

The protectionist campaign by the Irish Barley growers, 1919–34^{*}

by Raymond Ryan

Abstract

The post-First World War disruption to agricultural supply and demand heralded a long-term decline in the Irish barley industry. After initial attempts at collective bargaining and negotiations with brewers, the majority of Irish barley growers sought government assistance for their sector, through tariffs and guaranteed prices. However, given the hostility of the Cumann na nGaedheal administration and of the Irish Farmers' Union to Protectionism, the barley growers' persistent campaign had the consequence of increasing support for Fianna Fáil, who introduced protection for the barley sector in 1932.

The years immediately following the First World War witnessed significant turbulence in the demand, supply and price of agricultural produce throughout western Europe. The Irish barley industry was no exception and the post-war disruption heralded a protracted decline in both the Irish barley acreage and in prices. Barley growers responded with a protracted campaign to seek government assistance in the form of guaranteed prices for their sector and tariffs on imported produce.¹ Their efforts have received some attention within the historiography. Dennison and MacDonagh have studied the relationship between Guinness and the barley growers during the 1920s and more briefly during the 1930s as part of their history of the Guinness Brewery, while Daly has briefly considered their demands in the context of the general campaign for protectionist economic policies.²

This article will expand the existing historiography by describing the anatomy of the barley growers' campaign in detail, showing the way it affected the representative farming organizations of the period, and how the demands for the barley sector eased the acceptance of farmers for protectionist economic policies. It will also demonstrate the capacity of Irish farmers to adopt

* This article was based on research funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, to whom I wish to express my gratitude. I am also grateful to the staff of the Boole Library, UCC, the National Library, Dublin and the National Archives, Dublin.

¹ For a general overview of Irish agricultural conditions during this period, see C. O'Grada, *Ireland. A new economic history, 1780–1939* (1994), pp. 389–96. On the formation of agricultural policy, see M. Daly, *The First Department. A history of the Department of Agriculture* (2002), pp. 124–6, 144–69 and J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912–85* (1989), pp. 113–17, 184–6. For a similar treatment of the

Irish butter industry, see R. Ryan, 'The Irish butter industry, 1922–39', *Irish Economic and Social History* 28 (2001), pp. 32–47.

² S. R. Dennison and O. McDonagh, *Guinness, 1886–1939. From incorporation to the Second World War* (1998), pp. 207–09; Daly, *First Department*, pp. 148–51.

collective action to resolve difficulties in their sector. The article is based on research carried out on the archives of the Irish Department of Agriculture, and also makes extensive use of contemporary newspaper reports. Newspapers carried verbatim reports of meetings held by groups and organizations, and these have been extensively cited in this article with due caution for the claims made by those contributing to such meetings.

I

Barley cultivation was a well-established sector in Irish agriculture. By 1918, 182,779 acres in the area of the future Irish Free State were devoted to it.³ The area under cultivation then fell sharply over the following fifteen years, reaching a low point of 57 per cent of the 1918 acreage in 1932 (Table 1). Barley cultivation was heavily concentrated in Leinster counties such as Laois, Offaly, Louth and Wexford and these, together with Carlow and Kildare and in addition, the Munster counties of Cork and Tipperary, accounted for 88.4 per cent of the barley acreage in 1919.⁴ Many of these farmers produced barley for sale, primarily to breweries. Guinness was the principal purchaser of home-grown barley, reflecting its dominant position in the Irish brewing industry.⁵

The tillage sector enjoyed favourable conditions in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. The British Government continued to enforce compulsory tillage orders and to fix prices for tillage crops, including barley.⁶ Yet barley growers were dissatisfied with the prices they obtained from brewers and their grievances were initially articulated by the newly formed Irish Farmers' Union (IFU).⁷ In the autumn of 1919, the National Executive of the Union criticized the unilateral setting of barley prices by the Maltsters' Association without the consent of farmers. The National Executive advised County Associations to instruct members not to sell barley at less than 50s. per barrel (a barrel being two cwt), a price significantly greater than the government fixed price of 34s. 5d. per barrel.⁸ In addition to withholding produce, the Cork Farmers' Association threatened to supply British buyers if the local breweries did not pay the stipulated 50s. per barrel price.⁹ These tactics succeeded and barley farmers succeeded in obtaining the 50s. per barrel they sought.¹⁰ The following year, when the Union requested a meeting with the Guinness board to discuss prices, their request was refused.¹¹

Thus the barley growers had already commenced organized action when prices collapsed

³ BPP, 1921, XLI, *Agricultural Statistics, Ireland, 1921*, pp. 18–22.

⁴ D. A. Gilmour, 'Land and people, c.1926', in J. R. Hill (ed.), *A new history of Ireland*, VII, 1921–84 (2003), p. 65; BPP, 1921, XLI, *Agricultural Statistics, Ireland, 1921*, pp. 18–20.

⁵ On Guinness' dominance of the Irish brewing industry, see A. Bielenberg, 'The Irish brewing industry and the rise of Guinness, 1790–1914', in T. R. Gourvish and R. G. Wilson (eds), *The dynamics of the international brewing industry since 1800* (1998), p. 115.

