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Commercial Agricultural Renewal in 1920s
Ireland**

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Creameries, Cow-Testing, and the Free State: Commercial Agricultural Renewal in 1920s Ireland

ABSTRACT

The 1920s and the creation of the Irish Free State was one of attempted recovery for the agricultural sector and the dairy industry was to prove a cornerstone of that effort. This study explores contemporary debates on agricultural modernisation as expressed in pro-Treaty newspapers such as 'The Irish Statesman,' the 'Free State' and the 'Freeman's Journal' between 1920 and 1929. With underperforming milk yields, hygiene problems and inefficient organisation of creameries, commercial farmers and policy makers called for a pragmatic combination of scientific improvement, education, selective breeding and co-operative organisation. This analysis traces three interwoven strands of reform: efforts to boost productivity through cow-testing and herd improvement; the passing of regulatory legislation, notably the Dairy Produce Act 1924, which imposed quality standards and pasteurisation; and Minister Patrick Hogan's reorganisation programme for creameries, which included the transfer of proprietary facilities to farmer-owned dairy co-operatives and a reduction in wasteful competition. These projects represented a particular Free State approach to things, which was a mix of farmer voluntarism and strategic state intervention. It ultimately resulted in higher butter exports and improved industry standards by the late 1920s. This piece argues that these debates illustrate how Ireland's commercial farming classes sought to anchor the new state through practical economic modernisation rather than continued political agitation, laying important foundations for the development of Irish dairying in the interwar period.

KEYWORDS

Agricultural Law, Rural Society, Economics, Irish Politics

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture was central to the State's plan for economic development in the turbulent years after the foundation of the Irish Free State/Saorstát Éireann in 1922. The new State had been ravaged by the Civil War and was in a desperate economic situation. Resources were scarce, people were leaving rural areas and farming was the main source of employment and export earnings. Dairying above all was regarded by many as the most promising field. Ireland's rich grasslands, temperate

climate and established network of creameries created a fertile ground for growth but persistent problems, such as relatively low milk yields, poor hygiene standards, inefficient organisation and competition with Denmark and the Netherlands - threatened its potential. Contemporary pro-Treaty newspapers like 'The Irish Statesman,' the 'Free State' and the 'Freeman's Journal' became sites of debate. These publications reflected the outlook of commercial farmers and supporters of the Irish Farmers' Union/Party and Cumann na nGaedheal, and were advocates of practical modernisation rather than radical upheaval. They were always urging that the future prosperity of Ireland depended upon scientific farming, selective breeding, wider agricultural education and stronger co-operative organisation. Reformers in this immediate period focused on farmer-led improvement, technical efficiency and targeted legislation, rather than state subsidies or political agitation. This study explores these overlapping campaigns from 1920 to 1929. It follows debates over herd improvement and education, examines the advent of regulatory frameworks such as the Dairy Produce Act 1924 and considers the major reorganisation of the creamery sector under Minister Patrick Hogan. When combined, these efforts demonstrated a unique Free State approach to agricultural development, combining voluntarism, co-operation and selective state intervention in the quest for a more productive and competitive dairy industry.

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION, LAND USE, SELECTIVE BREEDING AND MILK PRODUCTION

An article by R. Naudin in 'The Irish Statesman' from 1920 argued that Ireland's future prosperity depended not only on political change, but also on the effective development of its natural and agricultural resources. Particular importance was attached to the report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Resources and Industries of Ireland, especially its interim report on milk production. The report highlighted the poor quality of much of the milk reaching urban consumers, particularly in Dublin, and noted that scientific research showed Irish milk often failed to meet standards achieved elsewhere. Improving the purity and availability of milk was therefore presented as both an agricultural and public health priority, especially for mothers and children. The report focused on the low productivity of Irish dairy cattle. The average Irish cow produced about 420 gallons of milk annually, compared with 700-800 gallons in leading dairy countries such as Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands. Some Irish cows produced as much as 1,400 gallons, demonstrating the potential for improvement. The Commission estimated that increasing average yields to 700 gallons per cow could raise agricultural income by around £20 million annually. Although agricultural organisations and the Department of Agriculture promoted cow-testing associations, farmers were often sceptical of state-

