappointments . . . the linen trade, the great support of this country has greatly suffered from these circumstances, its markets which ought to be regular, rendered uncertain, and a timely appearance at the fair of Chester and Bristol obstructed." ⁷

The year 1780/1 was a particularly active one for enemy privateers around the Irish coast. Buckingham, the Lord Lieutenant, having in March 1780

. . . expressed my apprehensions of the manner in which the trade of the kingdom during this season of the year would stand molested by privateers and other cruisers

belonging to the enemy, unless the most effectual protection which could possibly be afforded were granted.⁸

was, by July, forced to conclude that "such apprehensions have not proved groundless . . ." ⁹ and his concern was echoed later in the month by Richard Vaughan & Co. of Bristol, who observed that the merchants of that city were "greatly alarmed at the many Privateers that are in the Irish and Bristol Channel." ¹⁰ In the light of such intense activity, it is most unlikely that the linen trade, the leading single Irish export to Britain, did not suffer significantly.

The effect of this shortage of cloth and the uncertainty about its transportation was evident in the British market. Of the 14,947,265 yards of plain cloth exported in 1780/1, 14,421,835 yards went to Britain, a similar proportion to the previous year, in which 18,298,815 yards out of a total of 18,746,982 yards had gone to Britain. Therefore, since British demand was primarily for domestic consumption, re-export accounting for an inconsiderable quantity in relation to total import from Ireland, the nature of British domestic demand was a vital determinant of the success of the Irish linen trade. Demand in Britain had been low. A financial crisis following the entry of France into the war and a consequent depression in trade and manufacture had reduced British demand and this was reflected in the fall in Irish linen exports from 21,779,981 yards in 1777/8 to 18,526,648 yards in 1778/9 and again to 18,298,815 yards in 1779/80. However, there were signs of improvement in England in 1780, with rising imports, suggestive of speculative re-stocking by merchants in anticipation of the end of the war, ¹¹ and the production of narrow cloths, intended largely for the domestic market, increased from 87.4 thousand to 98.9 thousand. ¹² Demand for linen was certainly strong. Prices of cloth, as has already been noted, had risen appreciably in the wake of the shortfall in production and this was passed on to the British purchasers. Michael Andrews admitted, in July, that his goods were 'dear', but claimed that they were "as low charged as I can afford them" ¹³ and his brother John, in September, drew criticism from Newcastle that his linens were too highly invoiced, but replied "that I cannot help as they have got up so much in price." ¹⁴ Clearly, Irish linens were considered highly priced by the British market, but yet there are no complaints of goods lying on hand and thus it must be taken that sales were being

effected, even at such high prices. However, the shortfall in cloth production, which the high prices had reflected, ensured that the strong British demand could not be satisfied. This was reflected in the upsurge in demand from the beginning of the 1781 season when, after a better flax harvest in 1780, supplies of cloth became easier.

The new season ushered in an upturn in the fortunes of the linen manufacture which continued until mid-1781 as British demand, which had been stifled in the previous year, was successfully catered for by the unimpeded production of a new cloth season. Exports of plain cloth, which in 1780/1 had been 14,947,265 yards, soared in 1781/2 to 24,970,303 yards, and with the emergence of a downturn in the trade in the second half of 1781, the majority of these sales must have been effected in the spring and summer of 1781.

As early as February 1781, Michael Andrews reported "a pressing demand" from Glasgow,¹⁵ and it is likely that there was a strong demand for cloth immediately the produce of the 1780 flax harvest was ready for market. In March, Michael Andrews was expressing himself happy that a Glasgow correspondent was "in so fair a way of selling my linens . . .";¹⁶ in April he expressed regret that he could not send more than 1,000 to 1,200 pieces to a new customer, due to his obligations to Glasgow and the North of England;¹⁷ and in May he "received considerable orders from the North of England";¹⁸ whilst it was reported in the Belfast Newsletter at the beginning of July that linens to the value of £2 million had been exported in the space of fifteen days.¹⁹

The problems of supply which had been so evident in 1780/1 were not repeated in 1781/2, whilst on the war front, although privateering remained a serious threat, evidenced by the continued high level of issue of letters of marque²⁰ and the regular correspondence to secure naval protection,²¹ evidently it did not seriously inhibit the linen trade.

Although cloth was clearly plentiful in the new season, it continued to be highly priced. Michael Andrews noted in December 1780 that there was "not the least appearance of a fall"²² and he observed in March 1781 that "I cannot say I can send coarse linens any cheaper than last season."²³

It was August 1781 before a fall in prices was noted and even then, Michael Andrews noted ". . . yet I am afraid they are high enough as they were for some time past at an enormous price."²⁴ But price was clearly no deterrent to British purchasing - this was partially due to continued economic recovery in England, but more importantly, was the product of speculation.

Recovery in England had continued. Exports rose (from £10.6 million to £13.4 million)²⁵ and output of broadcloth increased (from 102 thousand to 112.5 thousand cloths)²⁶ in 1781, generally an indication of improving employment and incomes in an important section of the economy,²⁷ whilst output of narrow cloths, generally an indicator of domestic demand,²⁸ although falling in 1781/2, remained significantly above the depressed level of 1779/80.²⁹ However, it is unlikely that the recovery suggested by these figures was of a sufficient magnitude to fuel an increased demand such as is suggested by the substantial rise in Irish linen exports - the 24,970,303 yards exported in 1781/2 represented the highest export total since 1770/1. The substantial nature of this upturn suggests strongly that speculative factors were at work. There had been substantial general restocking by English merchants, in anticipation of the ending of the war, during 1780/1,³⁰ evidenced by a marked rise in imports from £10.6 million in 1779/80 to £11.9 million in 1780/1, the speculative nature of which was emphasized by the sharp fall in imports in the following year to £9.5 million. It seems likely that the upturn in demand for linen was an integral part of this movement, which continued into the first half of 1781 due to the inability of merchants to satisfy their requirements because of uncertainties in both supply and demand in the spring and summer of 1780.

This speculative nature of British demand was further emphasized by a fall-off in demand during the second half of 1781 which, exacerbated by interruptions in production and by the continued uncertainties in transport due to the war, produced a downturn in the linen trade which continued into the final quarter of 1782.

Demand, which had clearly been buoyant as late as July 1781,³¹ showed signs of downturn in August. In that month, Michael Andrews had to request

sales from Glasgow ". . . when any opportunity . . . offers . . . as I long much to have sales"³² and in the following month he was expressing the hope ". . . that trade will soon mend"³³ but in October, at the Chester Fair, it was noted that ". . . our linens are in great quantities rejected".³⁴ In November, John Andrews expressed regret that the linens he had sent to Glasgow ". . . do not please"³⁵ and even Michael Andrews, who had effected sales in London³⁶ and Chester³⁷ in October, was, by November, discovering that his linens ". . . have not been selling as expected"³⁸ while, by December, the situation had become so acute that he was unable to pay a debt of £500 because "the backwardness of trade puts it out of my power".³⁹ This deepening depression in the linen trade was reflected in the exchange, which rose sharply again in November and passed par in December. By January 1782, the extent of the depression was widely appreciated and in that month, when the exchange rose to a new peak of 9%, John Moore, the agent on the Annesley estates in Co. Down, wrote to his employer

It has grieved me to see the sudden rise of the Exchange against us . . . I believe its' present rise must be chiefly owing to the decline of our linen trade, a misfortune truly national, as almost the whole of our circulating cash was drawn from this source . . .⁴⁰

Moore went on to attribute this decline to "the knavery of our bleachers"⁴¹ and indeed, contemporary opinion laid great emphasis on a decline in the quality of linens presented for export, as the cause of the depression. Inadequate preparation of the yarn, too much rubbing of the cloth to produce an attractive appearance⁴² and, above all, the use of lime as a bleaching agent,⁴³ were deemed responsible for producing rottenness in cloth, which defect was compounded by the fraudulent lapping and sealing of webs to conceal the faults. In a memorial to the Trustees of the Linen Manufacture in August 1780, the linen merchants expressed concern at the ". . . rapid increase of Complaints from all quarters against Irish linens"⁴⁴ and the subsequent flood of support, encapsulated in the report, in December 1781, of the Committee on the State of the Linen Manufacture,⁴⁵ which came out forcibly against the use of lime,⁴⁶ was sufficiently strong to force the government to introduce a bill in March 1782 to outlaw bleaching with lime and to reform the sealing system, which became law in May 1782. But such defects were not new - they had, by common consent,

been growing since 1779 and the Committee on the State of the Linen Manufacture had been collecting evidence since February 1780 in support of its conclusions - what, however, was new, was the strength of overt opinion on the subject, and there can be little doubt that this was essentially a reaction to the downturn in sales. In fact, this concern over the quality of linens was little more than a symptom of the disorder rather than the malady itself. Undoubtedly, the export of sub-standard linen was a problem. Both Michael⁴⁷ and John Andrews were complained against, although John claimed that it was ". . . the first time I ever had . . . inside damage in all my lifetime. . ." ⁴⁸ but in total terms, the volume of goods returned as faulty was small.

<u>year</u>	<u>yards of linen returned</u> ⁴⁹
1778/79	133,586
1779/80	159,064
1780/81	226,029
1781/82	216,878

In the context of a total of 24,970,303 yards of cloth exported in 1781/2, a return of 216,878 yards would have attracted little attention had the export trade continued buoyant, but in a period of bad sales, it assumed a grossly disproportionate significance.

In fact, the cause of this downturn was essentially a lack of demand in Britain. Some dislocation in trading may have been caused by the failure of Marlar & Co. of London in July 1781, with whom ". . . a vast number of merchants and linnen drapers were connected."⁵⁰ It was reported that the firm had failed for "upwards of three hundred thousand pounds"⁵¹ but a subsequent report that total losses to Irish merchants would not exceed £25,000⁵² seemed to take the heat out of the issue and, in the absence of any further comment, it must be assumed that the failure had no substantial adverse effect on the Irish linen trade. In fact, it was probably the very nature of British demand, i.e. its speculativeness, which was responsible for the slowing down in exports from mid-1781. If English imports were not related to consumer demand, then the accumulation of imported material, by exceeding the rate of purchase, could be expected to produce a surplus, the logical result of which would be the slowing

down or ceasing of further import - the sharp fall in general English imports in 1781, after the marked rise of the previous year, suggests such a trend. So, just as the upturn in demand for linen from autumn 1780 to mid-1781 had been an integral, but delayed, part of the speculative upsurge in English imports in 1780, so, too, the decline in demand was largely a product of the withering of this speculative urge, similarly delayed.

This contraction in the linen trade was exacerbated during 1782 by some reduction in output and by the continued effect of the war on shipping. The manufacture of cloth was inhibited in the final quarter of 1782, due to the severe harvest for, as the agent on the Abercorn estates observed, ". . . the people being quite engaged in saving their crops . . . prevented spinning and weaving . . ." ⁵³ whilst finishing was dislocated by the action of the northern drapers, who, in protest against the new sealing arrangements contained in the 1782 Linen Act, ⁵⁴ placed a ban on the purchase of brown linen and on bleaching, ⁵⁵ which was in force from 5th to the 15th August. ⁵⁶ The downturn in export was reflected in the concern of Thomas Greer's London partners at the small quantity of linens finished at New Hambro, for "there has not yet been above fifteen hundred . . . last year by this time we had above 2,500 sent away . . ." ⁵⁷ On the market side, apart from the ban on the purchase of brown linen, the continuing dislocative effects of the war on transportation were re-emphasized in the autumn of 1782, for "The linen ships of Newry got . . . to Chester in good time, those from Dublin not until the fair was over." ⁵⁸

It is likely that this reduction in output served to increase the price of brown linens at market (such had certainly been the case during the last period of supply affected output in 1780/1), ⁵⁹ a trend which certainly became marked from June 1782, when, in anticipation of a speedy conclusion to the war, it was reported that there had been an advance of at least 1d. in the shilling. ⁶⁰ Such rising prices must have reduced the attractiveness of Irish linens in Britain, where the already weak demand was probably further reduced by the effects of the 1782 harvest failure, which considerably reduced the disposable income of workers. ⁶¹

Certainly sales continued to be acutely depressed in the spring, summer and autumn of 1782. In May, Michael Andrews noted ". . . so little progress in the sale of my linens . . ." ⁶² whilst the span of the depression was emphasized by John Andrews, writing in July:

. . . the trade in Newcastle must become to a very low ebb when I cannot get a turn of my money once a year, the 2 boxes I sent you I bought before this time last year . . . ⁶³

It was reported in October that ". . . no linen has been sold at the Chester Fair" ⁶⁴ and, not surprisingly, in November, the Banbridge linen drapers called for "some mode of relief to the trade from its present critical and embarrassed situation." ⁶⁵

A more general reflection of the depressed state of the linen trade was the emergence of a campaign to establish a white linen hall in Ulster as an alternative to Dublin. There had been a growing resentment among Ulster linen drapers during the 1770s at the predominant role of Dublin in the linen trade and the depression in 1781 and 1782 seems to have brought this to a head. ⁶⁶ The notion of a hall in Belfast or Newry was first publicly mooted in August 1782 ⁶⁷ and the subsequent development of the idea suggested strongly that it was a product of its time - that is, it proceeded from a background of poor linen sales and depressed domestic credit. Its protagonists stressed the element of economy - reduction in travelling expenses, reduction in long delays and loss of time at market - which would lead to the ability to sell cheaper, ⁶⁸ and it was estimated that a saving of 6% could be effected on carriage and commission. ⁶⁹ On a more general level, it was believed that the opening of such a hall would be followed by the establishment of a bank ". . . wherein a sufficiency of cash might be regularly found to answer the exigencies of business". ⁷⁰ The speedy organization of the venture - meetings were held on 15 November and 2 December to promote the erection of white linen halls in Belfast and Newry respectively - although owing something to municipal rivalry, ⁷¹ indicated the popularity of the project and suggested the high level of concern which obtained, regarding the state of the linen industry.

However, the end of the war brought relief to the linen trade and ushered in a period of recovery which lasted until the emergence of a post-war contraction in demand in mid-1783.

Peace with America was effected at the end of November 1782 and a complementary settlement was concluded with France and Spain in January 1783. John Andrews' observations in January 1783 that "brown linens have never been dearer this winter than they have been these three years past"⁷² suggests that there had been an upturn in purchasing following the peace with America, in anticipation of the re-opening of trade, and following the peace with France and Spain, there was a substantial upward movement in the prices of, and demand for, finished linens. It was reported at the end of January that

The Preliminaries of Peace have already been felt in a very comfortable Manner by the Northerners who are attending the Market at the Hall; Peace has operated so far as to raise the Price of Linens considerably.⁷³

and in the following month John Andrews noted that

Since peace has been declared linens of all sorts have advanced prodigiously. I am told very few left unsold at the Dublin Hall . . .⁷⁴

The renewed confidence in the prospects for the linen trade was reflected in John Andrews' instructions to his English correspondents in January⁷⁵ and February 1783⁷⁶ that no goods were to be sold below invoice price and, where possible, should be sold above it, for ". . . as the peace is now concluded trade of all sorts will flourish . . ."⁷⁷

Great expectations had been entertained for trade in general with the coming of peace but, in particular, it was anticipated that "the Americans must stand in very great Need of . . . our Linens . . ."⁷⁸ and indeed, the upturn in linen exports from the middle of March 1783 owed its impetus to an upsurge in speculative export to America, although the steady recovery in British demand was ultimately to be more important.

Irish merchants were quick to take up the challenge of trans-atlantic trade and by mid-March export had begun.⁷⁹ The desire of the linen trade to make a successful initial impression ". . . at this time when new and beneficial Sources of trade are opening . . ."⁸⁰ was emphasized by the call from the Linen Board in March, for the examination of all linens ". . . which are intended for export to foreign countries, and particularly to America . . ."⁸¹ The linen trade responded quickly to the new export

opportunities and this was reflected in the 1782/3 trade figures. In a year when linen exports in general had fallen, transatlantic exports rose from 225,195 yards in 1781/2 to 632,100 yards in 1782/3, with those to America in particular rising from 126,620 yards to 402,033 yards, and there can be little doubt that this rise in export to America was largely the product of the beginning of post-war exportation in the second half of March 1783. The full extent of the upsurge in export to America was revealed in the 1783/4 figures, which showed a rise from 402,033 yards in 1782/3 to 3,394,742 yards in 1783/4, the dramatic nature of which is emphasized by the realization that since there was a marked contraction in American demand from mid-1783, it is probable that the greater part of this exportation was concentrated in the period late March to June 1783.

Exports to Britain, although more substantial, appeared less frenzied, largely because of the failure of a post-war boom to develop in Britain.⁸² The slowness of the peace negotiations may have accounted for the lack of a sudden boom in English exports,⁸³ whilst the harvest failure in 1782 restricted recovery in domestic demand.⁸⁴ Improvement in English demand was, therefore, gradual, but export of Irish linens to Britain recovered well, rising to 21,128,150 yards in 1783/4 from 15,212,469 yards of the previous year, and since English demand was again inhibited in the autumn by the constraints of a financial crisis,⁸⁵ it is likely that the greater part of this exportation had taken place by July 1783.

Activity was certainly high in the manufacture in the spring and summer of 1783, in response to this renewed demand from Britain and the desire to (speedily exploit) the new American market. John Andrews noted in May that he had never seen

. . . such work as we have now in the brown markets . . .
everyone in the trade that can command any money is
speculating as high as possible . . .⁸⁶

whilst in Dublin, in June, linens were finding "a smart and profitable sale"⁸⁷ with prospects deemed to be good for the forthcoming Chester Fair.⁸⁸ The increased activity in the trade was reflected also in the establishment throughout the spring and summer of new local markets for cloth and yarn in Ulster - at Desertmartin⁸⁹ in February, Kircubbin⁹⁰ in March, Moneymore⁹¹ in May, Greyabbey⁹² in June - and their speedy

success - it was announced in June that the Desertmartin market would continue on a regular monthly basis,⁹³ whilst the Greyabbey market, "from the great encouragement given by a number of the principal linen drapers of the counties of Down and Antrim . . ." was also speedily pledged to continue monthly throughout the year⁹⁴ - served to further emphasize the intensity of activity in the trade.

However, during the second half of 1783, a downturn in the trade emerged, which lasted until the spring of 1784, as demand from the British and American markets contracted.

In America, by early summer 1783, the market was already overstocked with imported goods and an American merchant, writing to London in June, concluded that there would be ". . . an amazing stagnation and low ebb in trade for a while."⁹⁵ Such a contraction proved to be the experience of the linen trade, for whereas in Philadelphia in July linens were selling well, at upwards of 30% clear profit,⁹⁶ by August the heavy importation was clearly depressing the price and sale of goods and it was reported that "Linen, though reckoned to be one of the best articles will not sell for more than 80 to 100 per cent on invoice. Coarse linens a mere drug . . ."⁹⁷ The Earl of Abercorn's agent observed in October that "Our linens sent hence to America, arrived in the general glut"⁹⁸ and the return of a brig from Philadelphia in November brought the report that "Linen cloth was not so good an article, some of it sold at first cost, and at best produced a very modest profit."⁹⁹ This speedy waning in demand in America - export after all had only begun in March - served to emphasize the speculativeness of the venture. Over-speculation by Irish merchants, following the re-opening of the American market, a failing evidently shared by their British counterparts, was exacerbated in the Irish case by an unrealistically optimistic view of the benefits to be derived from the American trade, which proceeded largely from the belief that the relaxation in the Navigation Laws would be the panacea for the economic ills of the nation. But, since American purchasers were interested mainly in low-priced linens, the demand for the quality Irish goods was always likely to be limited, as the decline in exports to America in the years after 1783/4 emphasized.

There was contraction also in British demand. Autumn saw the appearance of a financial crisis in England, due partly to an external drain and partly to losses sustained by merchants through an over-estimation of demand for British exports, especially in America,¹⁰⁰ and the price of British 3% and bank stock, which began to fall from July 1783,¹⁰¹ would seem to back-date this decline to the summer. The result was to slow down the circulation of money and hamper the process of recovery.¹⁰² The effect on the linen trade was to depress sales. John Andrews, in reply to a Dublin correspondent in July, wrote that "the prices you mention you are offered for the linens is vastly lower than I ever thought to take for them"¹⁰³ and in August he threatened to take goods away from Glasgow "if they are not sold or a prospect of selling them . . ."¹⁰⁴ His correspondence for the remainder of 1783 is marked by assertions of goods being "as low invoiced as in my power . . ."¹⁰⁵ and an apparent willingness to accept abatements¹⁰⁶ - an attitude in stark contrast with his immediate post-war strictures to correspondents that no goods should be sold below invoice price.

A general indication of the downturn in the linen trade was the emergence of a campaign to restrict the export of linen yarn by means of a duty, which, both in timing and content, clearly suggested that it was a direct response to bad sales. The idea was first publicly mooted in December 1783 (by which time the contraction in the British and American markets was clearly apparent) in a petition from the merchants of Dublin¹⁰⁷ and was taken up by the Ulster linen-draper as "a means of enabling us to send our linens on cheaper terms to market"¹⁰⁸ for "the Failure of the Trade is a Consequence of the very high Price of Yarn, occasioned by the extensive Orders received from the English Markets".¹⁰⁹ In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that the export of yarn was unduly affected by English demand, or was injurious to the level of cloth exports. Export of yarn was high in 1782/3 at 35,813 cwts., but it was not unusual for yarn exports to rise in a year of bad cloth exports, as spinners increased the export of yarn as a means of compensating for reduced domestic demand occasioned by depressed cloth sales - yarn exports had been high also, at 37,202 cwts., in 1780/1, when cloth exports had fallen to 14,947,265 yards. With the return of successful cloth exports in 1783/4, yarn exports did fall, although only from 35,813 cwts. in 1782/3 to 33,014 cwts. in 1783/4, and it may well be that there was some increased demand

from Britain as manufacturing there began its post-war recovery. However, the fact that cloth exports leapt from 16,039,705 yards in 1782/3 to 24,961,898 yards in 1783/4 makes clear that the level of yarn exports had little effect on the cloth trade. Had demand for cloth remained high throughout 1783, concern over yarn exports would not have materialized, and this is emphasized by the gradual disappearance of the issue by the spring of 1784, as sales began to improve again.

Indeed, in the spring of 1784 the new season witnessed an upturn in the linen trade, with an upsurge in demand from America and a gradual improvement in the British market, which was reflected in the rise in the total export of plain cloth from 24,961,898 yards in 1783/4 to 26,677,647 yards in 1784/5. This was the first time in the decade that linen exports had risen in two successive years, and the total for 1784/5 was the largest export total to date for the century. This proved to be the beginning of a period of sustained recovery, with the 1784/5 total being bettered in every year until the end of the century.

Strong demand was evident from the beginning of the spring season, with particular emphasis being laid on exports to America. In April, ". . . that trade [linen] still continues rapidly to be extended to the above [America] . . . part of the world . . .",¹¹⁰ in May there was an "extraordinary demand for white and coloured linen for the American markets . . .",¹¹¹ whilst at the beginning of July it was reported that

Considerable orders for white and coloured linens have arrived here within these few days from diverse parts of the American continent.¹¹²

Clearly there had been an easing in the stagnation in American markets which had emerged from mid-1783,¹¹³ but this was far from being the beginning of an open-ended transatlantic demand for Irish linen. Over the year, linen exports to North America actually fell from 3,394,742 yards in 1783/4 to 2,354,049 yards in 1784/5, and it seems as though there was a downturn in American demand in the second half of the year. After July there is very little comment on export to America, in marked contrast to the spring and early summer, and in late November it was reported that ". . . the linens lately exported from the Northern ports of this kingdom (to America) have not met with a quick sale . . ."¹¹⁴

Contemporaries again sought to lay the blame on a diminution in the quality of the goods due to bleaching with lime,¹¹⁵ but it is likely that this was, by now, little more than a standard reaction to bad sales. The high demand at the beginning of the season, especially as the American market was emerging from a period of stagnation, was understandable, but it was unrealistic to expect such success to continue as post-war demand stabilized. The subsequent decline in the linen trade to America - exports fell again in 1785/6 to 1,035,045 yards and again in the following year to 967,459 yards - in a period when total exports of cloth were rising, emphasized the limited appeal of high quality Irish linens in the American market.