⁶ BPP, 1920, IX, *Department of Agriculture and*

Technical Instruction for Ireland, nineteenth General Report, 1918–19, pp. 75, 82.

⁷ For a general overview of the organisational efforts of Irish Farmers during this period, see Raymond Ryan, 'Farmers, agriculture and politics in the Irish Free State area, 1919–36' (unpublished PhD thesis, University College Cork, 2005), pp. 12–50.

⁸ *Irish Farmer*, 27 Sept. 1919.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 Oct. 1919.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 Oct. 1919.

¹¹ Dennison and McDonagh, *Guinness, 1886–1939*, p. 206.

TABLE 1. Barley acreage in the Irish Free State area (26 counties), 1911–36

<i>Year</i>	<i>Barley acreage</i>	<i>Barley acreage as a % of total tillage acreage</i>	<i>Barley acreage as a % of total acreage</i>
1922	163,173	9.40	0.96
1923	145,813	8.73	0.86
1924	156,239	9.57	0.92
1925	145,626	9.27	0.86
1926	141,009	9.09	0.83
1927	120,796	8.00	0.71
1928	129,092	8.44	0.76
1929	117,591	7.73	0.69
1930	116,195	8.00	0.68
1931	115,735	8.12	0.68
1932	103,453	7.27	0.61
1933	117,422	8.07	0.69
1934	142,725	9.54	0.84
1935	138,650	8.71	0.81

Source: Statistical Abstract, 1937, pp. 32–3.

from 22s. 5d. per cwt in 1920 to 12s. 10d. per cwt in 1921 (Table 2).¹² This collapse was due in part to the cessation of fixed tillage prices,¹³ but also the universal fall in agricultural prices, and industry-specific factors such as increased excise duties and a reduced specific gravity of beer, all of which reduced the demand by brewers for malt.¹⁴ The National Executive of the IFU unsuccessfully lobbied the Guinness Board to introduce graded barley prices and to cease the importation of barley and malt.¹⁵ Barley growers then changed their tactics from lobbying the brewers to seeking financial assistance from the government. In 1921 for example, a delegate to the IFU congress called for a tariff on imported barley.¹⁶

This change of emphasis was also evident in the public statements of the Irish Barley Growers' Association, established under the auspices of the IFU. In addition to improved marketing and grading schemes, the Association called for barley cultivation to be subsidized from duties on grain produce. The barley growers were also adopting a more hostile attitude to the brewers, especially Guinness.¹⁷ Criticisms of the monopoly power of Guinness and of their importation of barley would feature prominently in the following years. Support for barley growers began to emerge as a political issue, one which was especially vexing for the Cumann na nGaedheal administration and which was exploited by opposition deputies.

¹² *Statistical Abstract, 1937–8*, pp. 172–3.

¹³ *Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland, twenty-first General Report, 1920–21*, p. 78.

¹⁴ *Cork Examiner*, 26 Oct. 1922.

¹⁵ Dennison and McDonagh, *Guinness, 1886–1939*, p. 207.

¹⁶ *Irish Farmer*, 12 Mar. 1921.

¹⁷ *Irish Independent*, 26 Oct. 1922.

TABLE 2. Barley prices, per cwt, and price index, 1918–35

<i>Year</i>	<i>Barley prices, per cwt</i>	<i>Barley price index, 1926=100</i>
1918	17s. 2d.	214.6
1919	23s. 5d.	292.7
1920	22s. 5d.	280.2
1921	12s. 10d.	154.2
1922	8s. 11d.	111.0
1923	9s. 2d.	114.6
1924	13s. 0d.	162.5
1925	9s. 3d.	115.6
1926	8s. 0d.	100.0
1927	9s. 4d.	117.0
1928	8s. 0d.	100.0
1929	7s. 11d.	99.0
1930	7s. 1d.	87.5
1931	6s. 11d.	86.5
1932	7s. 4d.	91.7
1933	6s. 8d.	83.3
1934	7s. 3d.	90.6
1935	7s. 11d.	99.0

Source: Statistical Abstract, 1937, pp. 172–3.

In a Dail debate in July 1923, the Labour Party Deputy for Laois-Offaly, William Davin, whose constituency contained many barley growers, endorsed their demands for a guaranteed price for barley or an embargo on imported barley. Davin also endorsed the hostility of the barley growers towards Guinness by reference to the ‘bad treatment and low prices’ suffered by them. W. T. Cosgrave (President of the Executive Council, 1922–32) was able to utilise the pending report of the Agricultural Commission to defer action to assist barley growers.¹⁸

The free trade instincts of the government were reinforced by the advice they received from the ministry’s civil servants who were consistently hostile to the demands of the barley growers. They maintained that the barley acreage was not price responsive, while any subsidy for barley growers would be regressive, as a majority of farmers would end up subsidizing a small number of wealthy tillage farmers through higher barley prices.¹⁹ The Department also argued that Guinness could easily recoup the additional costs arising from an import duty by reducing the price it offered farmers, whilst the company, contrary to popular belief, actually paid prices

¹⁸ *Dáil Éireann Debates*, IV, col. 1679, 31 July 1923.