sponsored schemes and reluctant to change established practices. Rather than advocating direct subsidies, the report proposed co-operative self-improvement through cow-testing associations. These organisations kept production records that allowed farmers to identify productive and unproductive animals. Evidence showed substantial differences between individual cows: in one Munster-based association, the ten best producers averaged about 830 gallons annually, while the ten poorest produced only 210 gallons. Such findings demonstrated the value of record-keeping, selective culling and improved herd management. International examples from Canada, Sweden and Denmark were cited to show that systematic breeding and management could significantly increase milk yields without major capital investment. The Commission recommended improving breeding practices and noted that milk-producing qualities were inherited through both paternal and maternal lines. It proposed provincial stud farms where bulls could be assessed through the performance of their offspring before being certified for wider use. While acknowledging concerns that selecting for milk production might reduce beef values, it argued that the gains from high-yield dairy cows would outweigh any losses. The aim wasn't to replace specialised beef herds but to eliminate poor-quality dual-purpose cattle and improve dairy stock nationwide. Overall, 'The Irish Statesman' viewed the Commission's proposals as practical and potentially transformative, capable of increasing productivity, raising rural incomes and improving the national milk supply through herd testing, selective breeding, co-operation and farmer-led reform.¹

A feature in the 'Free State' newspaper by S. Mac Conneachtain in early September 1922 argued that the future success of Irish agriculture depended on more efficient farming methods, closer integration of tillage and livestock production, and wider access to agricultural education. It reflected on the decline of arable farming after wheat became less profitable in the late nineteenth century and suggested that farmers had struggled partly because they lacked sufficient scientific knowledge and training. The author noted that modern agriculture offered new opportunities through machinery, artificial fertilisers, and improved livestock breeds. However, increased production was only valuable if it generated sustainable profits. Agricultural progress therefore required innovations that were both productive and economically viable. Denmark was presented as a model of successful agricultural development. The article attributed Danish success not only to its technical advances but also to the strong agricultural co-operative institutions that enabled farmers to organise production and marketing collectively. Co-operation was portrayed as an essential element of agricultural progress alongside scientific improvement. A major theme

¹ R Naudin, 'Milk Production in Ireland' *The Irish Statesman* (24 April 1920).

was the importance of mixed farming. The author argued that crop cultivation and livestock production should complement one another rather than operate separately. Livestock helped maintain soil fertility through manure, while dairying supported higher levels of agricultural productivity overall. Drawing on Danish experience, the article suggested that the expansion of dairy farming could contribute to improved crop yields and more intensive land use. The article also linked dairying to wider social and economic goals. Dairy farming was seen as a means of increasing agricultural output, creating employment, and improving living standards in rural communities. It was presented as an important tool in addressing rural decline and sustaining population levels in the countryside. The author argued that Ireland's future depended on making better use of its agricultural resources, with particular emphasis on increasing participation in farming and expanding educational opportunities in rural areas. While recognising the role of creameries, the article maintained that improvements were also needed within farm households. The perceived superiority of Danish butter was attributed largely to better dairying practices rather than better processing facilities. This reflected the belief that agricultural progress depended as much on the daily practices of farmers as on modern infrastructure. The article also identified inadequate agricultural education as the main obstacle to improvement. It argued that modern farming and dairying methods had not spread widely enough throughout rural Ireland and called for agriculture and dairying to become core subjects in rural primary schools. Agricultural education was expected not only to improve technical skills but also to encourage co-operation, raise productivity, and strengthen the co-operative movement. The author criticised Ireland for lagging behind countries such as Denmark, Holland, and Belgium in agricultural training and urged the Free State government to make agricultural instruction a central feature of educational reform.²

During an era of ongoing uncertainty and conflict, another 'Free State' newspaper editorial by S. Mac Conneachtain claimed that agricultural reconstruction was one of Ireland's best hopes of economic recovery. It had identified dairying as an area of significant potential, supported by Ireland's fertile grasslands, favourable climate and access to key markets. It argued that this potential could only be fully realised with the adoption of scientific farming methods and improved livestock management. The introduction of modern farming practices was seen as essential to increase productivity and strengthen the competitiveness of Irish dairy products. Breeding cattle were of particular importance. The Dairy Shorthorn was commended for its hardiness, low costs of maintenance

² S Mac Conneachtain, 'Improved Farming: Combinations Essential 'The Free State (9 September 1922).