In fact, contemporary comment had probably over-emphasized the relative significance of American demand. Typical of such attitudes was a report in the Belfast Newsletter in May 1784 which noted

. . . we are now shipping from all the ports of the kingdom double the quantity of linens to foreign ports that we do to Great Britain . . . nay almost all the linens on our bleach greens are actually bespoke for other countries, besides Great Britain, . . . insomuch that all the north of Ireland . . . is clearly convinced, that the linen manufacture of Ireland would receive no check whatsoever, if a single yard was not to be exported to Great Britain"¹¹⁶

and whilst over-exuberance at the recovery in the linen trade, initially fuelled by demand from America, may have clouded contemporary judgement, it may be, too, that there was a deliberate attempt to over-state the significance of foreign export. At a time when concern about English retaliation against the non-importation was strong, it was clearly desirable to foster a public belief in a growing economic independence from Great Britain, especially with regard to linen, which, due to its overwhelming dependence on the British market, was especially vulnerable to economic retaliation. In fact, of the 26,677,647 yards of plain linen cloth exported in 1784/5, only 2,354,049 yards went to North America, whereas 23,904,514 yards were exported to Great Britain.

Thus the Irish linen trade continued to be dominated by the British market. Exports to Britain rose, for the second year in succession, from 21,128,150 yards in 1783/4 to 23,904,514 yards in 1784/5, but unlike the upsurge in demand from America, the rise in British demand was slow,

mirroring the recovery from the financial crisis of autumn 1783 and winter 1783-4. It was January 1784 before there was a break in the steady fall in British stocks, with bank stock rising, by one point from 112 to 113, for the first time since August 1783; it was February before there was a break in the fall of India stocks, which had been dropping since 1783; and April before there was a break in the fall of 3% consols, which had been in continuous decline since July 1783. Stocks did not, in fact, regain the levels which had been current in the spring and summer of 1783 until the second half of 1785¹¹⁷ and at the end of 1784, merchants were still complaining of shortages of money.¹¹⁸ Thus, despite John Andrews' high hopes for the new season, which had encouraged him in March to instruct a Newcastle-on-Tyne correspondent not to take 1d. off the invoice price,¹¹⁹ he was reluctantly obliged, in the following month, to accept abatements on sales in Glasgow.¹²⁰ However, by the second half of 1784, English demand seems to have strengthened appreciably. It was reported in mid-July from Chester that

The linen manufacturers from the North had plentifully assorted the market . . . and the buyers from the . . . different parts of England, were greater than was ever remembered . . ."¹²¹

and in September "the richest cargo on board any vessel that ever sailed from this harbour", containing £75,000 worth of white linens, left from Belfast for London,¹²² while in October "a great quantity of linens of all denominations were purchased by the several buyers . . . from England and Scotland. . ." who attended the Newry market.¹²³

This recovery in demand in Britain was reflected in the speedy return to, and maintenance of, high levels of activity in the local manufacture. As early as the beginning of March, John Andrews remarked on ". . . the best market in Dublin that has been for many years . . ."¹²⁴ and he was sufficiently encouraged, by the end of April, to predict ". . . the greatest prospect of a linen market this season than we have had for some years"¹²⁵ while James Black of Newry "encouraged by several gentlemen of eminence in the linen trade" was so confident of the prospects that he announced in June his establishment as a broker for receiving and shipping linens from Newry to Chester, London and America.¹²⁶ A measure of the increased activity may be gathered from the report from Dublin at the end of June that

Notwithstanding the new linenhall built in the North, and the great addition to our own Linen-hall here, yet it is a fact that there is not a room unoccupied and a greater demand than can be complied with . . .¹²⁷

By September 1784 the new hall at Newry had been joined by one in Belfast and the success of both halls in the second half of 1784 and early months of 1785 bore witness to the strength of the recovery of the manufacture. The September 1784 market in Belfast "exceeded the warmest hopes of all the persons concerned"¹²⁸ and the October market in Newry "exceeded our most sanguine expectations",¹²⁹ whilst in February 1785 "the late sales have so far exceeded the expectations of the most sanguine friends of the Belfast Hall . . ."¹³⁰ On a more modest level, the upturn in the linen trade was reflected in the success of local markets. That at Dromore, for example, although only deemed to be "fully established"¹³¹ as a monthly market in May 1784, proved so successful that by December it was operating on a fortnightly basis¹³² and the year 1784/5 saw the establishment, consolidation or expansion of similar local ventures in such places as Richill,¹³³ Ballymena,¹³⁴ Moira,¹³⁵ Loughgall,¹³⁶ Hillsborough¹³⁷ and Killylea.¹³⁸

The impetus of this recovery in the linen trade was maintained in the following year and, despite the continued decline of the American market and a brief fall-off in demand from Britain in the spring and early summer of 1785, exports of plain cloth rose again from 26,677,647 yards in 1784/5 to 28,168,666 yards in 1785/6.

Export to America continued to decline, falling from 2,354,049 yards in 1784/5 to 1,035,045 yards in 1785/6, but this was more than compensated for by increased British demand. Exports to Britain rose from 23,904,514 yards in 1784/5 to 26,218,782 yards in 1785/6, despite an uncertain start to the season. John Andrews expressed regret in March 1785 to a London correspondent that ". . . you have had such a bad market"¹³⁹ while in the following month, Andrew Ferguson lamented to a correspondent in Westby "that there is still so great a stagnation in the market"¹⁴⁰ and complained again in June of goods lying on hand.¹⁴¹ The downturn in the trade was reflected in the Dublin on London exchange, which rose above par in March, for the first time since June 1784, and peaked at 9% in May before returning below par in July. There had, in fact, been indications of a slowing down in demand during the winter -

Ferguson had complained of bad sales in London in December 1784¹⁴² and in January 1785 Andrews had noted that ". . . there is nothing doing at the (Dublin) Hall . . ." ¹⁴³ In view of the slowness and uncertainty of the recovery in England, ¹⁴⁴ it is likely that the heavy buying of the spring and summer of 1784 could not be sustained, and the brunt of the subsequent recession was felt in the spring and summer of 1785.

However, this short recession seems to have had little effect in deflating the recovery in the linen manufacture at local level. Activity, particularly in Ulster, remained high during the winter, ¹⁴⁵ and this continued into the new season - the April market in Belfast was preceded by "very large orders to the merchants in the town", ¹⁴⁶ and the June market brought "large quantities of cloth . . . pouring into our White Linen Market", with sales from the beginning being "brisk". ¹⁴⁷ Such confidence proved to be justified, for by July, conditions in Britain had improved considerably - by July, government stocks had regained their pre-1784 autumn levels - and demand had strengthened. Both Andrews and Ferguson noted sales in July, with Ferguson, in particular, "being perfectly satisfied" ¹⁴⁸ with the efforts of his London correspondent, and in that month the exchange returned below par.

Continued British recovery ensured a sustained improvement in the Irish linen trade, and this was reflected in the rise in exports of plain cloth to 30,728,728 yards in 1786/7, and again to 35,487,691 yards in 1787/8, and in the maintenance of below par exchanges.

CHAPTER 6

Other Textiles

- (i) Wool
- (ii) Silk
- (iii) Cotton

The 17th century... The 18th century... The 19th century... The 20th century... The 21st century... The 22nd century... The 23rd century... The 24th century... The 25th century... The 26th century... The 27th century... The 28th century... The 29th century... The 30th century... The 31st century... The 32nd century... The 33rd century... The 34th century... The 35th century... The 36th century... The 37th century... The 38th century... The 39th century... The 40th century... The 41st century... The 42nd century... The 43rd century... The 44th century... The 45th century... The 46th century... The 47th century... The 48th century... The 49th century... The 50th century... The 51st century... The 52nd century... The 53rd century... The 54th century... The 55th century... The 56th century... The 57th century... The 58th century... The 59th century... The 60th century... The 61st century... The 62nd century... The 63rd century... The 64th century... The 65th century... The 66th century... The 67th century... The 68th century... The 69th century... The 70th century... The 71st century... The 72nd century... The 73rd century... The 74th century... The 75th century... The 76th century... The 77th century... The 78th century... The 79th century... The 80th century... The 81st century... The 82nd century... The 83rd century... The 84th century... The 85th century... The 86th century... The 87th century... The 88th century... The 89th century... The 90th century... The 91st century... The 92nd century... The 93rd century... The 94th century... The 95th century... The 96th century... The 97th century... The 98th century... The 99th century... The 100th century...

(i) Wool

The 1780s opened on an optimistic note for the woollen manufacture. The non-importation agreements of the late 1770s had substantially reduced the quantity of British goods brought to Ireland and there had been a consequent growth in demand for domestically produced textiles, so much so that by 1780 there was considerable competition among manufacturers for labourers.¹ However, this picture was speedily to change. A sharp rise in imports of old drapery from Britain from 1780/1, and the beginning of a downturn in domestic purchasing power in the second half of 1781 were reflected in the emergence of depression in the broadcloth manufacture. The downturn in this branch of the woollen manufacture emerged as one facet of a wider depression in trade and manufacture, which combined with increasing worsted yarn prices to reduce domestic demand for new drapery during 1783. By late 1783 distress was widespread in the woollen manufacture and found expression in the campaign to secure protecting duties, which had been initiated by the manufacturers in the face of continued government inactivity. The subsequent non-importation agreements provided short-term relief, but could not ensure a sustained recovery in the broadcloth manufacture, whilst the subsequent upturn in new drapery production was essentially a product of the general improvement in economic life from 1785.

The downturn in the woollen manufacture was apparent initially in the production of old drapery. Depression in the manufacture had been foreshadowed by bad sales at the wool fairs in August 1781² and the effects of this lack of demand were evident with "a total stop to the manufacture of broadcloth" reported in Dublin³ in October. Concern focused on the recent escalation in imports³ and in February 1782 this concern was cogently and concretely expressed in a memorial from the working broadcloth weavers of Dublin. They noted that

. . . the very enormous importations of British draperies which daily arrive in this Kingdom, frustrate all their diligence and industry. This practice of importing, for some time past, carried on . . . with such an unlimited latitude, that the working broad weavers do now actually experience the distressing inconveniences of an almost

general stagnation of employment; and, unless the grievance be speedily removed, a very few weeks will see them reduced to that extremity of wretchedness which they endured in the year seventy-eight - when from being useful members of society, they became a burthen to the public . . .⁵

The effects of this downturn seem to have been felt mainly in Dublin. The capital was the centre of old drapery but, although there was production for the market in the urban centres of the south, there is little evidence to indicate how quickly these centres were affected. Attempts were made in Dublin to combat the growing depression, but to little avail. Subscriptions were opened in June 1782 to buy locally produced goods to aid the ". . . several thousands depending on the weaving trade in the city and liberties distressed for want of employment"⁶ but despite these and a subsequent 10% export bounty, the broadcloth weavers at the end of August 1782 were still "in great distress".⁷

Contemporaries attributed this downturn in the old drapery manufacture to the effects of increased British imports, and although their emphasis was greatly exaggerated, it had some foundation. Old drapery was the more traditional sector of the woollen manufacture and the one which was least able to compete with the more efficient British methods of production. The considerable skills required in the manufacture of old drapery were as good in Ireland, but the organization of the industry rendered it less competitive. Of primary importance was the fact that Irish production, in contrast to Britain, was not conducted in the countryside. Spinning was certainly a rural pursuit, but the preparing, weaving and finishing were predominantly urban activities. This "dilatatory process" meant that the finished product was "loaded with the unnecessary charges of repeated land carriage, factorage and interest of money".⁸ The concentration of weaving in urban centres meant demand for higher wages and the continual threat of combination. Such factors served to increase production costs and bring the commodity to market at a higher price. Furthermore, Irish production methods remained small scale and old-fashioned. Arbuthnot remarked of the Limerick weavers, "there not being one among them of sufficient capital to conduct a factory and that their single webs are sold to the different traders. . ."⁹ Such was probably typical of urban production outside Dublin, and even

within the metropolis, there is little indication of the existence of concerns as capitalized, as those of linen and cotton. Wool, despite a lingering nostalgia about its potential greatness, had been supplanted in economic importance by linen, and was, in the course of the early 1780s, to be further relegated in importance by the rise of cotton. This decline in its relative status can be seen in the limited parliamentary support which was forthcoming for the manufacture in the course of the early 1780s, confined as it was to a share of the £15,000 awarded for manufactures in 1783¹⁰ and of the £8,000 awarded in 1785.¹¹ There seems also to have been a certain reluctance to admit new methods of production. The spinning jenny was the one new piece of machinery which created a favourable impression, probably since it ensured an increase in wages, but concern about a reduction in employment had hampered the introduction of the spring shuttle,¹² whilst Mr. Charles Halliday, of Carrick-on-Suir, lamented that he dare not introduce the carding-machine for fear of a rising among the wool scribblers.¹³

In contrast, the major competitor for the Irish market, the British woollen industry, was still the leading manufacture in its own country, and was too powerful a rival for the relatively weak Irish manufacture.

This weakness of the Irish manufacture vis a vis the British, had been temporarily obscured by the non-importation agreements at the end of the 1770s, but their removal in 1780 placed Ireland again in the field of open competition. Export to Ireland was therefore bound to increase, and such a trend was accentuated by the fact that war-time conditions had restricted British overseas markets for its most important textile export. It was not until the coming of peace that there was an expansion in markets for British woollen exports.¹⁴ Until such occurred, Ireland was a convenient, alternative market, and with English merchants offering their goods at eighteen months' credit, as a matter of course, their Irish counterparts, who could rarely go beyond six months, faced stiff competition.

But this emphasis on the effects of imports was undoubtedly exaggerated. Imports of old drapery had risen sharply in 1780/1 to 326,578

yards from 64,346 yards in 1779/80, rose again in 1781/2 to 362,831 yards and yet again in 1782/3 to 371,871 yards, and the cumulative effect of these three years of high levels of imports must certainly have made inroads into the market which, in 1779/80, had been virtually an Irish monopoly due to the non-importation agreements. But these increases in import are unlikely of themselves to have induced the downturn in the manufacture. The steep rise in imports in 1780/1 had not produced a crisis in the local manufacture and it is improbable that the slight increase in imports in 1781/2 would have been sufficient to cause the marked dislocation which was evident by late 1781. Of greater significance was the fact that late 1781 saw the first appearance of a tightening of credit consequent upon the downturn in both linen and provisions, the two staples of Irish trade, in the second half of the year.¹⁵ The inevitable consequence was a fall in domestic demand and this was clearly apparent by early 1782, when British merchants felt obliged to extend their credit facilities in order to secure sales.¹⁶ In such circumstances - a contracting home market and increasing British competition - a downturn in the Irish broadcloth manufacture was inevitable.

In the new drapery manufacture, the onset of depression was not so swift. Worsted was a cheaper fabric than broadcloth, manufactured in much greater quantities, and much less orientated towards Dublin as a centre of production. Thus, it was not so immediately susceptible to a downturn in purchasing power, and barely, if at all, concerned about the level of competitive imports. It was 1783 before sustained depression in the new drapery manufacture was apparent, and thus in the course of this year the depression in the woollen manufacture was appreciably deepened and widened.

There had been a hint of impending depression in the worsted manufacture in August 1782 with the launching of a fund to purchase comblents for export to Portugal, to alleviate "The present distress of the worsted weavers of this kingdom from a stagnation of their trade"¹⁷ but this distress seems to have been confined to Dublin, where the subscriptions were successful in providing the required employment. However, it probably represented the first effects of the downturn in consumer spending power emanating from the tightening in the credit supply, and accentuated, in the case of Dublin, by the consequent appearance of urban unemployment in the old drapery manufacture.

With the conclusion of the war, the ills of the worsted manufacture came to the fore. The situation was succinctly articulated in a memorial of the Dublin working worsted weavers to the Lord Lieutenant in April 1783 in which they pointed out that, rather than prospering since the peace as they had anticipated, they were threatened with the "extinction of their manufacture (there now being 430 looms and upwards totally unemployed in the city . . .)" This they attributed to the "very enormous" export of wool and worsted since the peace, which had raised the price of yarn from 18/- to 29/- per hundred skeins

. . . and it is not only still increasing in price, but is now become so scarce, that it is with the utmost difficulty¹⁸ that it can be procured at the above exorbitant rates . . .

Unlike the manufacturers of old drapery, those of new were not unduly concerned about the level of importation. True, like that of old, it had assumed greater proportions from 1780/1, but even at its highest point of 547,342 yards in 1781/2, imports of new drapery were modest in comparison to output, which in the 1770s had been estimated at around 9 to 12 million yards per annum.¹⁹ Much had been expected from the export trade in its new conditions of freedom, but it did not expand as had been anticipated, and by 1782/3 was only a little in excess of 500,000 yards. Contemporaries laid great emphasis on the restrictions on the Portuguese trade, but the controversy was disproportionate to the worth of the trade. Concern was engendered not so much because a substantial market had been lost but because, since the export trade was so limited, the loss of any outlet became a matter of considerable debate. It is doubtful if a speedy solution of the dispute would have significantly boosted Irish production. Thus, like the broadcloth manufacture, the production of worsted goods was essentially dependent upon the domestic market, a market which was becoming increasingly unreliable due to the high costs of raw materials and reduced purchasing power.

As the petitioners had pointed out, there was a marked increase in the export of worsted yarns to Britain. The figure of 66,677 stones for 1782/3 increased by almost 51% to 100,563 stones in the following year. This seems to have been a direct result of the post-war expansion in the markets for British woollens, noticeable from 1783,²⁰ which could be more speedily and more cheaply exploited by the use of lower priced Irish yarn. The resultant increase in yarn prices made it difficult for Irish worsted manufacturers, faced with a fall in consumer purchasing power, to offer

their wares at attractive prices. Inevitably, there were widespread calls for a change in the regulations governing the export of raw materials and it was even rumoured in the press in May 1783 that a bill was being prepared to restrict such export,²¹ but nothing seems to have come of it. The restricting of exports of worsted yarn would undoubtedly have lowered prices and hence allowed Irish goods to come more cheaply to market, but the advantages were probably illusory. Many would certainly have been deprived of their livelihood. It was computed that in 1783, 15,000 to 20,000 people in Munster subsisted by spinning wool.²² But more importantly, domestic demand would still have contracted. Unemployment, by mid-1783, as the crisis tightened, was assuming considerable proportions. The old drapery, as has been noted, was in a state of disarray, as was the silk manufacture, whilst with the ending of the war, the provisions trade was undergoing difficulties of adjustment and the return of ex-servicemen was further complicating the employment market. To this could be added the increasing food prices following the harvest failure of 1782. In such circumstances, domestic sales were bound to fall considerably. Worsted was a lighter, cheaper fabric than broadcloth and was thus more dependent upon demand among the industrial classes. The combination of unemployment and high food prices inevitably reduced the purchasing power of this class and thus, as worsted sales contracted, so the prevailing malaise of unemployment spread to the new drapery production. It was therefore inevitable that domestic demand would have contracted considerably in the face of such a rapidly deteriorating economic situation and thus the rising price of worsted goods consequent upon the increased yarn exports was little more than a contributory factor.

It would seem that this decline set in throughout the country from the conclusion of the war, but was initially more virulent in Dublin. It was summer 1783 before conditions of acute distress were apparent in the southern centres,²³ whereas, by April 1783, there was in the capital

. . . a greater and more general stagnation of business than in the years 1778 and 1779, when from being useful members to society, they became a burthen on their fellow citizens.²⁴

Such was of course to be expected. The growing economic crisis would have had an especially severe effect upon the largest centre of population and this would most certainly be reflected in a marked reduction of purchasing power. Furthermore, Dublin, since it was more orientated towards the production of old drapery, had a less developed and more vulnerable worsted manufacture which would have been placed under a disproportionate strain by the high level of imports into Dublin.

The result of this speedy decline in worsted manufacture, when combined with the already present depression in broadcloth, was considerable, and at the end of April 1783 it was estimated that 30,000 people in the city and liberties were ". . . in the utmost distress from the rapid decline of the weaving manufacture."²⁵ The situation continued to deteriorate through 1783. Despite the issue of a proclamation to prevent the illicit export of wool and yarn, a subscription for export bounties and the offer of £25,000 to fund new works,²⁶ the Dublin worsted weavers reported in August 1783 that "those measures have entirely proved ineffectual towards relieving Petitioners and their manufacture is now almost totally suspended."²⁷ Conditions seemed little better outside the metropolis. Giving evidence to the Committee on the State of Manufactures, early in 1784, Henry Hazell, a new drapery manufacturer from Bandon said that the previous summer, numbers of the manufacturers were starving,²⁸ whilst another manufacturer from Cork reported that there had been more unemployment than usual at the end of the previous summer.²⁹ Depression deepened in old drapery production, and the lot of the manufacturers was worsened by the effects of the 1782 harvest failure. Pointing out that subscriptions to aid exportation had continued to prove unsuccessful, the Dublin broadcloth manufacturers noted, in September 1783, that they

. . . have suffered the most distressing calamities occasioned by the consumption of foreign instead of native manufacture, which added to the late uncommon dearth of provisions has driven petitioners to such extremes as long made them burdensome on and not beneficial to society.³⁰

and the depths of their despair was reflected in their speedy entry into the protection campaign in September 1783.³¹

The mounting depression evident in late 1783 reached its peak in the early months of 1784, with the high level of distress which had been evident in Dublin being experienced in the other centres of manufacture. At a meeting of citizens for the relief of the poor in Dublin in February 1784, it was reported that the manufacturers of wool, worsted, silk and mixed goods

. . . not only in the city and liberties adjoining but in every part of the country where manufactures have been established, are in some places in a very declining state, and in others nearly annihilated.³²

and it was claimed that 21,000 people, in three Dublin parishes alone, were distressed in such circumstances.³³ By March, the woollen manufacture in Limerick was claimed to be "almost totally extinct. . ."³⁴ whilst in Cork, in April 1784, the unemployed woollen weavers processed through the city to draw attention to their plight

. . . with the figure of a fleece suspended to a flagstaff hung with crepe, a drum beating the dead march, and several of our unfortunate fellows being dressed in mourning cloaks in the rere.³⁵

In the worsted branch, conditions were equally severe. Two-thirds of the workers in the new drapery line in Cork were unemployed, as were a half of those in Bandon.³⁶ Depression was prominent also in Limerick and Waterford.³⁷ It seems likely that a factor contributing to the particularly high level of distress in the Cork area was the credit crisis associated with the failure of Warren's bank in the city, which became noticeable during the summer of 1784.³⁸

The continuation and intensification of the depression in the manufacture during 1783 and early 1784 was a particularly salutary experience for the manufacturers, who had come to view the restoration of peace as the panacea for the ills of the industry. This, combined with the continued inactivity of the government, provided the spark which produced the campaign to secure duties to protect Irish domestic production. A major initiative appeared in the campaign to secure protection, a policy which superseded the previous petty and piecemeal relief schemes by allying the plight of the woollen manufacturers with that of other industrial sectors, thus producing something akin to a national movement, which was likely to command greater attention.

In the context of the woollen manufacture, the essence of the protection argument was simple: "Our woollens depend upon exclusive consumptions at home to be great and prosperous . . ."³⁹ and this domestic market was deemed to be the desirable foundation on which to build up an export sector. The most obvious and effective means of securing such was believed to be by placing additional duties on imported woollen goods. This was a policy with an obvious appeal to the producers of old drapery whose manufacture had been directly affected by increased imports, but

the manufacturers of new drapery were also attracted to the protection campaign, by the inclusion of a demand for a restriction on the export of raw materials.