¹⁹ National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), A.G.1/

G.3233/28, Mr. Morris to Mr. Meyerick, Secretary, Department of Agriculture, 10 Oct. 1923.

above market rates to maintain domestic supply.²⁰ These arguments were further reinforced by the report of the Agricultural Commission, established by the government in 1925 to review the general nature of Irish agriculture and to recommend suitable policies. When its report was published later in that year, it advised against any assistance for commercial barley growers.²¹

Some members of the IFU questioned the necessity of supporting barley growers. Both Sir John Keane and Thomas Linehan, prominent members of the National Executive, opposed any assistance for them. Michael Heffernan, one of the most vocal members of the Farmers' Party, the political wing of the IFU, also opposed a tariff on barley, but supported the subsidization of domestic barley cultivation.²² At the 1924 IFU Congress, Heffernan opposed a motion moved by delegates from Laois and Offaly, and which was supported by the Kildare Deputy John Conlan, calling for a tariff on imported barley. Heffernan argued that granting a tariff would set a precedent for protecting other sectors of agriculture.²³

Despite a significant rise in barley prices from 9s. 2d. per cwt for 1923 to 13s. 0d. per cwt by 1924,²⁴ barley growers escalated their demands. In July 1924 both the Cork Farmers' Association and the County Kilkenny Unpurchased Tenant's Association called for a tariff on imported malt, while the Kilkenny resolution also requested a minimum price for barley.²⁵ The most systematic request by barley growers was submitted by the Laois Farmers' Association. The Association argued that the proceeds from an import duty on malt and barley could be used to subsidize barley growers. This scheme would eliminate the excessive profits made by Guinness and would counter the argument made by the Department of Agriculture that subsidizing barley cultivation would impose extra costs on non-barley growers.²⁶

The barley growers also received parliamentary support. Senator McEvoy argued in July 1924 that barley growers deserved assistance as they were required to cultivate barley, regardless of market price, in order to raise cash. R. A. Butler, then President of the IFU, supported government assistance for barley growers, but opposed a tariff as other tillage sectors would then demand a similar measure of protection.²⁷ This interesting distinction, which had been made previously by Michael Heffernan, reflected the fear among farming leaders that the imposition of tariffs on one commodity would lead to the introduction of a general protectionist economy, which would threaten the essentially export-orientated nature of Irish agriculture.

The Minister for Agriculture, Patrick Hogan, was determined to ignore the demands of the barley growers. Hogan correctly suspected that the demands of the barley growers were orchestrated by a small group of Laois-based tillage farmers²⁸ and Hogan presumably believed that the geographic concentration of barley growers, which facilitated their organizational efforts,

²⁰ NAI, A.G.1/G.3233/28, Dr. Hinchcliff to Mr. Meyer- ick, Secretary, Department of Agriculture, 22 Feb. 1924.

²¹ The commission believed that the case for subsidized tillage cultivation was justified only for the purposes of agricultural husbandry. *Report of the Commission on Agriculture, Final Report* (1925), R. 25, p. 27.

²² National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI), Irish Farmers' Union Mss, Ms. 19021, summary of meeting held by the National Executive, 20 Sept. 1923.

²³ *Irish Times*, 27 Mar. 1924.

²⁴ *Statistical Abstract*, 1937, pp. 172–3.

²⁵ NAI, A.G.1/G.3233/28, E. J. Cussen, secretary, Cork Farmers' Association to Minister for Agriculture, 22 July 1924 and copy of resolution from County Kilkenny Unpurchased Tenants' Association to Department of Agriculture, 29 July 1924.

²⁶ *Irish Times*, 23 Sept. 1924.

²⁷ *Seanad Éireann Debates*, III, cols 1022–24, 28 July 1924.

²⁸ NAI, A.G.1/G.3233/28, Patrick Hogan to Mr. Meyer- ick, secretary, Department of Agriculture, 20 Aug. 1924.

resulted in their assuming a disproportionate influence on Irish public life.²⁹ He argued that no action should be taken to aid the barley growers on two grounds. For one, a rise in barley prices was anticipated, and he recognised that the Irish Farmers' Union was divided on the merits of assisting barley growers and could not effectively campaign on their behalf.³⁰ Yet the government later decided that it would be prudent to at least acknowledge the grievances of the barley growers.³¹

A barley growers' deputation met W. T. Cosgrave and Patrick Hogan (Minister of Agriculture 1922–32) in November 1924. Led by Farmers' Party deputy John Conlan, the deputation included figures such as J. W. Young and Richard Hipwell, men who would become synonymous with the demands of the barley growers. However, their arguments for a tariff on imported barley were dismissed by Hogan, who disputed the alleged economic benefit of barley cultivation and who argued that a tariff on imported barley would make Irish stout exports uncompetitive.³² In the following year, Hogan repeated these arguments in the Dáil, accusing the barley growers of being jealous of the success of Guinness, while the proposed system of a tariff and subsidy for barley growers would constitute an unwarranted interference by the Government in the private affairs of farmers. Hogan revived memories of the disastrous regulation of the dairy industry by the then Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction as an argument against the barley growers' demands.³³