and high milk production, but the Kerry breed was also popular on smaller farms. It underlined that breeding choices should be based on local conditions, but said there was a need for more institutional support in the form of more stud farms and cow-testing stations to help farmers identify productive animals and phase out unprofitable ones. A systematic herd improvement was identified as a way to improve farm profitability. The persistence of inferior cows wasn't due to the shortcomings of the farmers, but to the lack of agricultural education and advisory services. As a result, the article called for more government funding for agricultural education, with an increased emphasis on agriculture and dairying in the national education system and wider dissemination of modern farming knowledge. The editorial also touched on concerns with the quality of the milk, referring to criticism of the supplies that were reaching the city consumers. It said improvements in breeding, herd management and dairy practices would benefit agricultural profits and public health. This discussion further demonstrates how important scientific farming and agricultural education were becoming in 1920s Ireland. It emphasised technical improvement, selective breeding and farmer training as the basis of progress, not advocating market intervention. In the years after administrative independence, it linked economic recovery with agricultural modernisation and a better use of Ireland's natural advantages by encouraging herd improvement, cow-testing, stud farms and education.³

By October 1922, S. Mac Conneachtain, writing again in the 'Free State,' presented dairying as a solution for many of the economic and social challenges facing Irish agriculture in the early 1920s. Written during debates over compulsory tillage, the article argued that prosperity depended on a more intensive system of mixed farming that combined crop cultivation with dairy production. The author traced the decline of Irish agriculture to increased foreign competition, which encouraged many farmers to convert tillage land into pasture. However, he argued that this decline wasn't inevitable and that better farming methods could have maintained higher levels of productivity and profitability. A central concern was how to increase agricultural output while preserving farm profits. The article, as seen in previous forms, proposed two main solutions: improving crop cultivation and improving livestock through selective breeding. Particular criticism was directed at low-yielding dairy cows, which were seen as an inefficient use of resources. Mixed farming was presented as the most effective way to improve soil fertility and productivity. Livestock supplied manure for crops, while crops provided feed for animals, creating a mutually beneficial system. The author argued that arable land could support more cattle than permanent

³ S Mac Conneachtain, 'Agricultural Reconstruction 'The Free State (23 September 1922).

pasture and that modern farmers also benefited from access to artificial fertilisers, which offered further opportunities for increasing yields. The article advocated the cultivation of underused grassland to increase agricultural production. Inferior pasture could be converted into forage crops, supporting larger livestock numbers and greater output. Although this shift would require more labour, the author viewed this as a positive development because it would create employment and help counter rural depopulation. The article also criticised reliance on grassland dairying, noting that pasture quality declined later in the season. Arable forage crops, by contrast, could provide a more consistent supply of feed and sustain higher milk production throughout the year. Dairy farming was portrayed as one of the most reliable and profitable branches of agriculture. Products such as milk, butter, and cheese enjoyed stable demand and were less vulnerable to market fluctuations than many other agricultural commodities. The author argued that intensive dairying made more efficient use of land and encouraged a more scientific approach to farming. It was also expected to support larger rural populations and promote the development of co-operative organisations similar to those that had contributed to agricultural success in Denmark. The article stressed the importance of replacing traditional practices with modern methods. Accurate milk recording was highlighted as a key tool for identifying productive cows, removing poor performers, and improving herd quality over time. Since high-yielding cows cost little more to maintain than less productive animals, systematic record-keeping and selective breeding were again viewed as essential to profitability, particularly in intensive farming systems where labour, feed, and fertiliser costs were high. The article concluded by examining changing economic conditions after the First World War. High cattle prices had encouraged farmers to focus on livestock sales, but falling prices and restrictions on exports exposed the weaknesses of this strategy. Dairying, by contrast, was presented as a more stable source of income. Converting agricultural produce into milk, butter, and cheese often generated greater returns than selling it in its raw form. Comparisons with the Netherlands, which supported a dairy herd almost equal to Ireland's despite its smaller size, were used to demonstrate the potential for more intensive and productive land use.⁴

An article published in 'The Irish Statesman' in June 1924 highlighted the economic potential of the Kerry cow, presenting it as a breed that could improve agricultural productivity and strengthen Saorstát Éireann's position in emerging dairy markets. At a time when Irish agriculture was seeking greater efficiency and export opportunities, the Kerry cow was portrayed as a valuable native resource. The breed was considered