The woollen manufacturers played an active part in the campaign from its inception. In September 1783, the Lord Lieutenant noted that the woollen manufacturers were "very clamorous" for protecting duties,⁴⁰ and in the subsequent months of 1783, a series of petitions from the various woollen manufacturing localities⁴¹ testified to the growing concern within the industry. However, the subsequent defeat of the protection proposals, in April 1784, based largely on a fear of British retaliation against linen exports, served to further emphasize the relatively unimportant position of the woollen manufacture in the Irish pantheon of industry.

Rather than daunting the manufacturers, however, the defeat of the proposals seemed to spur them into greater activity, and they entered into the subsequent non-importation agreement with great fervour. Success was swift and by May 1784 it was reported that

. . . the different woollen drapers throughout Francis Street have sold more Irish made fabrics, within the last 15 days, than for twelve months before⁴²

whilst the following month, the woollen and worsted manufacturers of Dublin were complaining of a shortage of hands and urging a stricter enforcement of the vagrancy laws.⁴³ Indeed, for the year 1784/5 the import of old and new drapery fell by 55% and 56% respectively.

However, although success was swift, it was not complete nor was it lasting. Widespread indignation was expressed in Dublin that importation was continuing through provincial ports and it was claimed that the country dealers were undermining the effects of the agreements by selling goods 20% cheaper than those of Dublin.⁴⁴ Suspicion was visited particularly on the northern ports and would seem to be substantiated by the trade figures. In 1784/5 the import into the northern ports of old and new drapery fell by only 16% and 15% respectively, and in the case of Belfast, that of new drapery actually increased by 5%. Even within Dublin itself, the proponents of the agreement felt obliged to resort to violence.⁴⁵ In June and July 1784, a number of manufacturers were tarred and feathered

for alleged violations of the agreements. Such seems to be suggestive of how tenuous their success was believed to be.

Thus contemporaries spoke of a "partial non-import agreement"⁴⁶ and although this was a reference essentially to the geographic limitations of the idea, it serves also to focus attention on the wider deficiencies of the scheme.

The main effect of the non-importation agreements was that of providing renewed opportunities for employment. Such would obviously have greatest initial effect upon old drapery production, which had been most directly affected by imports, and in consequence the immediate beneficial effects seem, not surprisingly, to have been felt in Dublin. Such relief was of undoubted importance in a period when economic conditions, in general, and in Dublin in particular, were severe. The provision of employment until the successful 1784 harvest had substantially moderated food prices, was of immense importance. But this improvement did not and could not last. The agreements were not an attempt to solve the problems of the woollen manufacture but rather, a device to secure the objective of protection - it was protection which was the goal whilst the agreements were only the means. Hence, when it became apparent that the government was not prepared to concede the goal, the validity of continuing with non-importation receded. Thus by 1785/6 imports were again increasing and by the following year, at 488,452 yards, imports of old drapery were the highest to date for the decade. The non-importation agreements, like their predecessors of 1778/9, had not increased the competitiveness of old drapery production, but had simply temporarily withdrawn the manufacture from the field of competition.

The effects of the agreements on new drapery were even less significant. A substantial upturn in domestic demand was required by the worsted manufactures and only in a very limited sense could the agreements promote such. The substantial reduction of imports in 1784/5 was certainly a positive contribution but, in terms of output, remained of little importance. Of greater significance, perhaps, was the upturn of employment in various sectors of the economy which, stimulated by the agreements,

would have increased purchasing power - a trend accentuated by the upturn in economic fortunes noticeable from 1785. The fall in export of worsted yarn by 6% in 1784/5, increasing to 20% and 27% in the subsequent two years, would seem to suggest such. However, an improvement in the fortunes of the new drapery manufacture was inevitable with an upturn in economic life, although the non-importation agreements may have initiated such a trend, a little earlier than might otherwise have been the case.

Thus, although improved conditions followed the implementation of the non-importation agreements, only in a very limited sense was such an improvement the consequence of the agreements. As the depression lifted during 1785, so the domestic demand for new drapery was bound to increase, whilst the prospects for old drapery remained poor, although they were, in the short term, obscured by the emergence of a period of prosperity. The deep depression in the manufacture in the 1780s had served to emphasize, if indeed such emphasis was required, that the prospects for the woollen manufacture were limited. The failure to develop a substantial export trade and the unwillingness of the government to artificially promote the manufacture at the expense of linen, clearly revealed the relative fall in importance of the industry. Such indicated that the production of woollen goods must in future be for the domestic market, and suggested that it would be new drapery which would emerge as the dominant branch of the manufacture.

(ii) Silk

Akin to the difficulties being experienced by the woollen manufacturers were those of the silk producers. The silk industry was the least numerically significant and economically important of the major textile manufactures and was confined almost exclusively to Dublin. Its decline, coinciding with depressed conditions in the largely urban orientated woollen manufacture, played an important role in exacerbating unemployment in the metropolis and in creating the textile malaise.

The silk manufacture, like that of wool, had benefited enormously from the non-importation agreements of 1779, and by 1780 there was full employment among the silk weavers.¹ Imports of raw and thrown silk did not reach their peak, at 68,609 lbs. and 76,931 lbs. respectively, until 1780/1 and confidence was clearly still high when John Ball reported to the Committee on the State of the Manufactures, that "In 1781, they extended themselves considerably in the Manufacture of these two Species of Goods . . . [silk and ribband]"² With the lapsing of the agreements, however, following the attainment of free trade, imports of manufactured silks from Britain rose sharply: the 1779/80 total of 10,655 lbs. doubling to 22,471 lbs. in 1780/1. Signs of a revival in the British silk manufacture had been evident from 1776 and the growing prosperity of the industry was enhanced by the decline in foreign imports which followed the outbreak of hostilities with France.³ Thus British producers were well placed to take advantage of the renewed opportunities offered by the re-opening of the Irish market. The first signs of a downturn in Irish silk production were evident in the 1781/2 trade figures, for although the import of manufactured silks further increased, to 25,658 lbs., that of raw and thrown silk fell, from 68,609 lbs. to 50,969 lbs., and from 76,931 lbs. to 61,396 lbs. respectively. This emergent downturn in silk production combined with the already present depressed conditions in the old drapery manufacture to cause, by June 1782, unemployment in the Dublin weaving trades estimated at several thousands,⁴ and by December 1782 the effect of the downturn in silk alone was clearly apparent for

. . . the Corporation of Weavers waited on the Countess of Temple with an Address to thank her for her general Patronage of the poor Weavers, and request her Excellency particularly to encourage the Silk Manufactures by her Example and Influence. . . ⁵

Although there is little specific contemporary comment on the emergence of depression in silk production, it seems likely that the manufacture experienced a similar pattern of downturn to that in broadcloth. The substantial increase in imported manufactured silks in 1780/1 had not, as in broadcloth, induced an immediate crisis, and it is unlikely that the downturn in production during 1781/2 proceeded alone from the further small increase in imports in that year. It is more likely that imported silks became increasingly attractive in the climate of falling consumer spending power in the second half of 1781 - a situation in which purchasers might be expected to favour the better quality British goods which were available on more competitive terms.

Certainly the Irish manufacture compared unfavourably with its British counterpart both in access to raw materials and in methods of production. There were only two houses of any consequence importing silks into Ireland and "these gentlemen not understanding the manufactory do not import a proper assortment of raw and thrown silks. . ." ⁶ In the realms of production, "For want of proper Machinery in the Process of Throwing we are not capable of making the Weft as good as they do in England." ⁷ whilst the strict regulation of apprenticeships was deemed to be a restrictive factor, inhibiting people putting their sons to silk weaving. ⁸ These factors served to reduce the competitiveness of Irish silk goods at market and combined with the superior credit facilities of the British manufacturers, and their greater fashion consciousness, to make British silks immensely attractive to Irish purchasers.

These emergent difficulties in the Irish silk manufacture were compounded by the general crisis which inevitably reduced the ability to purchase non-essential items. The result was a further reduction in Irish silk production evidenced by yet another fall in the import of raw and thrown silk, a trend which had begun in 1781/2 in response to increased imports of manufactured silk. The 68,609 lbs. of raw silk and 76,931 lbs.

of thrown silk which had been imported in 1780/1 had fallen in 1781/2 to 50,696 lbs. and 61,396 lbs. respectively and by 1782/3 had fallen further to 33,782 lbs. and 52,981 lbs. The fall in the size of the market was evident also in the decline in imports of manufactured silks, which, despite their more favourable terms of sale, fell from 25,658 lbs. in 1781/2 to 19,749 lbs. in 1782/3.

Some relief was afforded to the domestic producers by the newly instituted Order of the Knights of St. Patrick, for ". . . each of the 16 Knights is to have three esquires and all those must by express statute, be clothed in robes manufactured in Ireland. . ." ⁹ and it was reported in February 1783 that twenty unemployed looms had been set to work to complete this order. ¹⁰ This assistance was supplemented in May 1783 by the opening of a subscription for the relief of the silk manufacturers, initiated by a grant of £100 from the Lord Lieutenant. ¹¹ However, the effect of such reliefs was clearly limited both in scope and duration for by July 1783 it was reported that there was a total suspension of the silk looms ¹² with 1500 broad looms idle in the city of Dublin, ¹³ which, even allowing for patriotic exaggeration, is suggestive of conditions of acute depression. The fall in the size of the market was reflected in the further fall in the import of thrown silk from 52,981 lbs. in 1782/3 to 43,851 lbs. in 1783/4, the effects of which would not have been offset by the small rise in the import of raw silk from 33,782 lbs. in 1782/3 to 34,274 lbs. in the following year. The fact that there was only a slight fall in the import of manufactured silks from 19,749 lbs. in 1782/3 to 17,302 lbs. in 1783/4 suggests that those who were still in a position to purchase luxury goods were expressing a strong preference for the imported variety of silk. Once again the downturn in the silk manufacture coincided with a marked worsening of conditions in the woollen manufacture as depression spread to the manufacture of new drapery following the conclusion of the war. ¹⁴

It seems likely that some short term relief was provided by the introduction of a bounty scheme in September 1783 to encourage the mercers to purchase Irish silks, ¹⁵ and by the reciprocal pledge of the mercers

. . . to those who will favour us with any order for Irish silks of any kind whatsoever, that for every piece of silk bespoke from us, before the first of next December, we will put two pieces more into the Irish looms . . . ¹⁶

Certainly by November 1783 there was no total suspension in the manufacture as had been reported in July, but conditions nevertheless were very severe. It was estimated that 51% of broad looms and 41% of narrow silk looms were idle, as well as 65% of engines and 67% of engine shuttles,¹⁷ making 5-6,000 people unemployed.¹⁸

The depth of the depression in the silk manufacture and its basic similarity to the plight of the woollen manufacturers was emphasised by the involvement of the silk manufactures in the campaign to secure protecting duties, from an early stage. Together with the woollen manufacturers, they were identified as early as September 1783 as being very vocal in support of protection,¹⁹ and in the course of November a number of petitions were presented to parliament from the various sections of the silk manufacture seeking protecting duties and stressing the adverse effect of uncontrolled imports.²⁰ In a period of crisis when imports tended to be disproportionately emphasized as the cause of depression, the attraction of protection to a manufacture which was dependent on a domestic market is obvious. Furthermore, like the woollen manufacturers, those of silk had believed that the acquisition of free trade would produce a speedy and substantial upturn in their fortunes²¹ and the subsequent feeling of disillusionment was accentuated by the failure of peace-time conditions to effect an improvement. In the absence of any sustained government support, and with emigration appearing to be the only practical alternative,²² the appeal of protection was enhanced.

However, the early involvement in the protection campaign did little to alleviate the depression in the silk manufacture and the trends in that industry mirrored those in the woollen manufacture. In March 1784, John Ball reported to the Committee on the State of the Manufactures that ". . . their Want of Sales has left them a very large Stock on Hand, and obliged them to curtail their Hands nearly two Thirds since the Year 1781." He estimated that he had £4,000 worth of ribbands alone on hands and ". . . has heard from many in the Trade that are overstocked in the same Manner. . ."²³

Following the defeat of protection proposals in parliament in April 1784, the silk manufacture followed the lead of the woollen industry and

the mercers were prevailed upon to accept non-importation agreements in May 1784.²⁴ However, unlike the woollen manufacture which ". . . has lately derived very considerable support from the patriotic associations of the gentlemen of this country . . ." ²⁵ there was no speedy upturn for silk and in June it was reported that there were "upwards of two thousand looms, in their various branches, unemployed, which reduces ten thousand souls to the want of bread. . ." ²⁶ The reduced demand for English silks apparent from the fall in the import of manufactured silks from 17,302 lbs. in 1783/4 to 11,389 lbs. in 1784/5 was not reflected in a corresponding rise in demand for Irish silk goods. Domestic production did increase somewhat for although the import of raw silk fell slightly, from 34,274 lbs. in 1783/4 to 33,194 lbs. in 1784/5, that of thrown silk rose from 43,851 lbs. in 1783/4 to 48,198 lbs. in the following year, but the continuance of high levels of distress ²⁷ indicated the limited nature of the recovery. By 1784 the Irish cotton industry was making significant inroads into the market for silks. The domestic cotton manufacture, under the aegis of substantial government assistance, had been expanding rapidly during the 1780s and the ready availability of such produce, combined with the vagaries of fashion and the relative cheapness of cottons (an important consideration in a period of crisis) were expressed in a growing preference among Irishwomen for muslins and calicoes. Concern was being expressed by the domestic silk weavers about this trend from May ²⁸ and it was reported in the same month that some silk weavers had actually transferred to cotton production. ²⁹

Thus it was as Sheffield had surmised: the silk manufacturers derived little benefit from the non-importation agreements ³⁰ and the subsequent upturn in production in the second half of the decade was a product of the general recovery in economic life. However, the inroads made by the cotton manufacture were reflected in the failure of the Irish silk manufacture to re-attain the levels of production which had been achieved at the beginning of the decade, despite a marked reduction in the import of manufactured silks. ³¹

Thus for the silk manufacture the early 1780s witnessed a sinking into acute depression which neither the traditional voluntary reliefs, nor the more substantial non-importation movement could halt. The factors

(iii) Cotton

The cotton manufacture was different from the other sectors of the textile industry. It was different because it was new and thus untainted by failure or depression; it was different because it attracted substantial support from the government; and it was different because it continued to expand after the onset of the economic crisis, providing much-needed employment when the other textile manufactures were in recession. These factors combined to produce a sustained popular optimism and confidence about the manufacture, an effect considerably accentuated by the contrasting gloom and despondency which prevailed in the other sectors of the economy.

The manufacture began to expand significantly in the period following the grant of free trade and, under the aegis of government assistance in late 1781, continued its growth even during 1782 when the other sectors of the textile manufacture were depressed. However, there was a marked slowing down in this expansion in 1783 and early 1784 as the economic crisis approached its nadir, but although sales were poor and production fell, there is no indication of consequent unemployment or bankruptcies, due largely to continued government support. Under the stimulus of the non-importation agreements in the spring of 1784, there was an upturn in demand for Irish cottons and thereafter the manufacture began to expand again in the climate of economic recovery, especially after the successful 1784 harvest.

A significant expansion in the cotton manufacture was first noticeable in the period following the grant of free trade. The manufacture had been established in the 1770s in imitation of trends in Britain but had made no immediate economic impact. Imports of cotton wool and yarn in 1778/9 were only 1,345 cwts. and 4,689 lbs. respectively and they fell in the following year to 706 cwts. and 573 lbs. However, following the obtention of free trade in 1780, a new air of economic confidence pervaded Ireland and this seems to have provided the impetus for the take off of the cotton manufacture. Both Robert Brooke and George Hamilton,¹ two of the early pioneers, claimed that "encouraged

by the Prospects opened to Ireland on the Grant of Free Trade [they] embarked extensively . . ." ² and the example of these pioneer developments seems to have done much to spread the manufacture. Brooke of Prosperous, ³ Hamilton of Balbriggan ⁴ and Chadwick of Limerick ⁵ all claimed to have made their expertise available for public inspection. Brooks particularly laid great emphasis on the role of his manufacture in teaching the trade to others, a claim seemingly substantiated by Arbuthnot's report to the Linen Board, which noted that "many Weavers from distant parts have come to work a single cut, merely to learn the Art, which Privilege is refused to no one." ⁶

Imports of cotton wool and yarn rose in 1780/1 to 4,165 cwts. and 6,775 lbs. respectively from the low levels of the previous year, and by the end of 1780 it was reported that the production of cotton was employing about 2,000 people. ⁷

Expansion continued during 1781 and 1782. Despite problems in securing supplies of raw materials in 1781, and the emergence of a downturn in general economic activity from late 1781, which became marked during 1782, sales were effected, premises were expanded and the numbers employed were increased. Significant in sustaining this expansion was governmental financial assistance which first appeared in November 1781.

Imports of cotton wool and yarn fell sharply in 1781/2 to 993 cwts. and 2,295 lbs. respectively, but this slump in the supply of raw materials does not seem to have seriously incommoded the manufacturers, presumably since there were sufficient supplies already in the country, following the large import of the previous year. It was November 1781 before Edward Hardman, the Drogheda manufacturer, noted "a most extraordinary rise in the price of cotton wool" ⁸ and although lamenting in December that "I don't know what will become of the cotton manufactures for want of materials to carry them on" ⁹ he seems to have pulled through until March 1783, when "a very great fall" ¹⁰ in prices was reported. Certainly there are no suggestions of a suspension of the manufacture. Some Irish manufacturers chose to believe that

. . . orders have been given by the English that no cotton should be landed in Ireland from their West Indies vessels, that they have purchased all the raw cotton for sale in this kingdom and are now endeavouring to purchase all that is spun and have formed a Committee of Trade at Manchester

whose main design seems to be to prevent the progress of the cotton manufactures in Ireland"¹¹

but this was something of an over-reaction. It does seem that the slump in supply was due to increased British demand - Hardman noted that "The great advance in cotton was chiefly owing to it being all bought upon speculation in England"¹² but he attributed no base motives to this trend. After 1780, there was a return to high output in British production of printed goods,¹³ an important constituent of which was cotton, and this is reflected in the marked increase in retained imports of cotton in Britain in 1781.¹⁴

However, Irish cotton manufacturers continued to expand their enterprises and find sales for their goods. Hardman reported in June 1781 that he was recouping sufficient cash from sales to preclude the necessity of seeking further capital,¹⁵ and although complaining in August about the prices he was receiving,¹⁶ was confident enough in October to begin plans for a printing yard.¹⁷ His confidence evidently was not misplaced and in November he was "glad to find the cottons are sold at the prices I fixed on them."¹⁸ By late 1781 Hardman claimed to have spent £700 in erecting buildings and fitting them up for manufacture;¹⁹ George Hamilton at Balbriggan already had 100 looms and 20 jennies at work,²⁰ whilst dominating all was Robert Brooke's creation at Prosperous, on which £11,000 had already been expended.²¹

The final quarter of 1781 saw the clear-cut appearance of a downturn in the old drapery and silk manufactures, a trend which became marked in 1782. The cotton manufacture, however, continued to expand, for although sales became difficult in 1782, output increased and the numbers employed grew. This expansion was undoubtedly aided by the assistance which the manufacture received from the government, but must also have taken place at the expense of the other textile manufactures.

Confidence remained high in the cotton manufacture despite the shortfall in the supply of raw materials in late 1781 and early 1782. Hardman instructed a correspondent in January 1782 to purchase cotton wool for him "Cost what it will"²² and his confidence was evidently justified, for he noted in February "there is the greatest demand for every article of bleached cotton goods"²³ while in the following month "cottons of every denomination have been so scarce and in such demand".²⁴

Some temporary reduction in output in late 1781/early 1782 as a result of the shortfall in the supply of raw materials may have artificially stimulated demand. Although imports of mixed goods had been rising since 1780, those of pure cottons, fustians and muslins had been falling since 1781 in response to increased domestic production and thus any shortfall in the supply of finished goods may not have been made good by imports.

However, the manufacture continued to expand during 1782 as output and employment both increased. Under the aegis of government support premises were extended and machinery was improved. New concerns were established, notably those of Nathaniel Wilson in Belfast²⁵ and Comerford and O'Brien in Balbriggan²⁶ (who had taken over Hamilton's works), and the total numbers employed increased. By December 1782 it was estimated that 10,000 people were employed in cotton production,²⁷ a considerable advance on the 2,000 of 1780. This expansion in the manufacture was reflected also in output. Imports of raw materials rose sharply in 1782/3 and at 4,550 cwts. of cotton wool and 6,517 lbs. of yarn, were not only well in excess of the 993 cwts. of wool and 2,925 lbs. of yarn of the previous year, but also a little above the 4,165 cwts. of wool and 6,775 lbs. of yarn of 1780/1. The increase over the 1780/1 level was slight, but the fact that there was an increase at all, given that all the other textile manufactures were depressed, was in itself remarkable. Furthermore, the fact that the volume of imports in 1780/1 seems to have been sufficient to largely compensate for the shortfall in the supply in 1781/2 suggests that it overstates the extent of the manufacture at that time.

Sales did become more difficult during 1782 as the downturn in economic life deepened, but were nonetheless effected. In April both Brooke and Hamilton claimed to have "large stocks on hand",²⁸ a complaint echoed in May by Hardman,²⁹ who in June was lamenting that "It is impossible to go on marketing goods if I don't get regular sales"³⁰ But in the same month, although complaining that he would have no profit, he was agreeing to sell white cottons at 21d. per yard,³¹ and later in June was confidently accepting 20d. per yard for white cottons "to push them off to make room for more that are nearly ready for market."³²

By September, he concluded, "I think we have done tolerably well to keep all hands going for this past year."³³ However, if the manufacturers had any doubts about the progress of the cotton manufacture, they were not shared by popular opinion. In October 1782, the Dublin Journal praised "The excellency of the Irish cotton fabrics, and their rapid rise to perfection"³⁴ and concluded in November that

The Irish cotton manufacture . . . is now in so flourishing a state from the excellence, variety and cheapness of the fabrics . . ."³⁵

whilst the Belfast Newsletter announced with commendable brevity "the cotton manufacture flourishes . . ."³⁶

An important factor in sustaining this expansion was government assistance. Support for the production of cotton was initiated in November 1781 with a grant of £5,000.³⁷ Of the six claimants, awards were subsequently made to five, with Brooke and Hamilton taking the two largest shares of £1,250 each,³⁸ Jeremiah Vickers obtaining £1,000 and Charles Chadwick and Edward Hardman gaining £750 each. The initiative of 1781 was followed up in the next year by including mixed cotton goods in the grants available under the terms of the Linen Act, which came into force in May 1782.³⁹ In fact, the Act had restricted such grants to goods composed of at least two-thirds linen yarn, but the Trustees continued to give grants for cloth made of linen warp and cotton weft.⁴⁰ This liberal interpretation of the legislation seems to suggest a marked inclination by the Government to assist the cotton manufacture and must have boosted the confidence of the producers considerably. Some weeks later, further support was forthcoming when the Trustees announced grants for three-quarters of the cost of machinery for the manufacture of mixed fabrics. Since nearly all the applicants wished to buy carding machines and jennies, this support proved directly beneficial to the cotton manufacture. Awards were made immediately to eighteen firms.⁴¹

This type of government support, concentrating as it did on stimulating production and capital investment, was most apposite. The production of cotton, more than the other textile industries, required a considerable initial capital investment and thus relatively large industrial premises and workforces had to be established long before

the profitability of the venture could be accurately assessed. This was particularly true in Ireland, where vertical organisation, attempting all branches of production in one concern, was popular. Charles Chadwick, for example, sought aid for his manufacture in Limerick, since he was

. . . unable, from the smallness of his capital, effectually to carry on his Undertaking in a Country where one Man must be supplied with all the Materials to carry on the Business through its whole Progress, which is not the Case in England.⁴²

The timing of the government's intervention was also of significance. Prior to November 1781, the government had betrayed no undue interest in the developing cotton manufacture and those involved in the industry had not been conspicuous by their requests for assistance. However, suddenly in the short space of less than two weeks, six manufacturers petitioned for assistance between the 29th October and 7th November, and on 10th November the grant of £5,000 was announced. Given the short space of time between the first petition and the announcement of the grant, it is unlikely that the latter was a response to the former, but rather suggests that the petitions had been made in the knowledge that the government was considering support for the cotton manufacture. This sudden interest by the government in a new and developing manufacture was almost certainly a response to the appearance of depression in the other textile manufactures. By October 1781 there were clear signs of depression in the old drapery and silk manufactures in response to the general downturn in the economy consequent upon the depression in the linen and provisions trade. The cotton manufacture, in contrast, was expanding, and thus was a potential source of employment for those who could no longer obtain work in the traditional textile manufactures.