Support for barley growers was now proving to be an increasingly divisive issue for the IFU. The Union's 1925 congress was dominated by this issue. Strong opposition to a barley tariff was expressed by leading members of the union such as Sir John Keane and Col. O'Callaghan-Westropp, both of whom were prominent advocates of the livestock export trade and from an Anglo-Irish landed background.³⁴ Farmers' Party deputies John Conlan and Denis Gorey, along with J. W. Young and Brooke Brasier, who represented tillage farmers in East Cork, supported a tariff on barley. An unsatisfactory compromise resolution, which called for the equivalent level of protection for agriculture as that enjoyed by industry, was passed.³⁵

This was insufficient for barley growers who now began to organize independently of the Union in pursuit of their aims. This took the form of members of county committees of agriculture from barley-growing counties establishing a conference on grain prices which convened in August 1925. After discussing a number of proposals, such as the increased usage of barley as an animal feedstuff, the conference recommended a 5s. per cwt tariff on imported

²⁹ A similar argument was made by dairy farmers in West Limerick, *Limerick Leader*, 6 Nov. 1926.

³⁰ NAI, A.G.1/G.3233/28, Patrick Hogan to Joe McGrath, Minister for Industry and Commerce, 17 Sept. 1924.

³¹ *Irish Times*, 23 Sept. 1924.

³² NAI, A.G.1/G.3233/28, minutes of meeting held by President Cosgrave and Minister Hogan with deputation representing County Committees of Agriculture from barley-growing counties, 16 Oct. 1924.

³³ *Dáil Éireann Debates*, XI, cols 299 and 301, 22 Apr. 1925. On the DATI regulation of prices and the export of dairy produce, see Raymond Ryan, 'The butter industry

in Munster, 1884–1939' (unpublished M.Phil thesis, University College Cork, 2000), pp. 120–2.

³⁴ Col. O'Callaghan-Westropp was a prominent county Clare landlord, and was a vocal advocate of the livestock export trade. See *Clare Champion*, 24 Nov. 1923. Sir John Keane was a county Waterford landlord, a doctrinaire free trader and a staunch opponent of trade unionism among agricultural labourers. See NAI, A.G.2./2005/08/218, Commission on Agriculture, cross-examination of Col. O'Callaghan-Westropp; also E. O'Connor, *A labour history of Waterford* (1989), pp. 180–99.

³⁵ *Irish Times*, 28 Mar. 1925.

barley and malt and a minimum price of 30s. per barrel for malting barley.³⁶ Again, the Department of Agriculture rejected these proposals.³⁷

The conference's proposals were launched as barley prices reached their nadir. Malting barley prices fell from 13s. od. to 9s. 3d. a cwt between 1924 and 1925 (Table 2).³⁸ The barley acreage declined from 156,239 to 145,626 acres over the same period, the barley acreage now forming only 79 per cent of that of 1919.³⁹ Barley imports more than doubled, from 357,307 cwt in 1924 to 761,629 cwt in 1925, with 55 per cent of these imports originating from India (Table 3).⁴⁰ Yet such was the price decline that Guinness cancelled the further import of foreign barley in order to support the domestic market.⁴¹ The Department of Agriculture described how prices for malting barley had declined to such an extent that farmers preferred to feed barley to animals than attempt to sell it.⁴²

In the desperate conditions of October 1925, and especially given the recent increase in barley imports, the barley growers supported the proposals made by the Grain Growers Conference. For example, meetings held by barley growers in Tullamore and Portlaoise endorsed the Grain Growers' proposals, while the County Offaly Farmers' Association requested the Minister for Agriculture to implement the Grain Growers' Proposals.⁴³ The Department of Finance was also lobbied on this issue by the Laois County Committee of Agriculture.⁴⁴ However, J. J. MacElligott, Secretary to the Department of Finance, embodied the government's unwillingness to assist barley growers by arguing that the fall in barley prices was due to factors beyond the governments' control, such as a general depression in the brewing industry and the alleged poor quality of Irish barley. MacElligott also warned that an import duty on barley might force Guinness to abandon brewing in Ireland.⁴⁵ The level of crisis expressed by barley growers was such that even those unconnected with the Grain Growers' Conference supported government aid for barley growers. The Wexford Farmers' Association called on the government to lobby Guinness to increase barley prices.⁴⁶ The Kilkenny and Wexford County Committees of Agriculture called for a tariff to be imposed on imported barley.⁴⁷ Some members of the IFU National Executive also supported the imposition of a tariff on barley.⁴⁸

Yet the rush to endorse tariffs was resisted by some farming figures. Col. C. M. Gibbon, a member of the IFU and a leading advocate of improved commercial organization by farmers, had the courage to attend the 1925 Grain Growers Conference and argue that barley farmers would benefit more from increased research and action to reduce the monopoly power of

³⁶ Ibid., 5, 25 Aug. 1925.

³⁷ NAI, A.G.1/ G.322/28, Dr. Hinchcliff to Mr. Meyer- ick, Secretary, Department of Agriculture, 29 Sept. 1925.

³⁸ *Statistical Abstract* 1937, pp. 172–3.