⁴ S Mac Conneachtain, 'The Possibilities of Dairy Farming on Arable Land: Suggestions to Cope with Unemployment' *The Free State* (7 October 1922).

particularly suited to Ireland's upland and marginal farming regions. According to the article, Kerry cattle were hardy, resistant to disease, required relatively little feed, and produced high yields of milk. They were said to consume about one-third less feed than larger breeds while producing more milk than the average Irish cow. Their milk was especially valued for its high butter-fat content, making it well suited to butter and cheese production. The article focused on the breeding work of Sir John Fitzgerald, the Knight of Kerry, whose herd at Valentia, County Kerry, was regarded as one of the oldest surviving Kerry cattle herds. In 1923, a new herd was established at Stanmore near London using animals largely drawn from Valentia. The project aimed to demonstrate the breed's commercial value in the growing British market for premium dairy products. To support this goal, the Stanmore facilities were adapted to meet the strict standards required for the production of certified milk. This involved careful regulation of hygiene, storage and distribution, with milk monitored from production to delivery. Certified milk commanded premium prices, reflecting increasing consumer demand for clean and nutritious dairy products in Britain's urban centres. The venture also sought to promote the Kerry breed among British farmers and breeders. Milk yields were officially recorded and independently verified, providing evidence of the breed's productivity. Particular attention was given to the quality of Kerry milk, which was reported to have a higher butter-fat content than many competing breeds. The article also noted the success of Kerry creameries and dairies at Royal Dublin Society exhibitions, where they had won awards for butter and cheese production. Beyond dairy farming, the article argued that Kerry cattle had strong export potential. Their combination of hardiness, adaptability and apparent resistance to tuberculosis made them attractive to breeders abroad, particularly as public health campaigns increased interest in clean milk supplies. While a domestic market for certified milk might eventually develop, the breed's immediate importance was seen in its ability to improve profitability in Ireland's hill farming districts. Although dairy production received most attention, the article also emphasised the value of Kerry cattle as beef animals. They were described as capable of thriving on poor land while producing high-quality beef and veal when properly finished. The breed's supposed suitability for smaller, leaner cuts of meat was seen as an advantage in changing consumer markets.⁵

SCIENTIFIC IMPROVEMENT, LEGISLATION AND POLICY REFORM

An editorial in 'The Irish Statesman' from July 1924 welcomed the Dairy Produce Bill as an important step in modernising and regulating

⁵ 'The Commercial Value of the Kerry Cow' *The Irish Statesman* (14 June 1924).

Ireland's dairy industry. It argued that the legislation would improve the quality of Irish butter and strengthen its reputation in export markets by introducing enforceable standards of production and hygiene. Particular support was given to a provision allowing the Minister to require registered creameries to install pasteurisation equipment. Although some producers claimed that high-quality butter could be made without pasteurisation, the editorial argued that the co-operative creamery system, which combined milk from many suppliers, made contamination difficult to control. Pasteurisation was therefore seen as the most reliable way to ensure consistent quality and reduce bacterial risks. The Bill was presented as one of the most significant agricultural measures introduced during the early Free State period. It marked a shift from largely unregulated production towards a system based on scientific standards, inspection, and state oversight. The legislation was expected to improve hygiene not only in creameries but also on farms by penalising the supply and acceptance of dirty or contaminated milk, encouraging higher standards throughout the dairy sector. Despite its support for the Bill, the editorial criticised its failure to address milk sold directly for human consumption. Concerns about impure milk supplies had long been linked to poor public health and high infant mortality in Irish towns and cities. The article therefore called for further legislation to regulate urban milk supplies and improve public health standards. The editorial also rejected proposals from the Council of Creamery Managers to rely primarily on inspection and grading at ports of export. While visual examination could identify obvious defects, it couldn't detect bacterial contamination, which was considered a major cause of Irish butter's weaker keeping quality compared with Danish butter and other competitors. The Bill sought to address this problem by requiring technical competence from producers using the National Brand and by maintaining standards through regular inspection. A key distinction was drawn between earlier voluntary improvement schemes and the new regulatory framework. Previous branding and quality campaigns lacked effective enforcement and achieved limited results. The Dairy Produce Bill, by contrast, gave the state powers to enforce compliance through inspections and penalties, making meaningful reform more likely. The article also placed these developments within an international context, pointing to foreign examples where scientific supervision was combined with inspection and grading. It argued that modern butter production increasingly depended on scientific expertise and that technical decisions should be guided by qualified specialists, while still drawing upon the practical experience of those involved in the trade. Overall, the editorial viewed the Dairy Produce Bill as a major advance. Through its emphasis on pasteurisation, technical competence, inspection, and enforceable standards, the legislation was expected to improve product quality,