The resolve of the government to encourage the cotton manufacture rather than to assist the declining silk and woollen industries, may also have been stimulated by the realisation that its expansion was to some extent at the expense of the traditional textile manufactures. The Irish economy was clearly in decline by the final quarter of 1781, and thus expansion in one quarter had, by definition, to be at the expense of another. In the case of cotton, its continued expansion was almost certainly at the expense of silk and old drapery. Cottons were lighter,

cheaper fabrics and thus more attractive in a period of consumer spending power (in this context, it is significant also that production of new drapery, another cheap, light fabric, held up longer than that of old drapery), and for those who were fortunate enough to have the choice, were new and fashionable. Furthermore, the fact that such goods could be had from Irish manufacturers would doubtless have appealed to those of a patriotic temper, the numbers of whom were certainly increasing from late 1781, with the rising tide of radical public opinion. A comparison of the imports of mixed cottons (the principal form in which cottons were imported into Ireland) and old drapery, suggests that demand for the former held up better. The value of imports of both rose sharply in 1780/1 by 354% and 408% respectively and both increased in 1781/2 and 1782/3 before declining in 1783/4. But whereas the percentage rate of increase for imported old drapery was 11% in 1781/2 and 2.5% in 1782/3, for mixed goods it was 33% and 18%. Imports of fustians and muslins were falling from 1781/2 but more in response to increased domestic production than falling demand. This shift in emphasis was obscured by the contemporary insistence that the ills of the urban textile manufacturers were due solely to competition from imports, but was evident by 1783, for although the expansion in the cotton manufacture had slowed in response to the deepening economic crisis, the transfer of woollen and silk weavers to cotton production was readily apparent.

The remarkable expansion of the cotton manufacture in 1781 and 1782 slowed appreciably in 1783 and early 1784 as the economic crisis approached its nadir. This slowing down in the rate of growth was reflected in a decline in output, increasing difficulty in securing sales and a fall in the rate of increase of numbers employed in the manufacture. However, in stark contrast to the other textile manufactures, that of cotton did not experience the onset of unemployment or the suspension of manufacture. Again, government support played a vital role in sustaining the cotton industry.

During 1783, the economic crisis affected demand for cottons. A decline in the import of cottons emphasized that the problem was a general fall in demand rather than a particular disinclination to purchase Irish cottons - the value of imports of mixed goods, which had been rising since

1780/1, fell in 1783/4 to £113,028 from £124,310 in the previous year, whilst the import of fustians and muslins, which had been declining gradually since 1781, fell more sharply in 1783/4. Falling demand for domestically produced cottons was reflected in a fall in the import of raw materials and in increasing difficulties in effecting sales. Imports of cotton wool fell slightly from 4,550 cwts. in 1782/3 to 4,287 cwts. in 1783/4, while yarn imports were almost halved, falling from 6517 lbs. in 1782/3 to 3,340 lbs. in 1783/4. Annual totals for imports of raw materials had fallen last in 1780 and that in response to a shortfall in supply: with no evidence to suggest a repetition of this phenomenon, it seems the case that the fall in import in 1783/4 was in response to a decline in demand.

Sales certainly became increasingly difficult during 1783 and by the final quarter of the year, the leading manufacturers had large stocks of goods on hand. The worsening in conditions was well illustrated by the plight of Hardman who, in March 1783⁴³ was agreeing to sell at six months credit, a step which he had refused to countenance in the previous year.⁴⁴ In a desperate attempt to shift his stock, he was reduced to selling white cottons which in June 1782 he had sold at 21d. per yard and "at that price I shall not have a farthing for them"⁴⁵ at 16d., "a very loosing price,"⁴⁶ and was valuing printed goods "at less profit than I could have got on them a year ago and before printing. . ."⁴⁷ However, in the second half of the year sales almost dried up completely and in November, Hardman wrote:

We have now £4,000 worth of manufactured goods on hands, and for three months past we have not sold to the value of £100. I am confident every other manufacturer in the kingdom is in the same situation, and I have not a doubt but before the next session of parliament nine in ten of them will give up unless they either get aid to enable them to go on or a market for their goods."⁴⁸

From March 1783 the Linen Board had been operating a 5% bounty on sales of linen and cotton mixed, and the monthly disbursements suggest a similar profile of sales, with demand becoming almost stagnant by the end of the year. The Board paid out £149 in June, £564 in July and £343 in August, but in September payments fell to £90 and although recovering to £190 in October, were only £18 in November.⁴⁹

However, despite this decline in the fortunes of the cotton manufacture, there was no subsequent unemployment or suspension of manufactures. The role of the government in assisting sales and providing direct financial aid was significant in preventing the cotton manufacture sharing the same fate as the other textile manufactures.

Indeed, not only was there no unemployment in the cotton manufacture, but during 1783 the numbers employed increased, albeit at a slower rate than had been the case during 1780 and 1781. It was estimated in late 1783 that cotton production employed about 22,000,⁵⁰ a little over double that of late 1782, whereas between 1780 and 1782 the total workforce had increased from 2,000 to 10,000. Presumably the greater part of this increase took place in the earlier part of the year, when sales were still being effected, although even later in the year, when returns were very low, there seems to have been sufficient confidence in the manufacture to continue to take on workers. Sadlier, in Cork, reported in November that

. . . as proper Weavers and other Tradesmen occasionally offer, they give them Employment by which they are daily obliged to increase their Capital, however inconvenient it may be."⁵¹

Such continued confidence in the cotton manufacture in the midst of an acute economic crisis, with sales proving very difficult, must have drawn much of its impetus from the continued willingness of government to support the industry. In turn, the resolve of the government to continue to encourage the cotton manufacture was largely a product of the obvious utility of the industry to provide employment when other sectors of the economy were shedding workers at an alarming rate. Comerford and O'Brien in Balbriggan, for instance, had during 1783 "induced many weavers to remove from Dublin to that Town",⁵² whilst, due to the employment provided by the partnership of Bell, Bradshaw, Gerrard, Campbell and Mercer in Newry, "Numbers of the poor and indigent Inhabitants of the North have not only been prevented from starving in the late Scarcity, but have earned a comfortable Subsistence."⁵³ and, of course, above all was Robert Brooke's concern at Prosperous, which had increased its workforce from 1,200 in November 1782⁵⁴ to near 3,000 a year later.⁵⁵

The government had acted during 1783 to assist sales, with the introduction of a 5% bounty on sales of linen and cotton mixed,⁵⁶ and the measure was modestly successful, although, of course, the value of a bounty on sales in the context of low consumer spending power was bound to be limited. Sales to the value of £31,780 were effected by March 1784, but 70% of those claiming the bounty were seeking sums of less than £50; that is, they were claiming for sales of less than £1,000 worth.⁵¹ For

the small, less developed manufacturers, the small sales which the bounty assisted, ensured a significant return on their capital from an early stage, thus permitting them to expand without incurring the same inhibitive degree of stock accumulation which by late 1783 was proving such a threat to the larger manufacturers. For the more developed firms however, the benefits of the bounty scheme were more limited. They required substantial sales in order to significantly reduce their large accumulation of stocks. In the case of Hardman, although having £4,000 worth of goods on hand in November 1783, he was only able to sell £940 worth on the bounty during 1783/4.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, for the larger firms, the bounty did assist sales and must have been significant in allowing them to continue in business.

Further action was taken by government in October 1783, with the opening of the new parliamentary session, to widen the domestic market, with the implementation of an additional duty of 6d. per yard on imported calicoes.⁵⁹ However, Irish production of calicoes was slight and in the short term, such encouragement was unlikely to be significant. The introduction of the duty serves more to highlight the limited options available to the government to stimulate sales in the context of a declining domestic market.

Some sales were effected overseas with the opening of an export trade following the conclusion of the war in the spring of 1783, and the government moved to assist such sales. As early as December 1782, Hardman had been anticipating that America would prove to be a large market,⁶⁰ but his high hopes were not realized. Export of mixed goods rose in value from £1,418 in 1782/3 to £9,548 in 1783/4 and the export of fustian increased from 24,384 yards to 50,841 yards, but, judging from the large stocks on hand in late November 1783, the volume of exports had not proved sufficient to offset the lack of demand at home. The disappointing performance of the export trade was emphasized by the intervention of the government in February 1784, and a share of the £15,000 allotted for the provision of bounties for Irish manufacturers⁶¹ was devoted to cotton⁶² and applied as export bounties.⁶³ However, this assistance could not significantly increase the export of cottons - the export of fustian did rise from 50,841 yards in 1783/4 to 86,108 yards in 1784/5 but the value of exported mixed goods fell slightly from £9,548 to £9,383 - although it

probably was instrumental in maintaining the level of exports to America - both fustian and mixed goods exports to America rose slightly in 1784/5 - in contrast to the more established manufactures of linen and new drapery which both declined.

But more celebrated than any of these measures was the direct financial assistance which the government lavished on the cotton manufacture and in particular on the manufacture of Robert Brooke at Prosperous. Brooke's establishment had been a substantial undertaking from the beginning (£11,000 had been spent on it by late 1781) and after the division of the £5,000 awarded to the cotton manufacture in 1781, it seems to have secured a virtual monopoly of direct financial aid from government. Between November 1781 and November 1783, Brooke received in excess of £31,000 in loans and grants,⁶⁴ and in November 1783 was petitioning for another £40,000.⁶⁵ The attraction of Brooke's operation for the government was most likely his scale of operation and thus the potential he provided for employing weavers from Dublin - the major concentration of unemployment. Thus under government encouragement, Brooke increased his workforce from 1,200 in November 1782 to near 3,000 in November 1783, and in the final quarter of 1783 worsted, broadcloth, linen and silk weavers were all attracted,⁶⁶ further assisted by a public subscription in October 1783,⁶⁷ to resettle unemployed Dublin weavers in Prosperous. However, Brooke's treatment by government was clearly exceptional, as is evidenced from Hardman's comments to John Foster in November 1783.

Can it be said that because Mr. Brooke has already got £30,000 to build his town, that he must have £40,000 more to furnish the houses? . . . I cannot with patience hear of one man becoming the favourite of government, at the expense of every other person who has endeavoured to serve his country as well as he . . .⁶⁸

but even in the economically constricted atmosphere of late 1783, he continued to secure support. Proposing a suspension of further parliamentary grants during the retrenchment debate in November 1783, John Foster specifically excluded Brooke, "who has been induced to spend vast sums on national accounts . . ."⁶⁹ and thus, although not obtaining the full £40,000 for which he petitioned, Brooke was awarded £25,000 in November 1783, "to enable him to support and employ the Manufacturers

lately settled, and that may hereafter be settled at Prosperous . . ."⁷⁰
 Of the fourteen cotton manufacturers who petitioned for aid in late
 1783, Brooke alone was successful.

However, for all that government policy was successful in main-
 taining a growth in employment in the cotton manufacture, despite the
 diminishing returns to the manufacturers during 1783 and early 1784,
 in relative terms, relative that is to the extent of unemployment
 throughout the country, the benefits which accrued were small. The
 expansion of the manufacture had been remarkable, increasing in numbers
 employed about eleven times that of late 1780 by late 1783, but with a total
 workforce of only about 22,000 in the whole country, when 50,000 were distressed
 in Dublin alone, the extent of the manufacture was less significant than the
 level of parliamentary support or the laudatory press comments warranted, and
 the impact of the manufacture on the economic crisis was not nearly as
 great as contemporary opinion implied. It was an emergent manufacture
 with a small output and a small workforce which, because it continued,
 largely through substantial government support, to avoid sinking into
 depression, when depression was the order of the day, caught the popular
 imagination.

Recovery was evident from the spring of 1784, reflected in an upturn
 in the import of raw materials and improving sales. The initial stimulus
 for this upturn in fortunes was probably provided by the non-importation
 agreements, and thereafter the gradual increase in economic activity
 provided an expanding domestic market in which the Irish cotton manufac-
 ture, assisted by government bounty, could compete successfully.

Imports of all leading denominations of cotton goods fell in 1784/5,
 with, in particular, the value of imported mixed goods falling from
 £113,027 in 1783/4 to £70,214. Cottons were included in many of the
 general non-importation declarations and it must be supposed that to some
 degree this fall in imported cottons was due to patriotic zeal. Certainly
 English opinion attributed the decrease in export to Ireland, particularly
 of printed goods, to such a cause.⁷² Irish manufacturers seem to have
 responded to the stimulus of the non-importation agreements for sales of

mixed goods on the bounty increased markedly in May, June and July 1784, when the agreements were at their height. The Linen Board had paid out only £67 in January 1784 but by May this had leapt to £513, increased again to £700 in June and was at £583 in July.⁷³ Despite the relaxation of the agreement in the final months of the year, sales of Irish cottons, unlike those of silk and old drapery, continued to be good, and, bolstered against English competition by the 5% bounty, the Irish manufacturers were able to compete effectively in the expanding home market. The Linen Board disbursed £618 in December 1784 in bounty payments and over the year 1784/5, sales to the approximate value of £72,000 were effected on the bounty, compared with £31,000 in the previous year.⁷⁴ By January 1785 Sadlier & Company of Cork

. . . . find the demand for home consumption to increase so fast upon us, that had we capital to allow of extending the business threefold, we should find a certain mart without the aid of export.⁷⁵

while Francis Kirchoffer, the Dublin machine maker, rated the demand for his cotton machinery as the highest since his commencement in 1781.⁷⁶ Import of raw materials began to rise again in 1784/5 with imports of cotton wool rising to 5,223 cwts. from 4,287 cwts. in 1783/4 and yarn rising to 4,712 lbs. from 3,340. The size of the rise was unremarkable, but it marked the beginning of a long and virtually uninterrupted expansion of the cotton manufacture - by the end of the decade, imports of yarn had risen to 83,814 lbs. and by the end of the century, imports were in excess of 900,000 lbs.

CHAPTER 7

URBAN CRISIS

Inevitably the combination of harvest failure in the countryside and depressed conditions in manufacturing bore down heavily on the urban population. The urban crisis was initially and essentially one of employment. The adverse fluctuations in the town-based industries, especially textiles, compounded by rising fuel prices, cast many unto a dependence on public charity. Unfortunately, such charity was stretched well beyond the limits after 1782, when the prevailing employment-based crisis was accentuated by rising food prices following the unsatisfactory harvests of 1782 and 1783. By late 1783, urban distress was widespread and the extensive discontent which was fostered by its increase found expression in the movement to secure protecting duties and subsequently, and more seriously, in the extra-parliamentary activity associated with the non-importation agreements in 1784. Inevitably too, the urban crisis was greatest in Dublin. Not only was Dublin the leading centre of population, trade and manufacture and hence was bound to experience to a disproportionate degree the effects of depression, but also it was the centre of Irish political life and thus possessed the most sophisticated machinery for collecting, recording and disseminating information. Indeed, not only was the urban crisis most extensive in Dublin, but its relative severity was heightened by the comparative paucity of information available from the regional centres. In effect, therefore, the study of the urban crisis in the early 1780s is an examination of conditions in Dublin, with reference being made to regional centres essentially to illustrate variations from the metropolitan pattern.

The urban crisis, initially essentially employment based, owed much to the emergence of depression in the woollen and silk manufactures.¹ The weaving of these two textiles was essentially an urban activity and when combined with the attendant finishing processes, was in fact the leading urban employer. Silk was almost totally confined to Dublin, whilst in drapery, depression seems to have affected the production of

broadcloth earliest, the branch of the manufacture traditionally associated with the metropolis.

From late 1781, a downturn in the broadcloth manufacture was apparent² and by February 1782 many of the master clothiers in Dublin "have been already obliged to discharge their workmen, and they will all, shortly, be under the necessity of totally suspending the manufacture."³ Unemployment in urban textiles became more accentuated during the course of 1782 as depressed conditions became apparent in the silk industry.⁴ The seriousness with which the combined adverse fluctuations of those two textile manufactures was viewed, was revealed by an attempt by the Corporation of Weavers during 1782, to introduce a non-importation agreement.⁵ This proposal was finally implemented only in the watered-down form of a voluntary subscription, but this shift in emphasis owed more to the intervention of Grattan⁶ than to any sudden improvement in the situation, and conditions in the urban textile manufacture remained difficult. It was estimated in June 1782 that "several thousands" depending on the weaving trade in the city and liberties were distressed for want of employment.⁷ Despite the instigation of a number of voluntary reliefs and subscriptions, there was still distress among the broadcloth weavers in August 1782.⁸ It was this growing depression in the leading single sector of urban employment which provided the foundation for the beginnings of the urban crisis, which were emerging prior to the 1782 harvest failure.

Although by far the major cause of the emergence of urban unemployment in these years, the downturn in textiles was not the sole one, and a significant contribution was made by the temporary depression in sugar refining, which appeared suddenly in 1781, in response to an unusually large import of refined sugar in 1780/1, since sugar refining, dependent as it was on imports, was centred in the leading port towns. In June 1781, one of the three sugar houses in Belfast was up for sale,⁹ whilst by November it was reported in parliament that considerable dislocation was being experienced in Dublin, Cork and Waterford.¹⁰ The subsequent considerable debate stressing the inadequacy of the import duties was a predictably exaggerated response, but serves to draw attention to the depressed conditions existing in sugar refining. The level of imports

of refined sugar in 1780/1 was certainly high, but its major significance lay in the fact that it occurred in a year when the total import of sugar was unusually low and also the import of unrefined sugar was somewhat below normal, all of which combined to make the proportion of refined sugar imported particularly high. It was in effect a freak situation, which was not repeated, but its occurrence at a period when urban unemployment was already growing, rendered it especially significant. This short-term depression was predictably most virulent in Dublin, with twenty-two sugar houses idle in 1781,¹¹ but the fact of its existence in the other leading port towns served to give the regional centres a foretaste of the crisis to come.

The distress consequent upon this emergent urban unemployment was accentuated by rising fuel costs. Coal was the staple urban fuel and seasonal fluctuations in its price were an accepted feature of life, even in periods of prosperity. Despite a welter of discussion and legislation throughout the 18th century, coal prices still tended to rise considerably during the winter months.¹² This was a simple reaction to demand. Greater volumes of coal were required during the winter and the cross-channel voyage was more testing then, thus the commodity was higher priced. Except for the larger branches of manufacturing, few had sufficient capital to purchase large stocks at the lower summer prices, a factor of especial importance in a period of growing economic contraction. Thus the supply of coal continued to be on a seasonal basis. To this could be added the equally simple factor of weather conditions. Easterly winds were required to drive the coal ships across from England and since the elements could not be guaranteed to act in the best interests of man, coal fleets could be held up for several weeks, thus forcing up prices in Ireland substantially.

Such fluctuations were certainly in evidence in the early years of the 1780s, with the well-known pattern of high winter prices very much apparent. But if anything, winter prices were higher than normal. The winter of 1780/1 witnessed a marked rise in coal prices, for "During the course of last winter, coals in general from 16s. to 17s. per ton; this winter the average prices were from 19s. to 21s."¹³ and indeed by February 1781, coal was fetching 25/- per ton in Dublin. However, worse was to come, for by the following January, coals in Dublin were

commanding 28/- per ton, and whilst, in the absence of undue comment, it must be assumed that there had been the traditional fall in prices during the summer of 1781, this does not appear to have been the case in 1782. Mention was made in June 1782 of "the great price that coals have been kept up to, for some time past."¹⁴

It seems likely that the war was of some significance in forcing up the price of coal to unusually high levels. Both seamen and ships were in short supply, causing a marked increase in seamen's wages¹⁵ and a reduction in sailings to Ireland. The activities of enemy privateers further served to impede the movement of such shipping as was available. It was reported from Cork in September 1781 that, due to the lack of Admiralty protection, only two coal ships had arrived in the last six weeks, a situation sufficient to force up the price to 8/8 per barrel.¹⁶ Much contemporary comment sought to lay the blame for the high prices on malpractices by the masters of the coal vessels and the factors whereby coals were stored in gabbards in order to keep the price at the quay artificially high. Such profiteering may well have occurred, but it is likely that it was given a disproportionate importance by contemporaries in a period of growing crisis. Thus the price of fuel not only increased seasonally, as was usual, but increased to a high level and furthermore, maintained a high level, throughout 1782, the period in which urban unemployment was noticeably growing. The effect of this growing urban depression, consequent upon this combination of increasing unemployment and abnormally high fuel prices, was readily revealed in the House of Industry returns,¹⁷ which for the first eight months of 1782 averaged 1015 inmates compared with 857 inmates for the same period of the previous year; that is, prior to the depression reaching significant proportions.

In the final months of 1782, a new dimension was added to the growing crisis, with the failure of the harvest and the consequent phenomena of food shortages and high prices. The effects were speedily felt. Lord Temple, the Lord Lieutenant, wrote to London in November 1782 that "The price of grain is even now so high that the poor could not eat it"¹⁸ and this, predictably enough, was reflected in the supply of food in the towns with low bread assizes in Dublin and schemes to obtain cheap oatmeal for the northern cities. Only in the southern centres was there a sustained improvement in the food supply following the harvest.¹⁹

The now combined effects of growing unemployment and high food and fuel prices markedly accentuated distress. As early as November 1782 it was noted that

. . . numerous families are out of employ in the Liberty part of this city, and therefore feel the present scarcity of bread and potatoes doubly severe.²⁰

whilst it was reported in January 1783 that

The oldest man in Dublin cannot recollect an interval, when the loaf continued so small for so many weeks as have been now suffered; nor were coals, for so great a length of time, scarce ever known to have kept up to their present enormous price.²¹

and the effects were felt in a significant rise in the number of inmates in the House of Industry. The first three months of 1781 had averaged 946 per month; the growing unemployment had forced the average up to 1,036 per month for the same period in 1782, whilst this figure was further increased to 1,584 in 1783 with the addition of the food shortage. The importance of such government relief agencies was emphasized by the report in January 1783 that the charitable fund of the industrial parish of St. Michan was exhausted "and the calls of the poor very pressing".²² The only consolation appeared to be the mildness of the weather, for since "January is now more like April or May"²³ the high fuel prices did not bear down so hard on the urban population as might otherwise have been the case.

Thus by early 1783 severe urban depression was in evidence. The initial depression in employment, largely centred upon Dublin, had been accentuated, initially by unusually high fuel prices, but subsequently, and more significantly, by the emergence of a serious food shortage, with its attendant corollary of increasing prices. Furthermore, the first substantial indication of regional diversity, later to be a more marked feature of the urban crisis, had appeared, with the southern centres not experiencing a serious dislocation in food supply.