³⁹ *Statistical Abstract* 1931, pp. 26–7.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 64–5.

⁴¹ Dennison and MacDonagh, *Guinness, 1886–1939*, p. 211.

⁴² *Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, twentieth-fourth General Report, 1923–26* (1927), p. 5.

⁴³ *Irish Times*, 13 Oct., 28 Nov. 1925; NAI, A.G.1/

G.323/28, Mr. Fahy, Secretary, Offaly Farmers' Association to the Minister for Agriculture, 12 Oct. 1925.

⁴⁴ NAI, F22/65/25, Mr. O'Neill, secretary, Laois County Committee of Agriculture to the Minister for Finance, 14 Oct. 1925.

⁴⁵ NAI, F22/65/25, J. J. MacElligott to Ernest Blythe, Minister for Finance, 21 Oct. 1925.

⁴⁶ NAI, A.G.1/G.3288/28, Nicholas Murphy, secretary, Wexford Farmers' Association to the Minister for Agriculture, 28 Sept. 1925.

⁴⁷ *Irish Times*, 7 and 19 Oct. 1925.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 16 Oct. 1925.

TABLE 3. Barley imports and exports, by quantity and value, 1924–36

<i>Year</i>	<i>Barley imports (cwt)</i>	<i>Barley exports (cwt.)</i>	<i>Value of Barley imports (£)</i>	<i>Value of Barley exports (£)</i>	<i>Exports-imports (cwt)</i>
1924	357,307	30,818	187,605	17,879	(326,499)
1925	761,629	45,808	447,500	24,315	(715,821)
1926	116,044	388,099	46,701	168,065	272,055
1927	214,694	264,488	110,225	142,223	49,794
1928	233,428	193,266	120,259	93,145	(40,162)
1929	458,149	53,643	220,527	24,136	(404,506)
1930	301,739	17,196	107,722	6939	(284,543)
1931	449,854	20,024	134,584	8506	(429,830)
1932	385,200	5457	125,278	2480	(379,743)
1933	176,899	9240	50,150	3461	(167,659)
1934	131,290	0	34,501	0	(131,290)
1935	228,649	0	78,246	0	(228,649)
1936	404,515	0	117,182	0	(404,515)

Note: No import/export figures exist for barley for the immediate post-war period.

Sources: 1924–1930; *Statistical Abstract*, 1931, pp. 64–65 (imports) and 84–5 (exports); 1931–33, *Statistical Abstract*, 1934, p. 79 (imports) and p. 90 (exports); 1934–35, *Statistical Abstract*, 1936, p. 79 (imports) and p. 88 (exports).

Guinness than from tariffs.⁴⁹ Michael Heffernan argued that barley growers should improve their commercial organization and seek alternate markets to Guinness.⁵⁰ However, with the exception of Cork farmers which will be discussed later, barley growers ignored this advice and continued to look for government assistance.

Arguments were also made publicly in favour of the pricing policy of the breweries. R. Hamilton-Hunter claimed that the prices paid by Guinness for Irish Barley were equivalent to prices made by British breweries for average barley produce. Hamilton-Hunter claimed that the Irish barley growers compared the price for their produce with quotations for light ale barley which exaggerated their case.⁵¹ The Chairman of the Castlebellingham and Drogheda Breweries, William Cairnes, warned that a tariff on barley importation would have an adverse effect on the export trade of breweries.⁵²

The agitation by the barley growers assumed an increasingly political hue. In Portlaoise, barley growers criticized the opposition of a number of Farmers' Party Dáil Deputies to tariffs on barley, while Guinness was accused of having an undue influence over the government.⁵³ Barley growers nominated J. J. Bergin as an independent candidate for a by-election in the Laois-Offaly constituency. However, Bergin later withdrew his candidacy.⁵⁴ As 1926 progressed,

⁴⁹ *Irish Times*, 25 Aug. 1925. For an example of Gibbons' views on agriculture and collective organisation among farmers, see NLI, Irish Farmers' Union, Ms 19021, Memorandum by Col. C. M. Gibbon on organisation of the Farmers' Party, 29 Oct. 1923.

⁵⁰ *Irish Times*, 16 Oct. 1925.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19 Oct. 1925.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 31 Oct. 1925.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 27 Oct. 1925.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, 6 Feb. 1926.

the majority of barley growers resigned from the IFU. The Union congress of that year passed an explicitly free trade resolution.⁵⁵

The consequences were described by J. W. Young, a Laois barley grower in a letter to the Minister of Finance, Ernest Blythe.

The executive of the Farmers' Union has now been captured by academic free traders and is no longer representative of the bulk of tillage farmers, who have lost all confidence in them. A year ago, the Laois Farmers' Association on this question disowned them and there is no Farmers' Union now in existence in this county.⁵⁶

Free from the restraints of the IFU, many of the barley grower activists now associated with those who supported a general protectionist economic policy. A number of prominent barley growers attended the 1926 conference of delegates from County Committees of Agriculture, convened by Patrick Belton, which endorsed a wide range of protectionist economic policies.⁵⁷ These actions confirmed the earlier fears of Heffernan and Butler that if the barley growers secured tariff protection for their industry, there would be calls for more general protectionist economic policies.