strengthen export competitiveness, and contribute to the wider modernisation of Irish agriculture.⁶

Debates in 'The Irish Statesman' during the mid-1920s, as seen in an edition from August 1924, reflected wider concerns about the efficiency and organisation of Ireland's dairy industry. Two issues attracted particular attention: the large number of creameries operating in dairying districts and the quality of management within agricultural co-operatives. In July 1924, the County Kerry Association of the Irish Farmers' Union argued that too many central and auxiliary creameries were operating in County Kerry. It maintained that this duplication increased costs, reduced efficiency, and limited the profits available to milk suppliers. The association proposed that the Department of Agriculture should be given powers to close surplus creameries after consulting farmers and proprietors, with compensation paid to affected owners by the remaining creameries that would benefit from increased milk supplies. It also suggested that similar problems existed elsewhere and should be addressed through dairy legislation. 'The Irish Statesman' opposed this proposal. While acknowledging that overlapping creamery districts existed, the editorial argued that farmers already possessed the means to deal with inefficient creameries because they controlled the milk supply on which these businesses depended. If a creamery was uneconomic, suppliers could simply take their milk elsewhere. The article also warned that state-directed closures could create local monopolies, reducing competition and limiting farmers' freedom to choose between co-operative and proprietary creameries. Although supportive of co-operation, the editorial maintained that such decisions should remain with producers rather than government officials. Alongside these debates, attention was also given to the quality of management within co-operative societies. Correspondence published in the journal argued that managerial competence was a key factor in the success or failure of agricultural co-operatives. One contributor suggested that weaknesses in management had contributed to the slower development of Irish co-operation compared with more successful movements abroad. The writer argued that improving managerial training was more practical than attempting to reform the attitudes of large co-operative committees. Effective managers could provide business leadership, improve administration, and help educate committee members in co-operative principles. Professional training was considered essential, combining technical knowledge, business skills, and a commitment to co-operative ideals. Together, these discussions highlighted important themes in Irish agricultural development during the 1920s. Debates over creamery rationalisation reflected concerns about efficiency, competition, and the role of state intervention, while

⁶ The Irish Statesman (12 July 1924).

discussions of management revealed a growing belief that modern agricultural enterprises required professional administration as well as farmer participation. Both formed part of a broader effort to modernise the dairy industry and strengthen the competitiveness of Irish agriculture during the early Free State period.⁷

In November 1925, the final report of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (I.A.O.S.) Butter Control Scheme was discussed in an edition of 'The Irish Statesman' by D. Houston, and offered a detailed technical examination of Irish creamery operations, focusing on hygiene, bacteriological contamination, and the consistency of butter production. Conducted by Mr Cullen, the survey traced the entire process from milk reception to the final packing of butter for export. A major concern was the poor standard of milk handling at intake. Equipment such as strainers was often damaged or difficult to clean, creating potential sources of contamination. Milk was heated to around 130–135°F and passed through filtration systems before separation, but cleaning practices were inconsistent, with some equipment flushed using unsuitable wash-water. The report identified ineffective pasteurisation and poor post-treatment handling as key causes of inconsistent butter quality. While pasteurisation could reduce bacterial content, recontamination during later stages often undermined its benefits. Temperature control was irregular, partly because pasteurisation was overseen by staff with other duties. As a result, readings fluctuated, with tests showing major variation in bacterial counts between early and mid-flow cream. Raw cream itself was heavily contaminated, and in some cases pasteurised product was re-infected during handling, leading to even higher bacterial levels than before treatment. Cooling and storage presented further risks. Cooling equipment was exposed to dust and airborne microorganisms, and its design made proper sterilisation difficult. Cream stored in open vats was vulnerable to contamination from condensation and environmental debris, compounding hygiene problems. Churning processes, typically handling 120–130 gallons per batch, did not correct earlier contamination. Instead, bacterial levels in the finished butter largely reflected the quality of the original cream. Cleaning of churns was also limited by their design, relying on hot water and periodic lime washing rather than full manual sterilisation. The survey also highlighted broader structural and environmental deficiencies across creameries. Milk residues on walls contained extremely high levels of bacteria, while air testing in packing areas detected spores and microorganisms, particularly in draughty spaces. Similar issues were found in auxiliary branches, where poor layout and exposure increased contamination risks, and in some cases unpleasant odours were strong enough to draw public health attention. The report