However, public opinion was optimistic and the reason for such sanguinity was implied in a report in March 1783:

There never happened an event more providentially for this country than the present peace, which took place at the moment the distress of the manufacturers, and of all the poor in general, was arrived to a crisis of calamity as great as in the Spring of 1779, with this addition of the high price of all the necessities of life to render it insupportable.²⁴

Peace, it was believed, would be the key to a speedy improvement in conditions, for not only would trade and manufacture be stimulated but, from America, a ready source of food supply would be opened.²⁵ However, such optimism was misplaced and it speedily became apparent that peace was not the much longed for panacea for the economic ills of Ireland. It was noted in April 1783:

Since war is over, and almost the whole globe open to the commerce of Ireland, it is somewhat astonishing that we do not find at home a greater briskness of trade, and that we should hear the well grounded complaints of want of employ in such numbers of the lower orders of manufacturers.²⁶

The Dublin worsted weavers, for example, who had been

. . . happy in looking forward to the conclusion of the late war, as they flattered themselves, that when the establishment of peace should enable this country to advantage herself of her newly acquired commercial privileges, they might possible become not the least useful members among the working part of the community

found that "in this pleasing prospect Memorialists have been unfortunately disappointed".²⁷ Such a trend was clearly reflected in the Dublin industrial parishes. St. Catherine's opened a subscription in May 1783, for

on Account of the present Stagnation in Trade, there are many Thousands of the poor Inhabitants of the extensive Parish, which consists chiefly of Manufacturers in the various Branches of the Weaving Trade, in the greatest Distress, being out of Employment, and consequently deprived of the Means of Subsistence.²⁸

whilst in the neighbouring parish of St. Luke's, there were at the end of June ". . . numerous and unemployed poor amounting to upwards of three thousand souls."²⁹ This shattering of the optimistic assessment of the beneficial effects of peace introduced a new note of despair. The Freeman's Journal came close to capturing this when it reported in July 1783 that

. . . some of the poor manufacturers of the Liberty, who have long in silence borne the oppressive hand of famine and indigence . . . at last roused to a degree of madness by their

exquisite sufferings, and absolute despair of relief, did . . . commence cutting the muslins and nankeens in the dress of every person they met with . . .³⁰

The full reality of the deepening depression was becoming apparent to the urban population and in consequence the urban crisis assumed an increased significance from mid-1783.

High levels of unemployment were reported in silk by November 1783³¹ whilst, despite the various attempts to stimulate the production of old drapery, the Dublin broadcloth weavers reported in September 1783 that their manufacture had been brought to a degree of wretchedness that beggared description.³² The ending of the war saw the spread of depressed conditions to the manufacture of new drapery and by August 1783 the almost total suspension of worsted production in Dublin was being reported.³³ This downturn in new drapery production was of great significance in the spread of substantial unemployment to provincial urban centres, as worsted production was more prevalent outside Dublin. Hence the second half of 1783 saw the emergence of depressed conditions in the southern centres, notably Cork, Limerick and Bandon.³⁴ This catastrophic trend was further accentuated by a downturn in production in brewing and distilling, following the unsuccessful harvest of 1782. There was a 15% fall in the production of strong water and a 10% fall in the production of ale in 1782/3, followed by a further 19% and 14% fall respectively, in the following year.³⁵ As a result of recent trends towards concentration in larger scale factory units from the 1770s, in response to English competition, the effects of such a contraction in production were felt essentially in urban locations, notably, of course, in Dublin, but also in Cork, Waterford, Limerick, Kilkenny and New Ross.³⁶

The food shortage, too, was assuming critical proportions, for by July 1783 the 6d. loaf in Dublin, at 3.3.4, was the smallest, not only for the year but for the whole crisis, and although conditions continued less severe in the southern centres, with the assize in Cork and Limerick maintaining a pre-harvest level in excess of 4 lbs., clearly much depended on the success of the forthcoming harvest. However, the 1783 harvest failed to solve the food shortage³⁷ and despite an initial post-harvest improvement in conditions, the Dublin bread assize was falling before the end of the

year, and by January 1784 oatmeal prices were rising rapidly in the northern cities - once again, only the southern centres, in which the post-harvest assize remained well above 4 lbs. in early 1784, escaped the acute food shortage.

The inevitable consequence of this acute worsening in the employment situation and the failure of the 1783 harvest to substantially improve the food supply, was the existence of a dangerously high level of distress in early 1784. A citizens' meeting reported at the end of January 1784 that

. . . the poor in this city, and the Liberties adjoining, are in a most deplorable situation, being totally incapacitated from want of employment to provide food, which is extremely dear, and firing at this inclement season.³⁸

In numerical terms, it was estimated in February 1784 that ". . . no less than 50,000 souls are now in real want in this metropolis . . ." ³⁹ The worsening of the distress was particularly apparent in the increasing need to supplement parochial funds. St. Nicholas's parish, in which

The numerous and urgent calls on this charity for several months past in consequence of the severity of the season, and of the unemployed and indignant state of the lower classes of the manufacturers . . . have occasioned an expenditure unknown in former years⁴⁰

had exhausted their fund by the beginning of March 1784 and they were not alone in this situation. By late January 1784, in seven of the Dublin parishes, the poor were too numerous to be supported from parochial funds.⁴¹ This critical urban distress had been exacerbated by the severe frosts of early 1784, which increased pressure on the fuel stocks and food supplies. The fact that the public coal yards were open for periods in January, February and March is indicative of unusually high fuel prices and the effect of the weather in restricting the supply of vegetables and dairy produce in a period when the food supply was already seriously dislocated, was sufficient to secure for the Roman Catholic population of Dublin a dispensation to eat flesh four times per week during the forthcoming Lent.⁴²

The provincial centres too, in common with the metropolis, experienced a marked worsening in their situation with the emergence of levels of unemployment hitherto unexperienced in the early 1780s. Acute

dislocation was apparent in the production of both old and new drapery, notably in Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Bandon, culminating in a parade of unemployed weavers in Cork in April 1784.⁴³ Rising fuel prices exacerbated an already critical situation - in Cork, a public subscription was opened at the end of January to purchase coal for the poor,⁴⁴ whilst the severe frost of the first two months of the year, responsible at least in part for the high fuel prices, further contributed to the level of distress by limiting manual work⁴⁵ and ensuring that there would be little or no alternative employment in the countryside.⁴⁶ Only the relatively favourable bread assize, it seems, separated the urban manufacturing centres of the south from experiencing the same extremities as the inhabitants of Dublin.

It was therefore far from fortuitous that the protection campaign emerged in the second half of 1783, when urban unemployment in general, and that of Dublin in particular, was assuming grave proportions. As early as July 1783, at a meeting of Volunteer delegates in Dublin, it was unanimously resolved that

. . . the present Distresses of the numerous Poor, dependent on the Manufactures of this Country cannot be effectually relieved . . . unless our Legislature shall adopt the same wise Measure of Protecting Duties as established in Great Britain, this being a certain Means of providing Employment for our Inhabitants . . .⁴⁷

and as the urban crisis deepened in the course of the year, so the appeal of protection spread beyond the radical element in society, as epitomised by the Volunteers, and was readily espoused by a broader urban manufacturing element, which saw protection as a solution to their own particular problems. The inevitable result was a distinct increase in the level of popular activity and by November 1783, parliament was being vigorously petitioned. The close relationship between the growth of the protection movement and the intensification of urban distress was highlighted by the fact that of the nine petitions presented to parliament in late 1783 specifically requesting protecting duties, eight were from Dublin, the centre of deepest distress, whilst six specifically represented sectors of the urban textile industry.⁴⁸ Of course, in theory, protection was viewed as an instrument for radically revising the broad spectrum of Anglo-Irish trade, but in practice it speedily became identified with the plight of the urban manufacturers, and as early as September 1783,

the Lord Lieutenant had particularly identified "the silk and woollen manufacturers in Dublin" as being in the van of the protection campaign.⁴⁹ Consequently, it was scarcely surprising that as the urban depression deepened appreciably in the early months of 1784, so the popular support for protection escalated, a trend which reached a logical conclusion by forcing the issue to the attention of parliament in April 1784. Luke Gardiner, in opening the debate, indicated that the introduction of a protection discussion owed much to "the petitions of the people" and whilst he spoke in general terms of "the despondency and distress of the country" as justification for such a measure, it is not without significance that he chose to interpret the distress largely in terms of the condition of the woollen manufacture, the leading single source of urban employment. "The misfortune," he noted, "is not particular - it is universal - not confined to Dublin, it extends to . . . every part of the kingdom where the woollen manufacture is carried on".⁵⁰ The defeat of the protection proposals in April 1784, however, did not mark the zenith of popular activity for after the successes of 1778-9, non-importation had come to be regarded as the ultimate weapon in the popular armoury. The ready implementation of such a measure in April 1784, in effect a significant shift in method from parliamentary to extra-parliamentary activity, by the urban manufacturing forces which had come to dominate the protection movement, clearly indicated the acuteness of the depression, and the desperation to find a solution.

The initial results were encouraging, with a speedy upturn in employment. By May 1784

The effects of the non-importation agreements begin already to display the wisdom and policy of such resolutions, several of our famished countrymen having already been set to work.⁵¹

but by June, the weakness of the measure was already apparent. Reporting that month, the Dublin Journal noted

A temporary relief has been given to a part of our starving artisans, by the spirited resolutions not to import foreign luxuries; but we are sorry to observe that this is confined to the broad cloth manufacture, whilst those of the other branches exhibit the same gloomy picture of poignant distress.⁵²

The silk manufacture remained acutely depressed, and there are no indications of any substantial upturn in the manufacture of new drapery.⁵³ This served to highlight the practical weaknesses of the agreements as a medium for solving unemployment. Non-importation of itself could not produce an upturn in domestic demand except at the expense of the imports which it sought to prevent, and therefore its effect was always likely to be greatest in those sectors of manufacture which were most acutely affected by import. In the context of the urban textile manufacture, therefore, it was to be expected that broad-cloths would fare best, and since the production of old drapery was essentially a Dublin activity, thus the effect of the non-importation agreements was greatest in the metropolis. Undoubtedly some benefit did eventually accrue to the new drapery manufacture. It was reported in July 1784 that "those in the narrow worsted line are . . . for the most part returned to their looms."⁵⁴ but the new drapery sector in Dublin was small and might be expected to benefit disproportionately from any improved conditions, no matter how slight. In national terms, however, the effects of non-importation on worsted was slight. Most surprisingly, there is no comment from the provincial urban textile centres where worsted predominated on a speedy upturn in sales and increase in employment comparable with that of Dublin. In May 1784, it was reported in Cork that the agreements had only benefited the broad-cloth manufacturers while the "worsted manufacturers . . . had no means of supporting themselves and numerous families."⁵⁵ Furthermore, the effectiveness of non-importation in the southern centres was limited by the fact that many of the agreements did not come into force until 1st January 1785, in order to provide time to clear the backlog of imported cloths.⁵⁶ Thus the immediate effects which had been so striking in Dublin were even less likely to be repeated in the south. It is probable too, that any trends towards an upturn in employment would have been severely inhibited by the slump in confidence resulting from the banking crisis which emerged in the south in July 1784.⁵⁷ The fact that Cork journeymen were combining in late August 1784 to take no more than one apprentice each,⁵⁸ may further suggest that unemployment had remained acute.

That the effects of non-importation were limited to Dublin and limited even within the capital, was emphasized by the campaign

of violence which erupted there in June 1784, aimed at protecting and consolidating the new employment which had been created.

The original outrage was the tarring and feathering of Alexander Clarke, a master tailor, in punishment for importing English cloths,⁵⁹ and this set the scene for a series of such outrages in the subsequent two months. Tarring and feathering of those who had allegedly violated the agreements was the most common tactic, but not the only one, and mercers who had continued to import received threatening letters.⁶⁰ The fact that such outrages occurred, emphasized that employment gains worth protecting had been made, and the fact that the unrest was confined to Dublin further suggested that the beneficial effects had been confined to the capital. But furthermore, the emergence of such extreme activity by the manufacturers indicated a lack of confidence in the durability of the agreements and suggested that the benefits which had accrued had fallen significantly short of solving the employment crisis in the metropolis. The initial phase of the campaign, that of attacking and threatening recalcitrants, had emerged in June 1784, as it was becoming apparent that the agreements were not effecting the desired upturn in employment, and it assumed a wider field of operation as the debilitating effects of the limited nature of the agreements began to make themselves felt. It was reported in August 1784 that

Notwithstanding the patriotic spirit so generally manifested in this city by the non-importation agreements, we are sorry to find, by letters from several country parts of the kingdom, that great quantities of old and new drapery are clandestinely pouring in, with a view, as it must be supposed, of counteracting the above salutary measure. Besides this, a number of wholesale importers in this city have not yet come into the agreement, which must evidently tend to render abortive, if not timely remedied, the efforts of the manufacturers and wool drapers in general of the metropolis.⁶¹

Later in the same month, the Lord Lieutenant noted that

. . . resentment is not now confined to persons importing English goods . . . and accordingly several have suffered for working at low wages, for assisting in branches of manufacture to which they were not regularly bred and from having come in from the country to work in Dublin . . .⁶²

The spread of the campaign of violence to such peripheral threats to urban employment, starkly emphasized the limited and tenuous nature of the employment gains which had been won.

However, the violence did little to increase the benefits which had accrued from non-importation. The tactics of intimidation probably did secure a degree of personal adherence to the agreements - the reluctance of those who had been intimidated to give evidence against their attackers⁶³ suggests such an effect - but essentially the violence was counter-productive, since it alienated vital support. It was reported in August 1784 that several parishes were considering revoking their non-importation pledges as a protest against the continuing violence,⁶⁴ and indeed at least two, St. Ann's⁶⁵ and St. James's⁶⁶ subsequently took this action. The fear of losing such fundamental support, especially in the period before the harvest when food prices were high, was probably significant in arresting the violence. Certainly there were no reports of serious unrest after mid-August.

The non-importation agreements, therefore, clearly had not solved the unemployment crisis in Dublin, but they did effect a significant increase in employment opportunities in the metropolis. Such a trend was intrinsically valuable in the context of the general crisis, since it obviously facilitated the alleviation of a certain amount of the prevailing urban distress, although its value was partially eroded by continued high food prices in the wake of the unsatisfactory harvest of 1783.⁶⁷ The degree to which the increase in employment opportunities served to offset distress may be indicated by the House of Industry returns, which reveal a fall in the number of inmates from spring 1784, to levels below those of spring 1783, but still higher than those of spring 1782.

Thus it would seem that the urban crisis in Dublin peaked around April 1784, that is, prior to the upturn in employment following the non-importation agreements. In the southern centres, however, the crisis persisted longer. The paucity of information makes it impossible to build up a detailed picture of urban distress in the south, but the relative ineffectiveness of the non-importation agreement outside Dublin and the gloom cast over industrial and commercial life by the failure of Warren's bank in Cork,⁶⁸ compounded by the appearance during the summer of the most severe food shortage in southern cities for the whole crisis,⁶⁹ offered little scope for improvement before the 1784 harvest. Indeed, it was the new year of 1785 before clear signs of recovery were apparent in Cork.⁷⁰

CHAPTER 8

GOVERNMENT POLICY

The early 1780s was a period of increasing government activity. The driving force behind much of this activity had been the granting of free trade and constitutional independence, but of considerable significance also in forcing new initiatives upon government was the economic crisis in these years. The various facets and manifestations of the crisis called for action, be it regulation, promotion or relief, and such served to preoccupy the administration and swell the statute book. Aspects of government policy which were deemed in part contributory to the crisis were re-examined; new measures were formulated to control the crisis and limit its effects, and an active policy to promote expansion was begun. In all these spheres, government action was significantly influenced by the considerable public debate on economic affairs, which is clearly evident in these years from the volume of pamphlet literature produced.¹

The major themes in this facet of government policy inevitably strongly mirrored the components of the crisis, and essentially were, the promotion and organization of manufacture, the regulation of trade and credit and the securing of an adequate food supply. To this could be added a fourth theme - the alleviation of such human distress as was caused by the inadequacy of government policy or by the interposition of events over which government had no control.

Up until the failure of the 1782 harvest, the economic crisis had been employment based. The dislocation of trade and the downturn in industrial output caused extensive unemployment and reduced home demand for domestically produced goods at a time when overseas markets were difficult to secure. Consequently the organization of domestic manufacture was an important aspect of government policy.

In the realms of manufacture, government inevitably concentrated on textiles. Particular attention was paid to the linen manufacture, the leading export commodity, and considerable support was afforded to cotton, a new, expanding manufacture capable of providing employment for many who had been forced out of the more traditional textile industries. Support

was also forthcoming, both directly and indirectly, for other manufactures, in an attempt to revitalize the old and promote the new, so that through such a combination, Irish manufacture might be rejuvenated.

Government concern for the linen manufacture was evidenced as early as 1780, thus focussing attention on the difficulties in the manufacture from the beginning of the decade. The 1780 Act essentially did two things. It offered a scheme of bounties for the export of coarse cloth to countries other than Great Britain and it changed the emphasis from an imported to a domestically produced supply of flaxseed.²

A series of petitions had been presented to parliament in February 1780 requesting export bounties, and central to their argument was the claim of a decline in linen exports since 1771.³ Certainly, export levels for the remainder of that decade had not surpassed the 25 million yards of that year, but it seems likely that more recent fluctuations had influenced the timing of the petitions. There had been a slump in exports from the much improved total of almost 22 million yards in 1777/8 to 18,336,042 in 1778/9, and the figure for the subsequent year, the probable level of which would have been known to the petitioners, showed a further slight fall. These were years when the agitation to secure free trade was at its height and the prevailing free trade mentality is clearly to be seen in the demands of the manufacturers. Their remedy for the fall in exports was an incentive scheme to trade with countries other than Great Britain. Instead of shipping their goods first to England, they were demanding a direct bounty trade. But the remedies proposed only served to obscure the underlying motivation. The bounties for coarse linen export were essentially a reaction to poor sales and as such, the agitation for them indicates the beginnings of the first of the adverse fluctuations to which the linen manufacture was to be subject in these years; that which reached its depth in 1780/1. As a measure to improve the falling export levels, such an Act was of little use. Despite the optimism surrounding the potential benefits of free trade, the linen manufacture was still very heavily orientated towards the British market. Overseas markets remained of minor importance, and the implementation of a bounty scheme to encourage foreign export, in a period when European and transatlantic trade was disrupted by war, was not likely to significantly improve matters.

The accompanying change in flaxseed policy was not so much a reaction to the downturn in the linen manufacture as a measure to prevent further difficulties which might be incurred through a disruption in the supply of raw materials. Its origins seemed to lie solely with the government, for there was no evidence of strong public feeling on the topic - only two petitions were presented in favour of it, whilst three were presented against.⁴ The war, by 1779/80, had completely cut off the supply of seed from America and doubts about the quality and dependability of European supplies prompted a reversal in government policy.⁵ The bounties which had been used to finance the import of seed were to be used to encourage domestic production. The success of the measure in increasing home production of seed was quickly apparent for, despite a poor harvest in 1781 and no significant increase in import of seed, the output of cloth in 1782/3 was little affected, with exports totalling almost 25 million yards.

Thus the objectives of the 1780 Act were only partially fulfilled, for although the new flaxseed policy did prove successful, the export bounties for coarse linens had no significant effect on the export trade.

The fortunes of the linen trade did improve in the spring of 1781, but this owed little to the 1780 Act, and was the product of strong demand from Britain, which was reflected in a sharp rise in exports of linen cloth from 14,947,265 yards in 1780/1 to over 24 million yards in 1781/2. However, from mid-1781 there was a marked fall in this British demand and a consequent slump in sales. The reaction to falling sales among the merchants and factors provided the motivation for further regulation of the linen trade, which appeared in another Linen Act in 1782.⁶

Reaction to falling sales manifested itself in the revival of complaints about the quality of Irish linens which were presented for exports. Complaints about rotteness in Irish linen had first appeared about 1779,⁷ and the appearance of such was immediately linked to the use of lime as a bleaching agent.⁸ Although forbidden by law, the Linen Board had sanctioned some experimentation in the use of lime, but its use seems to have spread beyond the limited licensing scheme.⁹ This trend was sharply increased by the rise in price of imported bleaching materials in 1779,¹⁰ since lime was cheaper and more readily available, and by mid-1781 widespread concern was being evinced about the quality of goods being sent for export. To this

was allied the belief that a number of bleachers were compounding such illicit practices by fraudulently lapping and sealing webs so as to disguise such defects, and were evading redress by giving fictitious names and securities when obtaining their seals.¹¹ The result was a clamour from the merchants and factors during the second half of 1781, calling for a prohibition in bleaching with lime and a reform of the sealing system.¹² In normal circumstances, such activities would have commanded little attention, for the quantity of cloth involved was small (in 1781/2, the percentage of cloth returned as unfit was under 1% of the total),¹³ but in a period of falling sales, a disproportionate emphasis on readily accessible explanations tended to predominate. It was, most certainly, the downturn in sales, from mid-1781, which was the motivating force behind the agitation which led to the Act, for the concern over quality which characterized the agitation was but a symptom of bad sales.

The bill, when it appeared in March 1782, mirrored the popular remedies and sought to prohibit bleaching with lime and to encourage the domestic production of ashes instead. It reflected also the views of the merchants that all seals should be called in and re-issued only to those who had the financial capacity to back their enterprises. Furthermore, the clauses to enlarge the Dublin Linen Hall reflected another contemporary simplification, that a lack of accommodation for merchants and factors was a prime cause of the slump in trade.

The reform, although it had been loudly called for, was not greeted with unanimous enthusiasm, and particular resentment was felt about the requirement of an oath to obey the Linen Laws, for those holding new seals. The subsequent refusal to accept this, backed up by a suspension of dealings by the northern bleachers, and the consequent capitulation by government, had the effect of making the regulations a dead letter. In the face of concerted opposition, the government had, in effect, promised to ignore its own laws, a fact serving to emphasize the difficulty of pursuing a controversial policy in a period of crisis - the government simply could not afford to have the renewed downturn in sales, evident from mid-1781, exacerbated by a fall in production.

However, even if the regulations had been accepted, they, like those of 1780, although produced by conditions of crisis in the linen manufacture,

could have little effect in controlling the subsequent fluctuations in the trade, since they dealt with factors which, in the context of a crisis produced essentially by market conditions, were superficial and peripheral. Government was, in effect, helpless to stimulate the linen manufacture, since it could not guarantee overseas demand for an overwhelmingly export orientated manufacture. Thus its activities were limited to pacifying the popular manifestations of crisis conditions.

In contrast, a much more positive policy was pursued with regard to the cotton manufacture. This was possible, because as an "infant manufacture", cotton was still dependent on the domestic market, a sphere in which government could exert significant influence, and it was desirable because as a new, developing manufacture, cotton could provide much needed employment in a period when the other textile industries were in recession. Whilst it was fortuitous that a number of concerns had developed sufficiently by the early 1780s to benefit from government assistance, it is surely not without significance that parliamentary interest in, and support for, the cotton manufacture, began in 1781, a period of marked recession in the other textile industries.

The grant of £5,000¹⁵ in that year inaugurated a period of extensive government spending and some astute regulation, which permitted the cotton manufacture to expand continuously in a period of economic contraction. Direct financial support to encourage development, notably in the use of Robert Brooke's venture at Prosperous which, by 1785, had received almost £50,000; a liberal interpretation of regulations intended mainly for the linen manufacture which assisted sales and facilitated the purchase of machinery;¹⁶ and regulation of the domestic market by the introduction of a protective additional duty of 6d. per yard on all imported calicoes,¹⁷ emphasized the intent of the government to aid the expansion of the cotton manufacture. Such support was of undoubted utility in keeping many enterprises in existence during their difficult inceptive period, when sales were slow and capital expenditure high, for, as was noted by Comerford and O'Brien, "the returns in infancy of such undertakings are not adequate to these heavy disbursements."¹⁸

The net effect of all these measures of promotion and regulation was to permit the cotton manufacture to expand throughout the years of crisis.