A number of these barley growers then formed their own organization, the Irish Farmers' Protectionist Union, in early 1927. J. J. Bergin, the leading figure in the association, endorsed the levying of tariffs on imported livestock produce as well as imported malt and barley.⁵⁸ Meanwhile a number of figures within the IFU such as John Conlan and Brook Brasier continued to argue in favour of a tariff on imported barley. Brasier expressed his frustration at how the leadership of the Union 'would not have a tariff on barley because it might offend Messrs. Guinness'. Yet, the efforts of both Brasier and Conlan were in vain.⁵⁹

The grievances of barley growers were a significant issue in Leinster constituencies during the June 1927 election. The Irish Farmers' Protectionist Union carried out its earlier threat to nominate candidates. Bergin was nominated as a candidate for the Kildare constituency and was later accompanied by a running mate, George Henderson. Richard Hipwell was nominated as a candidate for Laois-Offaly.⁶⁰ The bitterness caused by the refusal of the IFU to support a tariff on barley was reflected in Bergin's criticism of Farmers' Party TD John Conlan for an incontinent attitude towards protectionism. In reply Conlan 'thought it strange that anyone should charge him with want of sympathy with the barley growers'.⁶¹ None of the Irish Farmers' Protectionist Union candidates were elected. Bergin and Henderson received 9.6 per cent of the vote in Kildare while Hipwell received 6.57 per cent in Laois-Offaly but the Irish Farmers' Protectionist Union's intervention contributed to the defeat of Conlan in Kildare.⁶²

Barley growers also attributed the decline in support for Cumann na nGaedheal in Midland constituencies to the barley issue. J. W. Young informed Ernest Blythe that both Fianna Fáil and Labour gained support from Cumann na nGaedheal in Laois-Offaly due to their support for tariffs on imported barley. Young stated that if the government levied tariffs on barley imports,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 16 Mar. 1926.

⁵⁶ NAI, F22/65/25, J. W. Young to Ernest Blythe, Minister for Finance, 1 Sept. 1927.

⁵⁷ *Irish Times*, 23 Apr. 1926.

⁵⁸ *Leinster Leader*, 9 Apr., 14 May 1927.

⁵⁹ *Irish Times*, 16 Apr. 1927.

⁶⁰ *Leinster Leader*, 7, 14 May 1927.

⁶¹ *Irish Times*, 19 May 1927.

⁶² B. Walker, *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1918-89* (1992), pp. 121-2.

Cumann na nGaedheal could gain between ten and twelve seats in Midland constituencies.⁶³ However, Cumann na nGaedheal did not adopt this policy for the September 1927 election. The polarized political conditions resulting from the entry of Fianna Fáil into the Dáil led to a surge of support for Cumann na nGaedheal without any recourse to appeasing sectional interests.

II

The latter years of the twenties witnessed the continued decline of barley prices. Barley acreage fell from 145,626 in 1924 to 120,796 by 1927.⁶⁴ The Department of Agriculture reported that barley cultivation was uneconomic during 1928 and 1929, and farmers only marketed barley to earn cash.⁶⁵ Prices declined from 9s. 4d. per cwt in 1927 to 8s. 0d. for 1928 and 7s. 11d. for 1929.⁶⁶ Some barley farmers took action to alleviate their plight rather than rely on the efforts of their self-appointed spokesmen. A few Midlands farmers switched to sugar beet cultivation. Barley producers in Cork followed the earlier advice of Michael Heffernan and exported their produce.⁶⁷ The majority of these exports were consigned to Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, and 1926 and 1927, the Irish Free State became a net exporter of barley (Table 3).⁶⁸ However, this export trade was not maintained and may only have been a means to dispose of unwanted barley stocks rather than an attempt to create a sustainable commercial venture.

The Great Depression further depressed the position of barley farmers, and by 1931 prices reached a low of 6s. 11d. per cwt.⁶⁹ Only 17,196 cwt of barley was exported in 1930, compared to 193,266 cwt in 1928.⁷⁰ The barley acreage continued to decline, reaching a low of 103,453 acres by 1932.⁷¹ The Midland barley growers could take comfort from the tendency of continental European powers to introduce protectionist measures to assist their grain producers. Italy had already waged its famous 'Battle for Grain' in the years after 1925. Both France and Germany imposed tariffs on wheat imports from 1928.⁷²

Midland barley growers unveiled their latest scheme at a conference held in Athy in January 1929. Attended by veteran campaigners such as J. J. Bergin, J. W. Young and Richard Hipwell, the convention called for a 15 per cent compulsory admixture of domestic grain in all grain produce sold in the Irish Free State.⁷³ While the scheme was presented as being of benefit to all tillage farmers, its benefits in allowing barley farmers to dispose of unwanted produce were obvious.⁷⁴ However, both Hipwell and Young continued to support the imposition of a tariff on imported barley, despite opposition from political supporters such as the Labour Party TD Daniel Morrissey, who believed that the admixture scheme would be of greater benefit to barley

⁶³ NAI, F22/65/25, Young to Blythe, 1 Sept. 1927.