⁷ The Irish Statesman (9 August 1924).

concluded that butter quality depended on strict hygiene control at every stage of production, from milk intake to packaging. It argued that systematic inspection and bacteriological testing should be central to enforcing standards under the Dairy Produce Act. The findings were intended for publication by the I.A.O.S. and were presented as an important step towards the scientific regulation and modernisation of Irish butter production.⁸

RE-ORGANISATION, MARKETING AND GROWTH

By February 1926, an editorial in 'The Irish Statesman' argued that Irish agriculture had entered a new phase following the progression of land reform. With ownership gradually being transferred from landlords to farmers, future progress would depend less on political campaigns and government intervention and more on farmers improving agricultural methods, organisation, and efficiency through their own efforts. The article maintained that while political mobilisation had been essential in securing land ownership, the challenges facing agriculture now required practical reforms. It criticised calls for extensive state subsidies, arguing that governments couldn't realistically subsidise the state's principal industry. Instead, it pointed to discussions within the County Longford Farmers' Union on co-operative organisation, livestock improvement, cow-testing, milk production, collective marketing, and management training as examples of reforms farmers could pursue themselves. A central theme was the importance of co-operative organisation. The editorial argued that Irish agriculture lacked many of the institutions found in more advanced farming economies. It highlighted the absence of an effective federation of dairy co-operatives, noting that Irish dairy societies generally marketed their products individually and often competed against one another. By contrast, dairy producers in places such as the United States of America had established large federations that coordinated production and marketing and invested in scientific research. The article suggested that Irish co-operatives had been slow to adopt such modern methods. The editorial also identified weaknesses in livestock insurance. Across continental Europe, mutual insurance societies helped farmers spread the financial risks associated with animal disease and mortality. In Ireland, however, livestock losses often led to demands for government assistance. Similar organisational shortcomings were said to exist in agricultural credit, purchasing, marketing, and manufacturing. Drawing on international examples, the article argued that successful agricultural development depended on voluntary associations created and managed by farmers themselves. While governments could support such initiatives through legislation and administration, they couldn't create them on farmers' behalf. The

⁸ D Houston, 'Final Report of the IAOS Butter Control Scheme: A Creamery Survey' *The Irish Statesman* (28 November 1925).

editorial noted that agricultural policy in Britain was moving in a similar direction and expressed confidence that the Irish government would support self-organised initiatives, particularly given its limited financial resources. The article concluded that effective agricultural administration depended on organised farmers 'groups capable of receiving and applying expert advice. Ireland's agricultural future, it argued, rested on co-operative organisation, scientific farming, and practical self-help rather than continued sole reliance on political agitation or state subsidies.⁹

An editorial in 'The Irish Statesman' from March 1927 welcomed the plans of Minister for Agriculture Patrick Hogan to reorganise the Irish dairy industry, presenting the reforms as the culmination of a struggle that had shaped Irish dairying for more than thirty years. According to the article, the central issue since the late nineteenth century had been the question of control: whether dairy production would be organised through farmer-owned co-operatives or proprietary creameries backed by private capital. Supporters of the co-operative movement argued that proprietary creameries could leave farmers economically dependent. Because milk was highly perishable and required immediate processing, ownership of local creamery facilities gave operators considerable market power. Once competition diminished and traditional butter-making declined, proprietary creameries could potentially reduce the prices paid to suppliers while maintaining profits. In response, the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (I.A.O.S.) organised farmers into co-operative dairy societies to ensure that processing and marketing remained under producers 'control. This campaign proved successful, leading to the creation of an extensive network of farmer-owned creameries across Ireland. Despite this growth, proprietary and co-operative creameries continued to coexist. By the mid-1920s there were approximately 400 co-operative societies and 180 proprietary creameries. The editorial argued that this dual system created significant problems. Competition for milk supplies often led creameries to offer higher prices to attract suppliers, while neighbouring co-operatives sometimes competed against one another. This rivalry encouraged inconsistent payment practices and produced inequalities between farmers in different districts. The article also criticised the excessive number of creameries established in some dairying regions. Duplicated facilities and high operating costs reduced efficiency and profitability across the industry. As competition intensified, some co-operative societies failed, while certain proprietary firms withdrew from the market altogether. The editorial contrasted Saorstát Éireann with other States, where governments had introduced legislation to regulate competition and reduce inefficiencies in the dairy sector. It argued that previous Irish