Apart from a temporary ban on production in Belfast, in protest against the commercial propositions,¹⁹ there seems to have been no contraction in employment during the early 1780s.

Government acted, too, to reform the coal trade, a matter of considerable public concern and one which had a direct effect on urban based manufactures, notably sugar refining and brewing, both of which were experiencing some dislocation.

It was intended that the new regulations governing the Dublin coal trade introduced in 1782²⁰ would ". . . tend much to relieve the manufacturers and poor inhabitants of the said city"²¹ and to this end, all previous coal legislation was repealed and to encourage importation and storage of coal,

. . . every person or persons, bodies politick or corporate shall be at full liberty to buy and sell coals, at such prices and times, in such manner and quantities and form, and to such persons as he, she or they shall choose.²²

High winter prices had, despite considerable legislative activity, become an accepted feature of Irish life²³ but, from the winter of 1780-1, prices rose to unusually high levels.²⁴ It was probably in an attempt to prevent a repetition of such that heads of a bill were introduced in November 1781 "to prevent the excessive Price of Coal."²⁵ The bill proved abortive but is indicative of the degree of concern which the rising coal prices had engendered. Prices were again unusually high in the winter of 1781-2, and this continuing phenomenon was probably an important factor in prompting the re-introduction of the bill in March 1782 and its swift passage through parliament to become law by May 1782. The high prices indicated the weakness of the existing legislation, whilst the growing crisis in manufacturing caused additional emphasis to be placed on any factors which made Irish production more expensive and hence less competitive. This was particularly true of brewing, ". . . with the Price of Brewing Coals, being considerably higher for two Years past than usual . . ."²⁶ and concern was also expressed as to the adverse effects of increased prices, on sugar refining.²⁷

There is, however, nothing to suggest that the new regulations served to improve the supply of coal. The factors producing the

unusually high prices had been fluctuating weather conditions and the effects of the war in disrupting and limiting sailings, neither of which was likely to be altered by the new regulations. With the ending of the war, coal prices did fall, but the traditional factor of higher winter prices remained, reflecting the unwillingness or inability of merchants to yard substantial quantities of coal during the summer.²⁸ Thus, the new regulations which, at least to an extent, were a response to the crisis in manufacturing, failed to prove beneficial, for although liberalizing the import regulations, they failed to provide an incentive to promote the speculative venture of yarding, upon which the success of the measure depended.

Out of the crisis, too, grew a more general policy of promoting manufacture, for whilst textiles were of paramount importance, if a speedy recovery from the depression, in order to secure the long anticipated benefits of free trade, were to be effected, some attention needed to be paid to manufacturing in general.

Significant in this respect was the creation of the Bank of Ireland and the passing of the anonymous partnerships legislation. Both these measures were seeking to accomplish essentially the same thing - to increase the stock of Irish capital which could be invested in trade and manufacture. Lamentation as to the lack of capital in Ireland had been a regular manifestation of crisis conditions throughout the 18th century and it is likely that the emergence of yet another crisis was significant in prompting the recurrence of such views. Both these pieces of legislation appear to have proceeded from the same situation - the emergence during the second half of 1781 of a tightening in the credit supply consequent upon a downturn in both linen and provisions, the two staples of Irish trade, the effects of which were evident by late 1781 in the appearance of depression in manufactures in Dublin dependent on the home market.

The partnerships bill²⁹ was first introduced in December 1781, and sought to permit anonymous partners to invest in a firm, with the assurance that their liability was limited to the extent of their investment and that they would not be subject to the bankruptcy laws. It certainly had widespread support among the mercantile class who had made "a great inquiry"

when a delay was occasioned in the return of the bill from England, and indeed it was described by the Lord Lieutenant as "a very popular bill".³⁰ However, its purpose of speedily attracting money into trade and manufacture was not realized. Sadlier, writing from Cork in January 1785 observed of the act

It was expected at the time of passing that most excellent law . . . that numbers would have stepped forward and advanced money on those conditions, but here it has not been the case, as not a single instance is to be produced in this city or county, of such a company formed under that act.³¹

Indeed, up until the end of 1784 only eight such partnerships had been registered.³² It was May 1782 before the measure became law, by which time it had become clear that the downturn in economic life in the second half of 1781, which had prompted the introduction of the Act, was not to be a short-term adverse fluctuation. A reluctance to invest in such obviously unpropitious times is understandable, a conclusion given point by the acceleration in the number of partnerships registered with the appearance of clear-cut recovery in 1785.³³ Thus the declining economic conditions which had prompted the introduction of the measure were the very reasons for its failure.

The National Bank Bill³⁴ was not introduced until the end of February 1782, but its origins, like the partnership legislation, lay back in the preceding year. Hillsborough had assured the Lord Lieutenant, Carlisle, at the beginning of December 1781 that the English administration would support the creation of a national bank, but that it should be organized in the same manner as the Bank of England, ". . . an exclusive company of individuals in which the government is to have no share."³⁵ Such seems to have been accepted as the basis of the mode of proceeding, for when the Bill reached parliament, in February 1782, Carlisle replied to Hillsborough that "The plan . . . approaches as nearly as possible to that upon which the Bank of England is constituted."³⁶

The scheme was clearly popular. Only one person, Ogle, spoke against it in debate, and although Flood urged caution, the remaining eight reported speakers were clearly in favour of the measure.³⁷ Outside parliament, although the merchants of Belfast and Dublin petitioned to

postpone consideration of the issue until a greater sample of commercial opinion had been taken,³⁸ the lack of subsequent comment along these lines would seem to suggest that there was little support for their views. Even the private bankers were not opposed to the measures, since they believed it would promote national trade and industry.³⁹ This general support for the bank bill represented a substantial change in attitude from that which prevailed in the 1720s, when nationalist opinion had been virulently opposed to the establishment of a national bank.

The intentions and motivation of the government in introducing the measure were made clear by Eden, the Chief Secretary, in a speech in the House of Commons on 27th February 1782.⁴⁰ Government expectations centred on the proposal that the maximum rate of interest allowed to the bank would be 5%, 1% under the existing legal maximum. This lowering of the rate of interest

. . . might inspire a disposition to throw money into commerce, and by increasing industry to promote frugality. Accumulation furnished the means of further loans at low interest, and thus first lowering of interest tended to lower it still further . . . all the consequences of industry thus increased, might be followed to an infinite extent - the multiplying of manufactures - the prevention of emigrations - the raising the value of land and debentures - the extension of foreign commerce - and the establishment of public credit.⁴¹

Clearly, the creation of a national bank was viewed by the administration as an important first step in reactivating Irish trade and manufacture. The reason why such was deemed necessary at that time, was anticipated by Eden in the same speech,

The whole turned upon this short principle - from the increasing state of Irish commerce, it was become essential to the prosperity of the merchants, and to prevent their hopes of an extensive trade from being nipped in the bud, it was necessary that an increased credit should be lodged either in the hands of private or public banks.⁴²

The existing banking facilities " . . . were naturally much too confined for the speculation, which the nation might at present entertain . . ." ⁴³
In fact, of course, Irish commerce was no longer in an "increasing state" as the emergence of the downturn in economic activity in late 1781 had revealed, and it is most likely that the real object of the government

lay not in assisting an expanding economy but in attempting to prevent the ". . . hopes of an extensive trade from being nipped in the bud." Confidence in economic recovery had been high following the grant of free trade and the high level of economic activity in 1780 and early 1781 had accentuated this confidence. These hopes of recovery were clearly threatened by the downturn in late 1781 and hence the government response. Significantly, attempts to introduce such a measure before, notably in 1720 and in 1780, had been in the wake of an economic crisis.⁴⁴

Although the subscription list was opened in August 1782, by which time the downturn in economic life was pronounced, the bank, unlike the partnerships legislation, experienced no lack of support and was able to commence business in June 1783. The bank, as a ". . . necessary corollary of the removal of trade restrictions and the realization of the national aspirations"⁴⁵ thus had a political complexion, which the partnerships legislation had not.

There were, therefore, essentially two aspects of government activity in the field of manufacture. The first was to be found in the regulation of individual industries, like linen and cotton, and important factors affecting such, like the supply of coal. Government action in this sphere was in the form of initiatives taken in direct response to the manifestations of crisis conditions and as a result of considerable public agitation. The other aspect of government action was the introduction of a policy, not related to any specific manufacture, designed to make capital more easily available and to promote voluntary investment. Although also a response to crisis, this was an attempt to stimulate rather than regulate manufacture, and as such, whilst assured of popular support, was much less attributable to popular clamour.

The logical and inseparable corollary to the government's activity in the field of manufacture was a concern for the regulation of trade. Prior to the end of the war in 1783, government activity had been directed towards ameliorating, as far as was possible, the effects of the conflict, and where such activity was less than fully successful, it could justifiably be claimed that the extent of the hostilities placed inordinate

demands upon the Empire at large, and that Ireland must expect to bear her share of the burden. With the conclusion of peace, however, Irish trading ambitions sought the fruition which they believed that the grant of free trade had assured, but the continuation of crisis conditions forced Ireland to seek for further concessions in trading regulations, a trend at variance with British policy. Hence, the period from late 1783 until the failure of the commercial propositions was one of policy conflict.

The prosecution of the war in Europe and America was obviously a leading element in government policy in the late 1770s and early 1780s, and the repercussions of such inevitably affected Ireland. The dislocation of overseas markets was obviously the major contributor to the crisis in this respect, but such was an inevitable result of the conflict rather than a deliberate facet of government policy. The obvious exception, however, was the restriction laid on the export of provisions. Ireland, and especially Cork, was the leading provider of wet provisions in Europe and the denial of such facilities to the enemy was an obvious element of strategy. From 1776 an embargo had been in force on the export of salt provisions to France and Spain, and in January 1781, this was extended to the United Provinces.⁴⁶

The embargo, however, did not prove unduly detrimental to the Irish provision merchants, since such reduction in export as was occasioned was rendered inconsequential by the compensatory effects of the admiralty contracts for victualling the British fleets during the war. The significance of the embargo, in terms of the prevailing economic crisis, is to be appreciated not so much in its imposition but in the timing of its removal. The situation was concisely articulated by the Dublin Chamber of Commerce in April 1783. In requesting the lifting of the embargo, it observed

That the victualling His Majesty's fleets and armies has during the war taken of the greater part of the provisions made up in this kingdom, but as peace renders such supplies nearly unnecessary, this country must have recourse to foreign markets, for the sale of the provisions now on hand . . .⁴⁷

Peace was virtually certain from January 1783 but it was September before definitive treaties were signed⁴⁸ and before the government felt able to lift the embargo.⁴⁹ The end of the war, as opposed to the final conclusion of peace, spelt the reduction of navy contracts, causing merchants to view what in war-time had been inconsequential outlets in a new light, as they strove to adapt to the new peace-time conditions. The delay in the removal of the embargo was, therefore, a factor in exacerbating the difficulties of transition from war to peace, and thus contributory to the prevailing difficulties in trade.

A further direct effect of the war was to render the seas around Ireland unsafe for commercial traffic, due to the activities of privateers. It was claimed in March 1780 that

. . . since the commencement of the present unhappy content the Channel has been infested by privateers of the enemy in a manner unknown to former times of hostility . . .⁵⁰

Government policy had previously been to provide naval protection, but on this occasion the level of such was disappointing, as was pointed out to the Lord Lieutenant in March 1780

That in former times of war regular convoys were usually appointed by the Admiralty for the vessels bound from the port [Dublin] to London, Bristol and other ports of England. But during the present hostilities your petitioners have not been so fortunate, the few convoys they have had being far from regular, the dangers of the Channel creating a necessity for their touching at the northern ports to take under their care the trade from thence which has caused great delays and disappointments . . .⁵¹

Due to the strain of fighting a war both in Europe and America, only limited resources were available for home defence. For example, in February 1780, the Lord Lieutenant pointed out that one frigate was insufficient to protect the trade of the Irish Channel and suggested that three frigates and three cruisers would be required,

. . . but if so many frigates and cruisers cannot be spared, I entreat those desired to be stationed between Waterford and Milford and at Carrickfergus, may be granted.⁵²

The Waterford trade was particularly badly affected - it was claimed in August 1781 that

. . . scarce a day passes that vessels are not taken in view of the people about Dunmore and Tramore, and unless effectual steps are taken to prevent, there must be an end to all trade here as insurance will not be had for any premium.⁵³

whilst that from Dublin and the northern ports was also seriously affected.⁵⁴ Despite continual correspondence to London, there seems to have been no significant improvement in naval protection, and in August 1781 it was estimated that in the course of the preceding year goods to the value of £850,000 had been lost.⁵⁵ Ransoming of vessels for cash became frequent - for instance, there was heavy ransoming of colliers in 1781 and 1782⁵⁶ - reflecting an acceptance by the merchants that effective protection could or would not be provided. Ironically, it was this acceptance of the situation by the merchants that prompted the only response from the government to the privateering problem - the introduction of a bill in June 1782, which became law in the following month, to prohibit the ransoming of ships and their merchandise captured by the enemy.⁵⁷ Clearly, in the context of a war on two fronts, the protection of Irish trade did not rate as a priority with the British government - a situation accepted by the merchant community and one reflected particularly in the high fuel prices in the winter of 1782/3 and, to a lesser extent, in the low level of linen exports in 1780/1.

The two areas of war-time regulation of trade already alluded to, although not particularly popular, were generally accepted as inevitable products of an emergency situation, and as such, did not arouse significant discontent. However, the dispute over the terms of trade with Portugal, which appeared suddenly in late 1781, was a more contentious matter, and one on which opinion on either side of the Irish Sea clashed vigorously.

During 1780, Irish woollen goods and printed linens had been refused admission to Portugal on the grounds that the Methuen Treaty of 1703, which regulated the admission of British goods, could not be deemed to include the specified Irish products, since the freedom to export such had not been granted until 1780. The matter caused little concern until late 1781, when it erupted as a topic of public debate, attracting a degree of attention disproportionate to its economic importance. The sudden outburst of concern about exclusion from the Portuguese market

was undoubtedly a symptom of depression in the domestic woollen manufacture. The value of the goods concerned was not substantial and the loss of the trade had evidently not significantly disadvantaged Irish woollen manufacturers in 1780 and early 1781 when the manufacture was thriving. However, with the appearance of depression in the home market in late 1781, attention was focused to a disproportionate degree on the export trade and the exclusion from Portugal was seized on as a grievance. The loss of the Portugal trade was deemed to be another example of the illusory nature of free trade and Eden's more realistic view, that the

. . . check in the first struggles not of the severest kind, is rather a loss of the advantages we were beginning to gain, not what we had been possessed of . . ."58

provided little consolation. Public and parliamentary opinion in Ireland was becoming increasingly radical in late 1781 as economic conditions worsened and the suspicion that Britain might seize the opportunity to inhibit the development of Irish trade undoubtedly coloured Irish reaction to British attempts to solve the dispute. Thus the dispute had an overtly political significance and as O'Brien pointed out, the action taken would be seen to create a precedent through being "the first question between Ireland and other nations that has come before the House".⁵⁹

It is clear that British policy was to support the claims of Ireland for, as Hillsborough observed,

We can never allow that our treaty with Portugal is limited to England alone - they might as well object to Scotland as the treaty was made before the Union.⁶⁰

but attempts to obtain redress were lengthy and protracted. The growing frustration in Ireland was further heightened by the unwillingness of Eden, the Chief Secretary, to bring the matter openly before the Irish parliament.

The subject, he said, was nice, and not so proper for the deliberation of a popular assembly, as for the ministerial intervention which was going forward.⁶¹

The result was a fostering of suspicion that the British ministers were not advancing the claims of Ireland as forcefully as could be wished

for fear of prejudicing the trading position of England. Although this was refuted by Eden, the realization that

. . . we have the misfortune to be at war with all the commercial powers of Europe, and when every port from the mouth of the Baltic to the mouth of the Mediterranean is a port of the enemy, except those of Denmark and Portugal . . .⁶²

seemed to suggest that whilst there was no policy to distinguish between the interests of the two countries in favour of England, yet in an emergency situation, the sectional interests of Ireland would not be allowed to prevail, to the detriment of the 'United Kingdom'. It was not until October 1783, when the war had clearly ended, that North indicated that the British government would not object to Ireland placing retaliatory duties on Portuguese wines,⁶³ and it was 1785 before such a step was, in fact, taken.

The extent and ferocity of the Portugal dispute undoubtedly owed much to the crisis conditions in the Irish economy. Had trade not been disrupted by war, had not the linen and woollen manufactures been in decline, it is likely that the popular agitation to secure another facet of the illusory free trade would not have reached a significant pitch, and the matter would have been happily left to ministerial negotiation. The dispute clearly pointed out that the concessions of 1780 and 1782 had not left the Irish with a feeling of obligation such as might make them automatically defer to the suggestions of British ministers, and heralded the more contentious period of trading policy, from 1783.

With the ending of the war by the signing of the definitive treaties on 3rd September 1783, government speedily set in motion the legislation to regularize the trade with the new American states,⁶⁴ and by the end of the year, this was complete. However, the speedy regularization of trading conditions did not produce a substantial upturn in economic fortunes, as had been anticipated, and thus there arose demands for the introduction of a policy of protection, demands which brought the manufacturers into direct conflict with government.

The policy of the North government was clearly spelt out in a letter to Lord Lieutenant Northington in October 1783. Neither an increase of

duty on English manufactures entering Ireland, nor a reduction of duties on Irish manufactures entering Britain, would be acceptable, for

. . . after all the political and all the commercial Acquisitions that Ireland has made within these few Years, one should hope that the considerate and judicious Men in that Kingdom, w^d, if they wished that Friendship may continue to subsist between the two Countries, avoid pressing for new and fresh Advantages to the Prejudice of Great Britain.⁶⁵

The English administration evidently felt that enough concessions had been granted and, although not explicitly stated, the implication seemed clear that a halt was being called because the proposed policy of protective duties would constitute such ". . . new and fresh Advantages to the Prejudice of Great Britain."⁶⁶ English administrations seemed to have had no substantial objections to a limited type of protection in individual sectors of the economy. The sugar duties had been settled in 1781, and subsequently, with a significant advantage in duties to Ireland.⁶⁷ Additional duties on beer in 1783, which equalized the duties between the two countries,⁶⁸ and the imposition of additional duties on imported calicoes, in the same year,⁶⁹ to protect the developing cotton manufacture, had been accepted without undue adverse comment. Of course, the theme uniting such instances was the fact that in no case was there an immediate threat to British trade and manufacture, whereas the more general policy proposed in 1783 seemed likely to prohibit a substantial sector of English exports to Ireland. It would seem that it was not protection as such which the British administration deemed prejudicial, but rather the high level of duties which were proposed and the wide range of goods which would be affected. Such was considered not protection but prohibition. English policy, therefore, which had begun to develop under North, and which received greater definition under Pitt, revolved around effecting a compromise between the separateness of Ireland and the economic interests of Great Britain.⁷⁰

Northington was confident that non-importation would not command sufficient support in the Irish parliament, for a reason that was all too obvious. He wrote to North, thus:

. . . I am persuaded that the considerate men of the country are too sensible of the loss which Ireland would sustain by provoking England to a retaliation ever to suffer so indiscreet a measure to pass into law.⁷¹

and the subsequent protection debate in April 1784 confirmed that a concern for the linen trade was an overwhelming objection to the proposals. The defeat was decisive - 123 to 37.⁷²

The defeat seemed almost as inevitable as the consequences -

. . . a volley of high treason in the papers, the execution of Foster in effigy, and at last, a mob at the House of Commons threatening death and destruction to the active members.⁷³

The reaction of the government was decisive. Proclamations were issued to preserve the public peace and this was supported on the ground by nightly patrols of horse. This had the effect of immediately quieting the situation and further measures were put in hand to prosecute seditious newspapers and to examine the conduct of the magistracy, who were suspected of being accessories to the riot.⁷⁴ It had been the policy of Northington, in the early stages of the protection dispute, rather

. . . to prevent any unhappy consequences, than to suffer the riotous disposition of the people to gain strength by neglecting to suppress it on its first appearance.⁷⁵

and Rutland, his successor, appeared to be following a similar plan.

Thus on the issue of protection the government had been decisive both inside and outside parliament. The substantial defeat of the proposals in the House of Commons and the speedy suppression of the riotous public reaction were indicative of such. But the subsequent implementation of non-importation agreements and the accompanying spectacle of intimidation of manufacturers and traders was a clear indication that, although protection had been defeated, the defeat itself had not contributed to improving the lot of the urban manufacturers who were still in considerable distress. The need for a positive corollary to the defeat of protection was clear, especially if Britain was to continue to prevent Ireland from adopting a course which was economically prejudicial to the mainland.

Pitt had accepted the assessment of Orde that ". . . the internal poverty and distress of the country is the radical cause of all the discontent that prevails."⁷⁶ Thus he introduced the commercial propositions ". . . designed to increase prosperity and prevent a conflict of legislatures."⁷⁷ Undoubtedly the motivation behind the commercial propositions drew much of its strength from the prevailing economic

malaise. It was that which had produced the divisive ideas of protection and non-importation and ". . . to render both those unnecessary is the avowed object of the present system. . ." ⁷⁸ Although not debated in parliament until February 1785, the scheme had its origins back in 1784 before the signs of a general recovery had rendered protection irrelevant.

However, there was a little more to the proposals than merely the promotion of Irish trade, as Pitt confided to Rutland in October 1784:

I own to you the line to which my mind at present inclines . . . is, to give Ireland an almost unlimited communication of commercial advantages, if we can receive in return some security that her strength and riches will be our benefit, and that she will contribute from time to time in their increasing proportion to the common exigencies of the empire. And having, by holding out this, removed, I trust, every temptation to Ireland to consider her interest as separate from England, to be ready, while we discountenance wild and unconstitutional attempts, which strike at the root of all authority, to give real efficacy and popularity to government, by acceding . . . to a prudent and temperate reform of Parliament. ⁷⁹

Thus, whilst overtly a measure to reform the trading relations between the two countries, the unsatisfactory nature of which had been highlighted by the revolutionary reaction to the years of economic depression, the proposed commercial treaty was also a part of a much wider scheme calculated to bind together the interests of Ireland and Great Britain.

Again, as in the sphere of manufacture, there was no overall policy in the matter of trade, but rather, a governmental reaction to a number of issues contributory to, or produced by, the economic crisis. Government preferred to stimulate trade through the medium of grants to the individual manufactures and there was no policy of general promotion. Ironically, it was the lack of attention to the individual difficulties of the silk and woollen manufactures, which was substantially contributory to producing the demand for an extensive reform of the prevailing trading conditions, and it was a refusal by a substantial section of the manufacturing class to accept the rejection of protection which eventually convinced government of the need for a generous reform of the system. The one single factor which made such a chain reaction possible was the continuing existence of conditions of economic depression.

In 1782, the adverse fluctuations in trade and manufacture were accentuated by what was to prove the first of two harvest failures, and thus a new dimension was added to the crisis, and a new area opened for government initiatives. The harvest failures of 1782 and 1783 and the associated difficulties in obtaining alternative food supplies⁸⁰ served to highlight the deficiencies in the existing legislation, deficiencies rendered further apparent by the arbitrary initiative required from the Lord Lieutenant to meet the emergency situation. The result was Foster's Corn Law in 1784, a measure which significantly reformed the corn trade and one which profoundly caught the public imagination.

By early November 1782 it had become apparent that there had been a serious harvest failure and this, combined with export demands from Britain, and an inability to secure alternative supplies by import, to cause widespread apprehension.