⁶⁴ *Statistical Abstract*, 1931, pp. 26–7.

⁶⁵ *Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, twentieth-seventh General Report, 1928–29* (1930), p. 3.

⁶⁶ *Statistical Abstract*, 1937, pp. 172–3.

⁶⁷ *Irish Times*, 24 Jan., 14 Sept. 1927.

⁶⁸ *Statistical Abstract*, 1931, p. 85.

⁶⁹ *Statistical Abstract*, 1937, pp. 172–3.

⁷⁰ *Statistical Abstract*, 1931, pp. 84–5.

⁷¹ *Statistical Abstract*, 1937, pp. 32–3.

⁷² P. Morgan, *Italian Fascism, 1919–45* (1995), pp. 98–9; C. P. Kindleberger, 'Commercial policy between the wars', in P. Mathias and S. Pollard (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, III, The Industrial Economies: the development of economic and social policies* (1989), p. 168.

⁷³ *Leinster Leader*, 5 Jan. 1929.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3 Aug. 1929.

farmers than relying on a tariff which Guinness could recoup through reducing barley prices.⁷⁵ Barley farmers preferred to seek government aid than to rely on their own efforts, an example being the collective organisation of barley growers to negotiate prices as practiced in Cork and as recommended by the IFU to Midland barley producers.⁷⁶

While the barley growers acquired powerful allies within the Fianna Fail and Labour parties, both parties were unwilling to endorse their demands in full. This was evident at the Mansion House conference convened by both parties in October 1930 to co-ordinate the demands for protectionism from various agricultural sectors. The representatives of the barley growers, J. J. Delaney and J. W. Young, continued to argue for a tariff on imported barley. However, both William Davin and James Ryan, Fianna Fáil spokesperson on agriculture, opposed a tariff, instead arguing for the restriction of barley imports through a licensing scheme. J. J. Bergin played the role of mediator, persuading his fellow barley growers to withdraw their motion, and argued that a tariff could be levied if the licensing scheme failed.⁷⁷ The eventual motion passed by the conference called on the government to estimate the required level of barley and malt imports necessary for the brewing industry and to restrict imports to this amount.⁷⁸ In spite of their apparent support of the barley growers' demands, Fianna Fail did not intend to injure the operations of Guinness.

Barley growers pursued another source of assistance through the Grain Inquiry Tribunal. This had been established in 1929 by the Cumann na nGaedheal administration as a means of defusing the persistent demand for protectionism for the domestic milling industry and the demand that a compulsory percentage of domestic tillage produce to be used in all milling input.⁷⁹ As noted previously, the Grain Growers Association advocated such an admixture in their Athy conference of 1929. The Association provided the bulk of witnesses who favoured the admixture, including J. J. Bergin, J. W. Young and Brook Brasier.⁸⁰ However, the Tribunal's report of 1931 rejected the proposals of the barley growers, citing the bureaucratic nature of the proposed scheme and the consequent increased feedstuff prices for small farmers. It criticized the barley cultivators for advocating the admixture proposal to gain the support of oat and wheat cultivators in order to dispose of their own unwanted barley produce.⁸¹

Cumann na nGaedheal remained hostile to the grievances of the barley growers. Patrick Hogan not only rejected the idea of assisting barley growers, but argued that Midland farmers continued uneconomic barley cultivation, seduced by promises by both Fianna Fail and Labour that their industry would be subsidized.⁸² Another critic of the barley growers, the Cavan independent TD John O'Hanlon, summed up the barley growers' problems as follows: 'As long as men are satisfied to supply Messrs. Guinness' maltsters or anybody else at a tied price and do

⁷⁵ Ibid., 4 Oct. 1929.

⁷⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 23 Mar. 1929.

⁷⁷ *Irish Times*, 3 Oct. 1930.

⁷⁸ NAI, S.6081, Irish Grain Growers' Association, copy of motions passed at Mansion House Conference, 2 Oct. 1930, submitted by Deputies Davin, Dwyer, Ryan and Mr. J. J. Bergin to the President of the Executive Council.

⁷⁹ Daly, *First Department*, pp. 150–1.

⁸⁰ Grain Inquiry Tribunal. *Report on proposal that maize meal and maize products for sale in Saorstát Éireann should contain a definite proportion of home-grown grain* (1931), pp. 6–7.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 29, 51.