⁹ 'Agriculture on Its Own Legs' *The Irish Statesman* (13 February 1926).

administrations had done little to address these structural problems. Against this background, Hogan's reforms were presented as an effort to rationalise a fragmented industry. By reducing inefficiencies, regulating competition, and creating a more coherent organisational framework, the proposed reorganisation was expected to strengthen dairy production and improve the position of farmers within the Irish dairy economy.¹⁰

On a similar note, in September 1927, the 'Freeman's Journal' examined efforts to reorganise the Irish dairy sector during the 1920s and presented the government's creamery purchase scheme as a major step towards stronger producer control of the industry. It argued that co-operative ownership offered a fairer and more efficient alternative to proprietary creameries, where profits could be concentrated in the hands of private owners rather than milk suppliers. The paper's article explained that farmers were generally paid only after butter had been sold, meaning their income depended on the market value of finished dairy products. Under purely private ownership, however, farmers had little influence over processing or marketing and risked receiving an even smaller share of the profits generated from their milk. The author pointed to European states where dairying was organised on a co-operative basis, allowing farmers to own and control processing facilities themselves. The government's creamery reorganisation programme was presented as an attempt to bring Ireland into line with these successful models by transferring ownership from private companies to co-operative societies. This objective was portrayed as the culmination of a long-standing movement within Irish agriculture to place the dairy industry under direct farmer control. A major criticism of the prevailing system was the lack of regulation governing creamery locations and milk supply areas. Co-operative and proprietary creameries often competed directly for suppliers, encouraging farmers to switch between buyers for marginal gains. While this competition appeared beneficial in the short term, the article argued that it created instability and inefficiency. Rival creameries operated overlapping collection systems, faced uncertain milk supplies, and incurred higher costs. These expenses ultimately reduced the returns available to farmers and, in some cases, threatened the survival of co-operative societies. To address these problems, the government purchased a large group of proprietary creameries, including 114 formerly owned by a single company. Of the roughly 580 creameries and auxiliary stations operating in the Free State, around 400 were already co-operatively owned, while about 180 remained private. The policy was to transfer viable purchased creameries to co-operative societies and close those considered unnecessary because of their proximity to existing facilities. Milk supplies from closed creameries would be redirected to neighbouring co-operatives. By the time of writing, nineteen creameries

¹⁰ The Resurrection of Irish Dairying 'The Irish Statesman (26 March 1927).

had already been transferred to co-operative ownership and forty-three had been closed and absorbed into existing networks. The aim was to reduce duplication, lower costs, and establish economically sustainable milk supply areas. The article also noted plans for legislation that would protect co-operative societies from future competition by newly established private creameries. Policymakers believed that co-operatives required secure supply areas to remain viable and that unrestricted competition could undermine their stability. These protections were presented as necessary to preserve the benefits of co-operative ownership and ensure the long-term efficiency of the dairy industry. Alongside structural reform, attention was given to improving butter marketing. The Irish Agricultural Organisation Society was working to establish a centralised marketing system that would reduce transport costs and improve distribution. More efficient marketing was expected to strengthen the position of Irish butter in export markets and increase returns to producers. Government-backed loans for new creameries and auxiliary stations were also supporting the modernisation of dairy infrastructure. The article concluded by stressing the importance of dairying to the wider agricultural economy. The creamery reorganisation programme was portrayed as more than an administrative reform; it was part of a broader effort to strengthen farmers economically through collective ownership and co-operation. By placing processing facilities under farmer control, the scheme aimed to ensure that producers received a larger share of the wealth generated by the industry while also creating a stronger and more resilient agricultural sector. The discussion reflects concerns about competition, market power, and profit distribution, while illustrating the transition from a mixed system of proprietary and co-operative creameries towards a more coordinated, farmer-controlled dairy industry during the interwar period.¹¹