The existing legislation clearly contributed substantially to exacerbate the situation. In an attempt to encourage agriculture, bounties were in operation to stimulate the export of grain.⁸¹ These were fixed at each quarter session, and once determined, could not be altered until the end of that three month period, irrespective of the price fluctuations during the quarter. Such export bounties had been fixed in October 1782, before the full extent of the harvest failure was apparent and when the price of grain permitted export on the bounty, and were not due to be reviewed again until January 1783.⁸² However, by November 1782, the Lord Lieutenant had noted

. . . a very considerable quantity [of grain] upon the Book of Customs, the Commissions for an almost unlimited quantity notorious, the price of grain risen to an alarming degree, and the temptation from the prices at Liverpool . . . still increasing . . .⁸³

Clearly such a situation could not be permitted to continue until January and the action taken was the implementation of an embargo on the export of grain.⁸⁴ Such a move, however, was considered an extreme step and one which could only be justified ". . . upon the ground of urgent necessity, to preserve the people from absolute famine . . ."⁸⁵

The objection to an embargo was that it set aside the laws of the land and was issued via the medium of a proclamation by the Lord Lieutenant, and hence was not a decision of parliament. Temple appears to have been acutely aware of the gravity with which such a decision would be viewed. He wrote to Sydney in November 1782

I do not at present see the means of avoiding an embargo for the alternative seems to lie between the clamour upon this stretch of the royal prerogative and the certain risings of the north and perhaps the whole country to take the law or the power of preventing exports into their own hands.⁸⁶

and thus on 13 November 1782, the proclamation was issued.

The reaction was generally favourable, and Edward Hardman, the Drogheda merchant, probably voiced the views of most people concerned in the corn trade, by lamenting the necessity of such a measure but accepting that government would not have so acted unless it believed the measure to be essential.⁸⁷ Certainly, there are no indications of substantial violations of the proclamation. Some seizures were made, but they involved small quantities⁸⁸ and indeed, the interception of such highlights the vigilance and strictness with which the embargo was attended at the various ports.

The embargo seems to have been essentially a reaction to the increasing export of grain and was not immediately backed up with measures to encourage import, because it was believed that such was not a practical scheme. Temple assessed the situation thus:

The uncertainty of any foreign supply, the impossibility of paying the necessary price for it, as it appeared from actual information that Hamburg corn was now dearer than Irish, exclusive of an enormous duty which could not be dispensed with, showed the impossibility of hoping to replace the quantity carried out . . .⁸⁹

He was also aware that the stocks in the country were "barely sufficient for our consumption . . ."⁹⁰ Thus it would seem that Temple readily appreciated how fine the difference could be between survival and acute distress, but having accepted that relief through import was impossible, was forced into banking on the internal supplies proving sufficient. Despite an awareness that the situation was so finely balanced, there are no indications that government had any contingency plans should

this assumption prove incorrect. The alarming rise in prices by April 1783 seemed to suggest the need for such.

However, by the spring of 1783, European grain was available for importation, but the inflexibility of the import duties rendered such impossible. Under the existing legislation,⁹¹ an additional duty of almost 17/- per quarter was levied on all imported grain not of British growth, while the price in Ireland did not exceed 53/4 per quarter. That such was an unrealistically high threshold became readily apparent, for in the spring of 1783, when grain was scarce and high priced and the consequent distress considerable, the threshold, although approached, was never quite reached.⁹²

It was the beginning of June before the government took action to encourage importation. In this month, the Privy Council authorized the port collectors to accept bonds from the importers of grain for the additional duties, on the understanding that such bonds would be subsequently cancelled by parliament, and to this was appended a system of import bounties.⁹³ Once again, the prevailing legislation had proved detrimental to the welfare of the country and had to be set aside by a Privy Council resolution. But the inadequacy of the legislation was on this occasion compounded by the failure of the government to act with sufficient speed. It had been obvious from April that relief through importation was both desirable and possible, but yet it was June before action was taken. It may well have been that the change in administration from Temple to Northington caused a delay or that government was simply reluctant to again accept the responsibility of suspending statute law, but whatever the cause, the effect was that the bonding scheme was implemented too late to achieve maximum utility. The consequent need for speedy import and the realization that the effectiveness of the measure would be impaired by the delay in its imposition, were probably the reasons for the addition of the generous import bounties.

Such weaknesses in the existing legislation, which had been exposed by the harvest failures of 1782 and 1783, were undoubtedly major factors in promoting the change in the regulations which emerged as Foster's Corn Law of 1784.⁹⁴ Foster had written to Temple prior to the parliamentary session of 1783, and following the embargo in November 1782,

that "The late necessity of dispensing with the Corn Acts shows that an alteration in them will be necessary."⁹⁵ He repeated exactly the same phrase in a letter to the new Lord Lieutenant, Northington, in August 1783⁹⁶ and presumably by that stage, the further setting aside of the corn acts by the bonding scheme had served to strengthen his views. Such breaches of the law were, of course, but the symptoms of the disorder, which Foster deemed to be

. . . an act [passed in the course of last session] . . . which prohibited the importation of foreign wheat, until the market price rose to 36s. the barrel, which act had a mischievous operation in a time of scarcity.⁹⁷

and which had proved to be ". . . the cause of all the threatened distresses of a famine."⁹⁸ The new measure proposed to permit duty free import from England where wheat was 27/- per barrel, and when at 30/- the ports would be open to foreign countries at the small duty of 3d. per barrel:

. . . every other sort of grain will be equally regulated, by which every necessity of embargoes, and the improper interference of the laws will be found totally needless.

Popular opinion favoured such a reform. A series of petitions was sent to parliament during December 1783,⁹⁹ the period at which the scheme was first introduced in parliament, seeking for more realistic threshold levels for the import duties and export bounties on grain, so that importation might be more readily facilitated. The revision of the corn laws which such petitions suggested, bore a close comparison to those embodied in Foster's Bill, but the petitioners had been motivated by the immediate concern of a growing deficiency in the stocks of grain and thus required immediate action. The bill, however, took quite some time to pass all its parliamentary stages (it was May 1784 before it became law) and thus interim action was required. Ironically, the action taken by government was that which the bill was seeking to render unnecessary - an embargo. Once again, the royal prerogative had to be invoked to prevent the export of grain on the bounty. The introduction of such, in January 1784,¹⁰⁰ at a time when the Corn Bill was going through parliament, must have helped to reinforce the support for the new regulatory measure.

Thus there was clearly no concerted, preconceived plan followed by government in tackling the emergency situation in food supply. Such

policy as had existed had been defined in the 21 and 22 Geo. III c.xxxvi, but these regulations, governing the import and export of grain, had clearly served only to exacerbate the crisis. Government action, therefore, was confined to a number of initiatives, each of which was a direct response to a new facet of emerging conditions. The crisis, therefore, by forcing the administration into the use of extra-constitutional measures, had shattered the existing government policy and paved the way for a reform of the corn laws. The emergence of Foster's Corn Law, therefore, was substantially a product of the crisis, but one which could not be effected sufficiently quickly, to ameliorate the conditions which had brought it into being.

Inevitably, the combination of the crisis in food supplies and the downturn in trade and manufacture induced substantial distress, in the relief of which the government played a significant role.

In June 1782, a bill amending the poor laws was introduced instructing corporations to apply the large sums of money which had been regularly raised for the relief of the poor.¹⁰¹ Concern about the non-application of such must be viewed as an indication of growing need among the urban and hence predominantly manufacturing population. The woollen and silk manufactures had been in decline from 1781 and by June of 1782 there was substantial unemployment among Dublin weavers.¹⁰² This concern for the growing plight of the unemployed manufacturers was further emphasized in the following year with the introduction of a bill to award £25,000 to Robert Brooke, since

. . . many industrious manufacturers in and about the city of Dublin, who were unemployed in the business of their respective trades, have been lately encouraged by the said Robert Brooke, to settle in the said town of Prosperous . . . and he is daily encouraging all such as are industrious and unemployed to settle likewise there, to the manifest advantage of your Majesty's industrious subjects.¹⁰³

The resettling of manufacturers outside the metropolis, and hence away from the temptations of idleness and combination, had been a recurring theme in 18th century manufacturing crises. The resumption of such ideas is indicative of the presence of crisis, but the peaceful acquiescence in such by the manufacturers, who in the past had strenuously opposed such a scheme, is suggestive of the growing severity of the crisis.

By the spring of 1784, it was found necessary to update the poor laws, since the funds being collected were proving insufficient to meet the increased requirements. In consequence, it was decided that Grand Jury contributions, up to £100, would be authorized to supplement corporation funds.¹⁰⁴ However, a more emphatic indication of the mounting distress was evidenced in two acts of early 1785.¹⁰⁵ These were preceded by petitions from the Foundling Hospital and Workhouse for aid from the Corporation for the Relief of the Poor in Dublin, which noted

. . . a vast Increase of Poor in this City, arising as they apprehend, from the late Scarcity and Dearness of Provisions, the Want of Employment among the Manufacturing Poor, and the disbanding of the Army and the Navy.¹⁰⁶

The combined effect of these two Acts was to make available £18,600 for the foundling hospital and the workhouse, whereas the last grant, in 1783, had amounted only to £8,000.¹⁰⁷ Although by this time, signs of a marked recovery were in evidence, with an upturn in trade and manufacture and a successful harvest in 1784, the continuing high level of urban distress, emphasized that recovery from such a severe economic setback could not be speedily effected. It was the magnitude of the distress caused which had forced government action in a sphere which was usually dominated by voluntary relief.

Thus the years of economic crisis had prompted government to considerable activity. There was no evidence of an overall economic policy except that of preventing Irish separateness from damaging British interests. This was a policy which received increasing attention after 1782 for, as the conditions of crisis deepened, so the likelihood of Ireland seeking solutions which would prove detrimental to Britain increased. The fact that government managed to avoid such an occurrence is reflective of the successful implementation of the policy. On the broader front, in dealing with the actual manifestations of the crisis in Ireland, government had mixed fortune, but was in general successful. Apart from the Portugal dispute and the protection issue, government actions were largely non-controversial. Attention was concentrated on matters which most obviously called for regulation and hence were already matters of public debate, and subsequent actions tended to strongly mirror the popularly expressed remedies. In the few instances where

government took the initiative, the issues involved, such as the national bank bill, were issues exciting no significant volume of adverse opinion. In effect, the country struggled through and the "economic severity of the season" and "other temporary circumstances"¹⁰⁸ receded and permitted recovery to take place.

The period of the depression was characterized by a general feeling of pessimism and a lack of confidence in the future. The country was in a state of economic depression, and the government was unable to do much to help. The depression was caused by a combination of factors, including a severe drought, a lack of investment, and a general feeling of pessimism. The depression was not helped by the fact that the government was unable to do much to help. The depression was not helped by the fact that the government was unable to do much to help.

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CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

The final fifteen years of the 18th century in Ireland, characterised seemingly for ever in the popular mind in the person of Grattan, categorised as a period of unrivalled prosperity, and fondly venerated as the supreme example of what an independent Ireland could achieve, were significantly shaped by the years of depression which immediately preceded them. The economic crisis of the early 1780s had been severe, long lasting and wide ranging, and its legacy was evident in the changes which it wrought in the nature of the Irish economy, in the clearer emergence of a strong sense of regional identity in the north-east of the country, and in the continued search by Britain for a satisfactory basis for Anglo-Irish relations.

The speed and strength of the recovery following the economic crisis was particularly marked. Rising values of exports and imports, and a regular, large surplus in the balance of trade, reflected the strong upturn in Irish trade and manufacture and the healthy state of consumer spending power. Exports, which in 1782/3 had been valued at £2,935,708, rose in each successive following year, apart from 1788/9, reaching £5,387,760 in 1791/2, whilst the value of imports at £3,123,031 in 1780/1, the last year of prosperity before the onset of depression, had been exceeded by 1785/6, and by 1791/2 had risen to £4,338,012. But within this framework of a rapidly expanding economy were changes in direction and shifts in emphasis which had originated in, or had been foreshadowed by, the crisis.

The linen trade remained the corner-stone of the economy and the remarkable expansion in the export of plain cloth, rising in each successive year apart from 1788/9, from the depressed state of 16,039,705 yards in 1780/1 to a peak of 46,705,319 yards in 1795/6, was the basis of the prosperity of these years. But the other traditional corner-stone of the economy, the provisions trade, did not experience the same recovery with, in particular, the trade in beef failing to recapture its peace-time markets. Growing competition after the war from north America for the

colonial markets in the West Indies, in which Ireland had enjoyed a virtual monopoly, was reflected in a marked drop in exports. In 1775/6, the last year before the imposition of the war-time embargo on export, Ireland had exported 203,685 barrels of beef, but in the ten years after the peace, averaged only 130,821 barrels, and never exceeded 159,000 barrels. This decline in demand had been foreshadowed in three successive poor years at the major livestock fair at Ballinasloe from 1782 to 1784. War-time demand had peaked in 1781 and, apart from a brief flurry in 1782/3, the export trade in beef never again approached its former levels. Indeed, a major crisis was averted only by increasing demand from Britain at the time when colonial markets were in decline. This shift in emphasis was significant in the butter trade also. Butter was much less dependent on the colonial market and, as a result, did not suffer the same decline in the volume of its exports as beef, but it did undergo a similar change in direction. Furthermore, its orientation towards Britain was increased as European demand declined in response to improvements in dairying on the continent.¹

Thus, following the crisis, there was a marked shift from the dependence on the transatlantic markets in favour of Britain, and, too, there was a distinct decline in the predominance of the pastoral economy as the importance of beef was reduced. This move away from pasture was given added impetus by the reform in the grain trade in 1784, which made arable farming more attractive. Foster's Corn Law,² following hard on two successive bad harvests, and undoubtedly a response to the food supply problems which were such a feature of the economic crisis, was designed to ensure a regular supply of corn, and by offering more attractive export bounties than had hitherto been available, provided a strong incentive for grain production. Its success can clearly be seen in the fact that exports of barley, oats and wheat, which in 1781/2, the fiscal year following the last abundant harvest before the onset of the crisis, had been 7,654, 173,341 and 87,803 barrels respectively, had by 1788/9, a year of comparable abundance, risen to 33,849, 332,959 and 218,737 barrels respectively. In the ten years 1783/4 to 1792/3, wheat qualified for the export bounty in eight out of the ten years, and barley and oats in seven.³ The expansion in the British market for grain, and the rise in Irish population which induced a more intensive use of land, contributed significantly to this upsurge in arable farming, but the reform in the grain trade,

born out of the sufferings of the early 1780s, provided the opportunity for the profitable exploitation of these trends.

In manufacture, too, certain shifts in emphasis were apparent, for while output in brewing and distilling recovered strongly, the emergent cotton manufacture increased gradually, and glass and worsted production expanded to fill the demands of the growing home market, there was no such sustained recovery for silk production and the manufacture of old drapery was in the terminal stages of decline. Silk production never again reached the heights of 1780/1, in which £164,260 worth of organzine and raw silk were imported.⁴ Though it rallied briefly on several occasions in the late 1780s and early 1790s, the value of imported raw material never exceeded £114,000⁵ and, faced with competition from lower priced English silks and from the fashionable products of the expanding domestic cotton manufacture, it was never again the force which it had been in the early 1780s. For old drapery, there was to be no recovery at all. The upturn associated with the non-importation agreements was short-lived and proved to be its final rally, as imports, which had been restricted to 156,772 yards in 1784/5, more than doubled in 1785/6 and rose in each succeeding year in the second half of the 1780s and 1790s, passing the million yard mark in 1795/6. After the crisis of the early 1780s, the future of the Irish woollen manufacture was more bound up with the production of worsted, although even in this branch, output fell as sheep farming declined in importance. Exports of yarn, at 100,563 stones in 1783/4, the height of the crisis, fell gradually during the second half of the 1780s, averaging 46,857 stones in the ten years after 1784/5, and falling as low as 15,062 stones in 1786/7.

The effect of the economic crisis was apparent also in the clearer emergence of a separate regional identity in the north-east of the country, based essentially on its increasing share in the prosperity emanating from the remarkable expansion in the linen trade in the second half of the 1780s and first half of the 1790s, and exemplified in the growth of Belfast as a major industrial centre with its points of contact more in the great industrial cities of Britain than in Dublin.

It had been the disastrous years of 1781 and 1782 for the linen trade which had brought to the surface the smouldering resentment which the Ulster drapers harboured against the predominant position of Dublin in the linen trade, and which had prompted them to establish structures through which they might organise and finance their trade independently of the capital. The opening of the white linen halls in Belfast and Newry in 1784 were the most celebrated manifestations of this new regional assertiveness, but of greater significance were the consequential benefits, notably improvements in the organization of shipping and the establishment of financial institutions. The establishment of a committee in Belfast in May 1784 to supervise the London trade, resulting from the concern of the linen hall committee to better arrange shipping,⁶ and the opening of a brokerage firm in Newry in June to receive and ship linens for Britain and America,⁷ probably born out of the prevalent rivalry between the two towns, introduced a greater co-ordination into the linen trade in Ulster, which probably increased the attractiveness of the northern ports to merchants, who prized punctuality and dependability in shipping. Certainly, the long delays, and loss of time occasioned by the previous dependence on Dublin, had been important factors in the campaign for the establishment of northern halls. The sharp increase in exports of linen from Belfast in 1784/5 may well have reflected the initial effect of this improved organization, since much of the linen involved would have been shipped before the new Belfast hall had opened.⁸ But of even greater significance was the establishment of banking facilities, which, in the opinion of one historian, ". . . was really of more help than the Linen hall to the northern bleachers in building up a direct export trade to their customers."⁹ The provision of a discount office had been envisaged as part of the original scheme for the Belfast hall, but had not come to fruition by the time sales began. However, the severe pressure placed on the traditional discounting facilities by the upsurge in sales occasioned by the new hall emphasized its necessity and in May 1785 a discount company was formed.¹⁰ The success of the company and the rapid expansion of trade in the mid-1780s led naturally to the opening of a bank in 1787,¹¹ and indeed not only one, for interest in forming a rival institution emerged within a few months and became a reality in January 1789.¹² The creation of this new regional organizational and financial infrastructure

provided the framework for the remarkable expansion of Belfast and development of its hinterland in the second half of the 1780s and early 1790s. The tendency of the northern population to be drawn increasingly into manufacturing, to the detriment of agriculture, the effects of which had been so evident following the harvest failures in 1782 and 1783, was accentuated and the rapid growth of the linen trade created a cash-based economy in the hinterland of Belfast. The town's increasing share in the linen trade - in 1783, exports of linen from Belfast accounted for less than 20% of the total exports, in the following year this jumped to above 25% and by 1792 the town was exporting about one-third of the country's linen - was the basis of its growing importance, which was reflected also in a rapidly developing industrial sector encompassing flour milling, glass production and, above all, cotton manufacture, and in a swelling population. By 1800, the population was in excess of 30,000, having stood at about 13,000 in 1770, and the greater part of this growth had occurred from the mid-1780s.¹³ In comparison with the growth in British industrial centres, such development may not have been unduly remarkable, but in the Irish context it was little short of phenomenal.

The legacy of the crisis was apparent, too, in the continuance of the search by the British government for a satisfactory basis for Anglo-Irish relations. The growing radicalism in Irish politics in the early 1780s, much of the support for which had been engendered by the economic malaise, cast doubts on the likelihood of the prevailing arrangements ensuring a stable relationship between the two countries, and prompted Pitt towards the commercial arrangements proposals in 1785, and, ultimately, towards the Union.

The growing economic crisis had provided much of the motive force for legislative independence in 1782, and the continued political unrest in 1782-4 owed a great deal to the deepening depression in these years. The fear, paranoia almost, that Britain might seize any available opportunity to inhibit the development of Irish trade and manufacture if such should threaten to conflict with British interests, which was clearly evident in the agitation leading to the Renunciation Act in 1783 and in the subsequent campaign for parliamentary reform, proceeded from a sense

of economic insecurity which was undoubtedly a response to the economic crisis. The strong links between the increasing radicalism in Irish politics and the growing concern about the economy took on a new and, to English eyes, more sinister dimension with the emergence of demands for protective duties against the import of British manufactured goods in late 1783. Protection, of course, had been demanded before, notably in the late 1770s, but its revival in the wake of legislative independence constituted a much more serious threat. To date, the growing Irish political assertiveness, although designed to reduce English influence in Ireland, had not been significantly to the detriment of Britain, but the appearance of the protection campaign, in English eyes, demands for prohibition, threatened directly British interests. The demands for protection, and more especially the re-emergence of a non-importation campaign directed against British goods, harkened back to the late 1770s, and served to convince the new prime minister, Pitt, that the concessions made to Ireland since then, notably free trade and constitutional independence, had not created a suitable foundation for a new, amicable relationship between the two countries. It was, therefore, largely the reaction to the growing economic crisis, albeit often expressed in political terms, which provided the motivation for Pitt's commercial arrangements in 1785, which were designed not merely to increase prosperity, but also to prevent conflict between the legislatures.¹⁴ The proposals to rationalize the duties imposed by each country, where, in the case of a difference the high duty would be reduced to the level of the lower - in effect, an arrangement for a free interchange of goods between the two countries - sparked off a virulent campaign against the proposals in Britain. Fears expressed in Britain that their market would be flooded with cheaper Irish goods, were to some extent a reaction to the speed and strength of the Irish recovery - a recovery which Irishmen attributed to the enlightened policies of the new Irish parliament. But in reality, the policies of Grattan's Parliament were, to a large extent, neither novel nor part of a grand design conceived by the new independent legislature. Government support for manufacture, for tillage, for the regulation of the coal trade or the financing of canal building, was not new. From the early years of the 18th century, parliamentary support for economic development had been evident - in the creation of the Linen Board in 1711, in the provision of

corn bounties in 1758, in the financing of the Newry canal¹⁵ - whilst in the years after 1782, much of the new government's legislation was a direct response to the economic crisis rather than a far-sighted policy for the regulation of trade and manufacture. Foster's Corn Law was a reaction to the effects of two successive years of bad harvests in 1782 and 1783, the frequent regulation of the coal trade owed much to the mounting level of urban distress, whilst the generous support for the cotton manufacture stemmed, at least in part, from the realization that this industry was growing whilst the others were in decline. Thus both in the motivation behind the proposed commercial arrangements and in the reaction to them, there was a strong legacy of the economic crisis which had preceded them.

The failure of the commercial arrangements to come to fruition, however, did not mark the end of British ambitions to secure harmony between British and Irish interests, for the same issues surfaced again in the late 1790s, as weaknesses began to appear in the facade of Irish prosperity. Once again, Pitt was the prime minister, but on this occasion he was successful, as the economic dimension in the Act of Union brought into effect that which had proved unacceptable in 1785.

NOTES

1. Year dates styled 1782/3 refer to the Irish fiscal year ending 25 March.

Year dates styled 1782-3 refer to the calendar year.

2. All imports and exports statistics, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from P.R.O. CUST. 15.

3. All assize of bread statistics are quoted in lbs. oz. drms.

4. Exchange quotations are, on occasions, styled thus:

8 7/8%

i.e. eight and seven eighths per cent.

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11. F.D.J. 21-23 Feb. 1782.
12. See Ch. 8.
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16. McDowell op. cit. p. 74.
17. Ibid. p. 71.
18. Ibid. p. 75.
19. Ibid. p. 84.
20. F.D.J. 24-26 July 1783.
21. Ibid. 15-17 Ap. 1784.
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9. S.P.I. SP.62/468. March 1780.
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11. Ibid. John Andrews, Comber to Geo. Miller & Co., 8 June 1780.
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15. Out letter book of Edward Hardman. T.C.D..Ms,4812. Edward Hardman, Drogheda to James Herdman, 5 Nov. 1780.
16. Ibid. Hardman to Palliser MacDonnell, 18 Dec. 1780.
17. Ibid. Hardman, Drogheda to Bracks and Murray, 1 Feb. 1781.
18. J. Andrews letter book. John Andrews, Comber to Isaac Woodvile, 7 Sept. 1780; John Andrews, Comber to Ben Lumley, 16 Oct. 1780.
19. Cullen Anglo-Irish Trade p. 182.
20. F.D.J. 1-3 Aug. 1780.
21. Out letter book of Blake. N.L.I. Ms.9944. Blake to Oliver Plunkett, Brussels, 14 Oct. 1780.
22. Commons' jn. Ire. vol. x, p. 121.
23. Ibid. vol. x app. cxi.

