

IRELAND, 1698-1829

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1. Coverage

Ireland over the period 1698-1829. Ireland and Britain entered a Customs union after the creation of the United Kingdom in 1801 a process only completed in 1826. As Peter Solar has noted, “whatever its economic advantages or disadvantages, it was a disaster for historians” (Solar, 277), removing one of the key long-run series. Detailed agricultural statistics survive from 1847 onwards, while good figures for the linen trade are also available from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

2. Documents

The original data is available in a continuous series of 140 import and export ledgers detailing incoming and out going trade by out-port (Irish) and foreign countries incl. England, Scotland, East Country, France, United Provinces, Spain & Portugal, North American Plantations. These ledgers are found in the UK National Archives in London and have reference no. CUST15/1-140. We are hoping to digitise and digitally curate selected volumes covering the whole period. Unlike for England and Scotland, there are very few surviving Irish port books. There was no synthetic document produced at that time, but it should be possible to recreate the balance of trade from the CUST15 series. An attempt to do this has been made by Truxes for the period up to 1783.

3. Institutional setting

The Irish Revenue Commissioners collected and recorded this data, which was initially stored in Dublin and then transferred to London following the Customs Union of the 1820s. Various contemporary commentators published selections extracted from this material

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during the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but it mostly remained unpublished in the original ledgers.

As far as we understand the data were based on declarations at the port. These were then subject to checking by customs officers, although it is impossible to know how rigorous/accurate these 'checks' really were. The available Irish statistics like the Scottish and English/British data should be regarded as a good representation of the flow of goods in and out of Irish ports.

4. Motivation

As with the English records, the primary consideration lying behind the collection of this data was to understand the outflow/inflow of goods for revenue purposes. Accurate figures were necessary for this purpose, and the beginning date of the CUST15 series correlates with the beginning of the impressive CUST1 series of Irish revenue minutes, indicating that both exercises were linked to an increasingly professionalised bureaucracy (Walsh, 2013). The secondary purpose behind the collection of these statistics was to ascertain a better picture of the balance of trade as a measure of the wealth of the nation.

Polemical economic commentators who sought to bemoan the state of the Irish economy, on occasion used, used this data in their writings. See for example Arthur Dobbs, *An Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland* (Dublin, 1729)

5. Methods

Much has been made in some of the historical literature about the detrimental impact of smuggling on Irish eighteenth-century trade but the Louis Cullen's research, especially in French archives, has suggested that accounts based on contemporary comment (printed or otherwise) need to be treated with caution. Instead we would argue that like the British case the increasing administrative capacity of the Irish state over time more than compensates for the losses incurred by smuggling or under declaration of goods.

In the absence of surviving port books it is impossible to completely cross-check the data, and in any case this would probably be very labour intensive and would yield little results. Some cross-checking is possible, especially with regard to the aggregate figures. Here we have been able to use other contemporary accounts, but this can only be done in a partial unsystematic way.

Finally the prices used to measure value do not change sufficiently over time to be used as an accurate measure of price movements.

6. Information

Each ledger contains a line-by-line account of the commodity level bilateral trade between Ireland and each of its trading partners. There are separate columns for each customs out-port recording the out/inflow of each individual commodity. Each commodity is recorded in terms of its value and its quantity. Official prices were listed in Irish pounds [£1 (Irish) = 12/13 £1 (English)]. They were calculated on the basis of the price of Irish exports in the home ports and the supposed prices at which imports were purchased in ports abroad (Cullen, 1968, p. 182). However, foreign destinations/ports of entry are not listed systematically in the ledger. When it is mentioned, it is the first port of call/country, which is given. Also, values recorded did not include freight, insurance etc.

A very wide range of measures were used, we have yet to codify these. Some comparison could be made with the price series created by Kennedy and Solar for Irish agricultural prices (Kennedy and Solar, 2007), which begin in the late eighteenth century. The list of goods changes over time, and we have as yet not had sufficient time to enumerate these and to measure their change over time. This however is possible to do. The Commissioners of the Revenue design the categories of goods recorded and their names.

Individual in-ports/out-ports are listed for the whole period. These changed very slightly over time as new customs posts were established/old ones were abolished.

7. Projects

We are currently beginning a project to digitise this data, having recently received funding from the Irish Research Council to conduct a pilot study. Our intention is not only to digitise the original ledgers, but also to create a freely accessible online database. The ultimate objective is to produce a digitally curated edition of the Irish import and export ledgers.

8. Research

This data has been used by to explore in detail Ireland's trading relationship with Britain in Cullen's path-breaking 1968 study, and with the American colonies in Truxes' *Irish American Trade*. Historians of

consumption have also used these records to good effect, to trace the import of luxury and other goods into Ireland.

The wealth of data available in these records (one of the richest in Europe) offers the interested researcher a wealth of opportunities to study not only the Irish economy, Ireland's role in the Atlantic imperial system, consumption patterns, but also to locate Ireland within a comparative context. We also hope that by digitising these records and making them available in a more usable format new research questions will emerge.

9. Bibliography

9.1. Primary sources

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