⁸² *Dáil Éireann Debates*, XXVI, cols 1054–7, 25 Oct. 1929.

not look for competitive markets, there is always going to be a grievance in the barley growing districts.⁸³

The grievances of the barley growers did not feature prominently in the 1932 election campaign, although Daniel Kennedy, one of the leading advocates for the barley growers, contested the Laois-Offaly constituency as an independent farmer, although with little success, polling only 1,553 votes or 3.32 per cent of the constituency vote.⁸⁴ With the formation of a Fianna Fáil minority administration after the election of February 1932, the Grain Growers' Association were swift to urge the Department of Agriculture to introduce an admixture scheme and a barley marketing scheme.⁸⁵

Fianna Fáil fulfilled their expressions of support for the barley growers and on entering government took measures to stabilise the barley sector. A tariff of 7s. 6d. per cwt, or 120 per cent of the 1933 price, was introduced on barley imports, while the introduction of domestic grain admixture offered barley growers an outlet for their produce.⁸⁶ The government policy followed the proposals agreed at the Mansion House conference of 1930. Despite the anticipation among barley growers that barley importation would be prohibited,⁸⁷ the government did permit importation of tariff-free barley under license, demonstrating that the government would not risk interfering in the activities of Guinness. Indeed, Dr Jim Ryan, the new Minister for Agriculture, met the Guinness board in 1932 and reassured them that the Government did not intend to interfere with Guinness' importation of barley and malt.⁸⁸ In practical terms, barley prices, after reaching a low of 6s. 8d. per cwt in 1933, stabilized at 7s. 11d. for both 1935 and 1936. The barley acreage decline was also reversed, with the area under crop increasing to 142,723 acres in 1934, although this figure slightly declined in subsequent years.⁸⁹ While some of this recovery was due to an increase in barley prices generally, for example barley prices in England and Wales increased from 7s. 7d. in 1932 to 8s. 8d. by 1934,⁹⁰ the actions of the government did assist in the stabilization of the barley sector.

One effect of these changes was that the issue of supporting barley cultivation was now politicised. Cumann na nGaedheal deputy and former Farmers' Party Leader, Denis Gorey, who had been supportive of the grievances of the barley growers in the 1920s,⁹¹ now censured the government for supporting those 'whose work consists of a couple of days seeding the field of barley and then shutting the gate, and whose only concern for the following six months is to see that the fences are good.'⁹² J. J. Bergin encouraged his fellow barley growers in Kildare to support the governments' retention of the land annuities, and to shun the opposition parties who had ignored the plight of barley growers in the past, but who now feigned concern for farmers.⁹³

⁸³ Ibid., XXXVI, cols 305-06, 20 Nov. 1930.

⁸⁴ *Midland Tribune*, 23 Jan. 1932; Walker, *Parliamentary election results*, p. 135.

⁸⁵ *Midland Tribune*, 3 Apr. 1932.

⁸⁶ *Department of Agriculture, second annual report, 1932-33* (1933), pp. 2-3, 14, 17.

⁸⁷ *Leinster Leader*, 20 Aug. 1932. However, the leadership of the Grain Growers' Association had now accepted that limited barley importation under licence was now acceptable, see *Midland Tribune*, 1 June 1932.

⁸⁸ Dennison and McDonagh, *Guinness, 1886-1939*, p. 213.

⁸⁹ *Statistical Abstract*, 1937, pp. 32-3, 172-3.

⁹⁰ *Statistical Abstract for the United Kingdom for each of the fifteen years 1913 and 1921 to 1934*, p. 278.

⁹¹ *Kilkenny People*, 19 Feb. 1927.

⁹² *Dáil Éireann Debates*, XLIV, cols 1484-5, 10 Nov. 1932.

⁹³ *Leinster Leader*, 30 July, 27 Aug. 1932.

III

Irish barley growers faced a perilous situation in the 1920s. The cessation of compulsory tillage, the reduced demand for malting barley by brewers and the post-war depression all acted to reduce barley prices and consequently cultivation sharply declined. The barley growers were also disadvantaged by their position of supplying Guinness, who enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the brewing industry. However, the general effort to organize Irish farmers, embodied by the Irish Farmers' Union in conjunction with the geographic concentration of barley cultivators in the Midlands and in East Cork, facilitated the adoption of collective action by barley growers to address their grievances.

At first barley growers employed direct bargaining and trade-union style measures, such as withholding supplies from the brewers, to increase barley prices. However, following the formation of the Irish Free State, the barley growers sought government assistance for their sector. The export drive by the Cork Farmers' Association was a rare example of independent action by barley growers to solve their problems. However, Cumann na nGaedheal ignored the demands of the barley growers, given their support for the livestock sector, whose costs would be increased by tariffs on imported barley. The government was unwilling to intervene in the internal operations of the brewing sector. It also received advice from the officials of the Department of Agriculture who were sceptical of the benefit of assisting barley growers. Eventually the grievances of the barley growers were addressed by Fianna Fáil, who placed tariffs on imported barley and who offered a market to barley producers in the form of the domestic admixture scheme. These measures stabilised the barley sector. The decision of Irish barley growers to seek protectionism and government assistance was not an isolated tendency. Many continental European countries imposed tariffs and import quotas to protect domestic producers and ensure self-sufficiency, as seen in Italy, France and Germany.

The campaign by the barley growers had political effects. Due to the free trade stance of the union's national executive, many barley growers left the IFU and disowned its political affiliate, the Farmers' Party. Given that Cumann na nGaedheal did not address the barley growers' grievances, many of the barley growers came to support Fianna Fáil. Thus, by refusing to engage in voluntary activity to alleviate their difficulties and seeking assistance from a favourably inclined government, the barley farmers contributed to the politicization of the various sectors of Irish agriculture and this, in turn, hindered the development of an effective agricultural policy in the early years of the Irish Free State.