24. Ibid. vol. x p. 200.
25. S.P.I. SP.63/468, March 1780.
26. See above.
27. See Ch. 5.
28. B.N.L. 6-10 July 1781.
29. See Ch. 5.
30. Massereene/Foster papers. P.R.O.N.I. D.562/5333. Memorial of Linen Merchants, 30 Aug. 1781.
31. F.D.J. 20-22 Sept. 1781.
32. Ibid. 16-18 Oct. 1781.
33. Blake letter book. Letter from Blake, 20 Dec. 1781.
34. P. Mackesey The War for America 1775-83 (London 1964) p. 416.
35. B.N.L. 4-8 Jan. 1782.
36. Hardman letter book. Hardman to Vaughan Hamilton & Co., 17 Feb. 1782.
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40. Out letter book of J. Moore. P.R.O.N.I. D.2309/4/4. John Moore to Arthur Annesley, London, 20 Oct. 1781.
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42. Ibid. 11-14 Aug. 1781.
43. Ibid. 2-4 Oct. 1781.
44. See Chs. 7 and 8.
45. See Ch. 7.
46. Commons' jn. Ire. vol. x pp. 264-5.
47. Ibid.
48. See Ch. 8.
49. Parl. reg. Ire. vol. 1 p. 292.
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55. See Ch. 5.
56. J.B. Holroyd 1st Earl of Sheffield Observations on the Manufacturers, Trade and present State of Ireland (3rd ed. London 1785) p. 69.
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65. Ibid. 26-28 Sept. 1782.
66. See Chs. 7 and 8.
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69. H.O.P.I. HO.100/2.
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79. Ibid.
80. F.D.J. 28 Sept. - 1 Oct. 1782.
81. Ibid. 19-22 Oct. 1782.
82. Ibid. 14-16 Nov. 1782.
83. Cork Public Museum. Committee of Merchants Mss. Inspection records of casks and firkins.
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112. F.J. 8-11 Feb. 1783.
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131. Blake letter book. Blake to J.E. Browne, London, 10 Feb. 1783.
132. F.D.J. 11-13 Feb. 1783.

133. Ibid. 8-11 Feb. 1783.
134. F.J. 27 Feb. - 1 Mar. 1783.
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136. F.D.J. 26-29 Ap. 1783.
137. F.J. 24-26 June 1783.
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140. Blake letter book. Blake to Roger Palmer, 21 Ap. 1783.
141. Ibid. Blake to Jeremy French, 1 May 1783.
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47. See Ch. 4.
48. F.J. 16-18 Mar. 1784.
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50. Ibid. 3-5 Feb. 1784.
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105. F.D.J. 7-10 Aug. 1784.
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110. F.J. 16-18 Nov. 1784.
111. F.D.J. 23-25 Nov. 1784.
112. F.J. 21-24 June 1784.
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43. F.D.J. 12-15 June 1784.
44. F.J. 7-9 Dec. 1784.
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46. F.J. 30 Aug. - 1 Sept. 1785.

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10. F.J. 13-15 Feb. 1783.
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12. F.J. 12-15 July 1783.
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3. Ibid. Harcourt to Thos. MacDonnell, 16 Dec. 1783.
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21. Ibid. 21-24 Dec. 1782.

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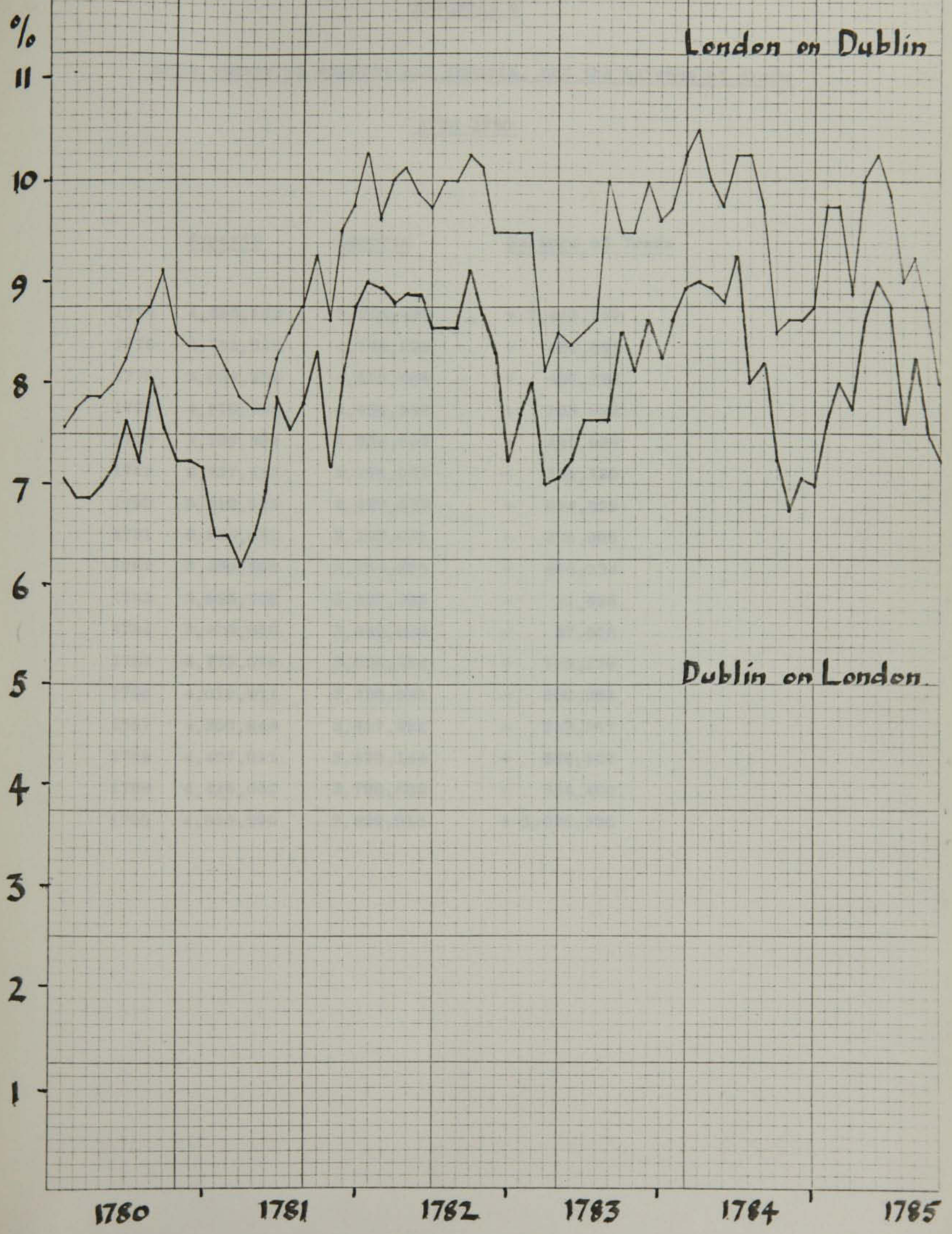
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APPENDIX 1

MONTHLY EXCHANGE RATES, 1780-85



APPENDIX 2Total values of exports and imports, and the balance of trade1774-1790

	<u>Exports</u>	<u>Imports</u>	<u>Balance of Trade</u>
1774	4,665,162	3,216,405	+ 1,448,757
1775	4,751,333	4,143,296	+ 608,037
1776	5,064,332	4,656,608	+ 407,724
1777	4,570,765	4,436,943	+ 133,822
1778	3,262,801	2,836,803	+ 425,999
1779	2,727,115	2,195,935	+ 531,180
1780	3,012,179	2,127,579	+ 884,599
1781	2,896,035	3,123,031	- 226,996
1782	3,400,599	2,994,265	+ 406,334
1783	2,935,708	3,007,236	- 71,528
1784	3,400,050	3,343,032	+ 57,018
1785	3,779,570	3,056,394	+ 723,176
1786	4,010,911	3,430,628	+ 580,283
1787	4,300,648	3,417,281	+ 883,367
1788	4,407,011	3,870,144	+ 536,867
1789	4,415,002	3,790,602	+ 354,400
1790	4,855,299	3,829,914	+ 1,025,385

APPENDIX 3Exports of Plain Linen Cloth 1774-1790 (yards)¹

1774	16,916,674
1775	20,205,087
1776	20,502,587
1777	19,714,638
1778	21,945,729
1779	18,836,042
1780	18,746,902
1781	14,947,265
1782	24,970,303
1783	16,039,705
1784	24,961,898
1785	26,677,647
1786	28,168,666
1787	30,728,728
1788	35,487,691
1789	29,344,633
1790	37,322,125

¹P.R.O. London. CUST. 15.

APPENDIX 4Exports of Beef 1774-1790¹ (barrels)

1774	187,495
1775	102,453
1776	203,685
1777	168,579
1778	190,696
1779	138,918
1780	187,755
1781	190,502
1782	155,582
1783	212,018
1784	126,531
1785	133,650
1786	158,388
1787	153,649
1788	130,857
1789	120,192
1790	126,993

¹P.R.O. London. CUST. 15.

APPENDIX 5Exports of Pork 1774-1790¹ (barrels)

1774	52,329
1775	50,368
1776	72,715
1777	72,931
1778	77,612
1779	70,066
1780	96,554
1781	106,283
1782	84,910
1783	112,296
1784	52,912
1785	58,455
1786	74,761
1787	101,859
1788	111,046
1789	93,336
1790	100,266

¹P.R.O. London. CUST. 15.

APPENDIX 6Exports of Butter 1774-1790 (cwts.)¹

1774	270,096
1775	264,140
1776	272,411
1777	264,181
1778	258,145
1779	227,830
1780	244,185
1781	264,210
1782	234,058
1783	249,485
1784	257,417
1785	282,802
1786	243,007
1787	330,866
1788	341,599
1789	314,876
1790	300,669

¹P.R.O. London. CUST. 15

APPENDIX 7Import of Old and New Drapery 1778-1790 (yards)¹

	<u>Old</u>	<u>New</u>
1778	378,077	741,427
1779	176,196	270,839
1780	64,346	159,428
1781	326,578	433,198
1782	362,830	547,342
1783	371,871	420,415
1784	351,848	323,217
1785	156,772	140,620
1786	315,097	251,395
1787	488,452	380,708
1788	650,717	560,748
1789	647,628	518,150
1790	653,899	504,551

¹P.R.O. London. CUST. 15

APPENDIX 8Imports of raw, thrown and manufactured silk 1778-1790 (lbs.)¹

	<u>Raw</u>	<u>Thrown</u>	<u>Manufactured</u>
1778	51,873	46,779	27,223
1779	29,633	22,292	15,794
1780	28,557	41,853	10,655
1781	68,609	76,931	22,471
1782	50,694	61,396	25,658
1783	33,782	52,981	19,749
1784	34,274	43,851	17,302
1785	33,194	48,198	11,389
1786	62,464	47,911	12,999
1787	42,435	57,253	13,244
1788	25,247	30,682	13,776
1789	42,315	56,753	8,565
1790	32,676	50,763	7,455

¹P.R.O. London. CUST. 15.

APPENDIX 9Imports of Cotton Wool (cwts.) and Yarn (lbs.)¹1780-1790

	<u>Wool</u>	<u>Yarn</u>
1780	706	573
1781	4,165	6,775
1782	993	1,925
1783	4,550	6,516
1784	4,287	3,340
1785	5,223	4,712
1786	7,260	22,188
1787	8,977	37,945
1788	10,728	45,015
1789	13,565	83,814
1790	11,911	77,687

¹P.R.O. London. CUST. 15.

APPENDIX 10Output of ale, small beer and spirits made in Ireland1781-1786¹

	<u>Spirits</u> <u>(gals.)</u>	<u>Small beer</u> <u>(barrels)</u>	<u>Ale</u> <u>(barrels)</u>
1781	1,787,298	170,634	485,826
1782	2,076,855	189,601	503,492
1783	2,771,523	188,122	452,098
1784	1,436,502	160,195	388,027
1785	1,450,415	152,446	361,903
1786	1,849,449	164,364	383,400

¹Journals of Irish House of Commons, Vol. XVI. Appendix ccclxxvii

APPENDIX 11

Monthly quotations for the assize of bread of the 6d. household loaf1781-1785 (lbs. ozs. drms.)

	<u>Belfast</u> ¹	<u>Dublin</u> ²	<u>Cork</u> ³
1781 J.	4.14.6	4.10.2	3. 6.3.
F.	4.11.3	4. 7.6	5. 4.6
M.		4. 8.3	5. 4.6
A.		4. 7.6	5. 5.4
M.	5. 3.1	4. 9.0	4.12.6
J.	4.14.6	4. 9.5	4.13.4
J.	5. 2.3	4. 9.5	4.15.4
A.	5. 2.3	4.11.0	4.13.3
S.	5.10.6	4.11.0	5. 0.7
O.		4. 9.5	5.11.6
N.	5.10.6	4.11.0	5. 6.3
D.	5. 4.6	4.11.0	4.12.6
1782 J.		4.12.2	
F.		4.14.4	4.12.0
M.		5. 0.0	5. 0.1
A.		4.15.1	5. 0.1
M.		4. 6.4	5. 1.5
J.	4.13.3	3.12.3	4. 6.0
J.		3.11.1	4. 5.0
A.		3.10.3	4. 5.4
S.	4. 1.7	3.12.0.	4.11.3
O.	4. 0.4	3.12.7	4. 8.7
N.	4. 1.3	3.11.1	4. 9.4
D.	4. 1.7	3. 7.2	4. 7.6

	<u>Belfast</u>	<u>Dublin</u>	<u>Cork</u>
1783	J. 4. 1.3	3. 8.0	4. 2.7
	F. 3.14.5	3. 9.4	4. 4.0
	M. 3.14.5	3.11.1	4. 5.0
	A. 3.14.5	3.11.1	4.10.0
	M. 3.14.5	3. 9.4	
	J. 3.11.6	3. 5.6	4. 5.4
	J. 3. 8.5	3. 3.4	
	A. 3.13.3	3. 5.6	4. 4.0
	S. 4. 1.7	4. 4.6	
	O. 4. 5.4	3.12.3	
	N. 4. 5.4	3.10.5	
	D. 4. 5.4	4. 2.2	4. 8.7
1784	J. 4. 0.4	4. 1.5	4. 8.2
	F.	3.12.3	4. 7.6
	M. 4. 0.4	3. 9.7	4. 8.2
	A.	3.10.5	
	M. 4. 5.0	3.12.0	4. 0.7
	J. 4. 5.0	3. 8.6	3.13.6
	J.	3.10.5	3.12.7
	A.	3.10.2	3.12.4
	S.	3. 8.3	4.10.6
	O. 4. 8.2	3.13.6	4.15.4
	N. 4. 5.0	4. 3.1	5.15.4
	D. 4. 5.0	4. 4.6	5. 1.5
1785	J. 4. 5. 0	4. 3.5	
	F.	4. 9.0	
	M.	4. 8.3	5. 4.0
	A. 4. 6.4	4. 9.0	
	M. 4. 7.6	4.12.2	5. 3.1
	J. 4. 7.6	4.13.0	5.10.6
	J. 4. 7.6	4. 9.5	5. 7.2
	A. 4. 7.6	4. 3.5	6. 2.7
	S. 4. 6.0	4. 4.2	5.13.5
	O.	4. 3.5	5.10.5
	N.	4.10.3	5.15.5
	D.	4. 9.0	

¹Belfast Newsletter²Faulkner's Dublin Journal³Cork Evening Post

APPENDIX 12

Monthly quotations of wheat prices 1781-1785 (s.d. per barrel)

	<u>Belfast</u> ¹	<u>Dublin</u> ²	<u>Kilkenny</u> ³	<u>Cork</u> ⁴
1781	J.	22. 3	20. 5	21
	F.	23	23. 4	21. 3
	M.	23. 6	23. 4	21. 6
	A.	24. 9	23. 9	21. 3
	M.	23. 9	23. 9	24
	J.	23. 9	23. 4	24. 3
	J.	23. 3	23. 6½	23. 6
	A.	21. 9	22. 6	24. 6
	S.	23	21. 8	23. 4½
	O.	21. 9	21. 8	23. 4½
	N.	22. 5	22. 1	20. 9
	D.	22. 6	22. 1	
1782	J.	22. 3	22. 1	24. 3
	F.	22	19. 2	24. 9
	M.	22. 3	21. 8	23. 3
	A.	23. 9	21. 8	23. 6
	M.	26. 6	21. 8	22. 7½
	J.	31. 3	28. 9	27. 9
	J.	31. 6	28. 9	28
	A.	30. 6	28. 9	27
	S.	30	28. 9	25. 9
	O.	27. 3	24. 7	26
	N.	27. 9	27. 6	25. 8
	D.	29	27. 6	
1783	J.	27. 9	27. 6	29
	F.	27. 3	24. 2	28. 4½
	M.	25. 6	24. 2	28
	A.	31	24. 2	25. 6
	M.	30. 3	25	
	J.	33. 3	33. 4	28. 4½
	J.	36. 6	33. 4	
	A.	34. 3	33. 4	28. 4½
	S.	23. 3	25.10	27
	O.	25. 9	25.10	
	N.	27. 6	25.10	
	D.	28. 6½	25	29

	<u>Belfast</u>	<u>Dublin</u>	<u>Kilkenny</u>	<u>Cork</u>
1784 J.	28. 9	27. 3	25.10	25. 7½
F.	28. 1½	29. 3	26. 8	26
M.	40.10	29	28. 4	26. 1½
A.	30	30. 9	28. 4	
M.	31. 3	30. 6	28. 4	29. 9
J.	28. 4	30. 6	30. 1	31. 3
J.	25	29. 6	30. 1	31
A.	25	31. 6	30. 1	32. 4
S.	25. 7½	29. 9	30. 1	25. 6
O.	24. 4½	24. 6	26. 8	23. 6
N.	24. 0¾	23. 9	22. 6	18. 4½
D.	26. 8	22. 3	22. 6	22. 9
1785 J.	23. 5¼	22. 6	20.10	23. 9
F.	20. 9¾	22	18. 4	22. 9
M.	25. 7½	22. 3	32. 6	19. 3
A.	25.11¼	27. 9	20.10	21. 6
M.	25. 3¾	22. 6	19. 2	22. 3
J.	25	21. 6	19. 2	18. 6
J.	22.11	21. 3	20	18. 9
A.	23. 1½	23	20	19. 3
S.	23. 4	24. 6	20	18. 9
O.	23. 6½	22. 9	20	21. 2½
N.	23. 1½	23. 3	19. 2	19
D.	23. 1½	23	19. 2	

¹Belfast Newsletter

²Faulkner's Dublin Journal

³Finn's Leinster Journal

⁴Cork Evening Post

APPENDIX 13

Monthly quotations of oatmeal prices 1781-1785 (s.d. per barrel)

	<u>Londerry</u> ¹	<u>Belfast</u> ²	<u>Dublin</u> ³	<u>Kilkenny</u> ⁴
1781 J.			8. 9	8
F.			9. 0½	8
M.			9. 3	8. 9
A.			9. 6	8. 3
M.				8. 9
J.			9	8. 2
J.			9. 3	8.10
A.			9	8.10
S.			9.3	
O.			9	8. 3
N.			8. 3	7. 9
D.			9	7. 7
1782 J.			8. 3	7. 9
F.			7. 6	6. 6
M.			7. 9	8
A.			7	7.10
M.			10	8. 9
J.			11	9. 9
J.			10. 6	9. 4½
A.			10	9. 3
S.			11. 6	8. 9
O.	14. 5½		12	9. 4½
N.			13	9. 9
D.	14. 5½		14. 6	13
1783 J.	13. 6½		13. 6	13. 6
F.	15. 4		13. 3	13
M.	16. 3½		13. 9	13. 4
A.	17. 5½		14. 6	13
M.	18. 8		15. 3	14
J.	21. 5½		19	16. 6
J.	23. 4		20	17
A.	19. 7		18. 9	17. 9
S.	14		25	17. 9
O.	12. 6½		11. 9	13. 3
N.	15. 9½	13.	11	9. 6
D.	15. 9½	13. 4	11. 6	9. 9

	<u>Londonderry</u>	<u>Belfast</u>	<u>Dublin</u>	<u>Kilkenny</u>
1784 J.		12. 8	12	9. 9
F.	17. 11 $\frac{1}{2}$	13. 8	13. 6	11
M.	17. 9 $\frac{1}{2}$	15. 10	13. 9	11
A.		14. 6	13. 6	11
M.	17. 3	15. 4	13. 9	11
J.	17. 9 $\frac{1}{2}$	14	13. 9	13. 6
J.	15. 4 $\frac{1}{2}$	11. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$	12. 9	12. 6
A.	14. 5 $\frac{1}{2}$	11. 9	12. 9	12. 3
S.	14	11. 9	12	11
O.	11. 6 $\frac{1}{2}$	9. 10	11	11. 3
N.		9. 10 $\frac{1}{2}$	10. 3	10. 6
D.	11. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$	10. 11	10. 6	10. 6
1785 J.	10. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$	9. 9	13. 6	10. 6
F.	10. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$	9. 5	12. 6	9. 9
M.	10. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$	9. 1	10	9. 9
A.		8. 7	9. 9	9. 9
M.		8. 9 $\frac{1}{2}$	7. 6	10. 9
J.	9. 9 $\frac{1}{2}$	8. 2	8. 9	8. 6
J.	10. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$	8. 5	7. 9	8. 6
A.	9. 9 $\frac{1}{2}$	8. 11	10. 3	8. 3
S.	9. 9 $\frac{1}{2}$	10. 5	10. 3	9. 3
O.		9. 3	10. 6	9. 3
N.	8. 9 $\frac{1}{2}$	9. 1 $\frac{1}{2}$	11. 3	9. 9
D.		9. 3	10. 9	9. 9

¹Derry Journal

²Belfast Newsletter

³Faulkner's Dublin Journal

⁴Finn's Leinster Journal

APPENDIX 14

Monthly quotations of potato prices 1781-1785 (pence per cwt.)

	<u>Londonderry</u> ¹	<u>Dublin</u> ²	<u>Cork</u> ²
1781 J.			18½
F.			18½
M.			18½
A.			24
M.			24
J.			24
J.			
A.			29½
S.			26½
O.			18½
N.			21
D.			17½
1782 J.			14½
F.			14½
M.			14½
A.			14½
M.			14½
J.			14½
J.			14½
A.			
S.			26½
O.	26		26½
N.			33½
D.	30		
1783 J.	26	42	34½
F.		48	34½
M.	44	49	34½
A.	44	49	33½
M.	48	50	
J.	58	50	42½
J.	68		
A.	40		50½
S.	36		58½
O.	28		
N.	44		
D.	44		23

	<u>Londonderry</u>	<u>Dublin</u>	<u>Cork</u>
1784 J.			22½
F.	50	48	24
M.	44	48	32
A.		36	
M.	50		39
J.	52		32
J.	36		28
A.	44		25½
S.	32		32
O.	18		20
N.			20
D.	22		20
1785 J.	26		23
F.	22		27
M.	22	29	24
A.		34	18½
M.			16
J.	22		9½
J.	38		11½
A.	28		13½
S.	20		26½
O.			24
N.	20		24
D.			

¹Derry Journal

²Faulkner's Dublin Journal

³Cork Evening Post

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Addenda

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