In 1928, the 'Freeman's Journal' offered a critical account of proceedings in the Free State Dáil concerning proposed legislation affecting the organisation of the dairy industry. The discussion focused in particular on a dispute raised by members of the Fianna Fáil party regarding developments at the Tipperary Co-operative Creamery, which the article characterised as an overstatement of a relatively minor issue. The author reported that the Minister for Agriculture dismissed the controversy as a "storm in a teacup," a view which the article broadly endorsed after reviewing the parliamentary exchanges. It suggested that the opposition criticism was based on a misunderstanding of the facts and that the ensuing debate ultimately served to clarify the situation rather than to reveal any substantive administrative failing. Fianna Fáil deputies were described as attempting to portray the Minister's policy as excessively

¹¹ 'The Creamery Industry: Dairying Profits to Go to the Farmer' *The Freeman's Journal* (24 September 1927).

authoritarian and potentially damaging to emerging industrial activity, particularly the production of casein in Tipperary. The article, however, argued that this characterisation wasn't supported by the evidence presented in the debate. A key intervention cited in the article clarified the nature of the Tipperary operation, noting that casein wasn't in fact being manufactured locally. Instead, milk was being coagulated and transported in bulk containers to Germany for processing. This statement was presented as undermining the claim that a domestic processing industry was being suppressed, and the article suggested that it weakened the political narrative advanced by Fianna Fáil members. The author further implied that this clarification exposed a lack of detailed knowledge among those who had initiated the criticism, although it also noted that the revelation removed the basis for what had been intended as a prominent political argument. In response to the debate, the Minister for Agriculture reaffirmed the government's policy objective of transferring the production of milk products into the hands of farmers themselves. This policy was presented as part of a broader programme of dairy industry reorganisation designed to strengthen co-operative ownership and reduce reliance on external commercial interests. The Minister also argued that the involvement of foreign firms in purchasing milk supplies for processing abroad was incompatible with national policy objectives. Such arrangements were viewed as potentially disruptive to the development of a domestic dairy processing sector under co-operative control. The article suggested that, in light of these clarifications, the criticisms raised in the Dáil did not present a coherent case against government policy. Instead, the exchange was portrayed by the partisan newspaper as demonstrating the strength of the Minister's position and the relative weakness of the opposition argument.¹²

A report published by the 'Freeman's Journal' during September 1929 presented the Dairy Produce Act as a significant factor in the expansion and improvement of the Irish Free State's butter industry during the mid-1920s. The article noted that butter exports to Great Britain increased from 401,559 cwt., valued at nearly £3.65 million in 1925, to 585,501 cwt., valued at approximately £4.57 million in 1927, representing an increase of almost £1 million in export value over two years. Contemporary observers attributed this growth to rising demand for Irish butter in Britain and to the regulatory measures introduced under the Dairy Produce Act. The report emphasised the state's efforts to improve quality control through a system of registration and inspection. From 1927 onwards, butter could only be exported from premises registered under the Act. By March 1927, 288 premises involved in butter production or export and a further 305 cream-separating stations had been registered following detailed inspections and the implementation of required

¹² Events of the Week 'The Freeman's Journal' (11 August 1928).

improvements. Department of Agriculture inspectors regularly visited creameries, butter factories, and separating stations, enforcing standards of cleanliness and production. Between 1925 and 1926, 685 prosecutions were initiated for breaches of the Act, resulting in 601 convictions and fines totalling £1,087. The article highlighted the role of inspection in raising production standards. Surprise inspections, butter sampling, and chemical analyses were used to monitor quality, while new laboratory facilities were established at the Department's Butter Testing Station in Dublin. Training programmes for creamery managers, butter-makers, and creamery staff complemented these regulatory measures. Further controls introduced in 1928 strengthened export inspections by requiring examination of individual churnings and improved traceability through mandatory churn-number markings on export packaging. The report also described wider state intervention in the dairy sector. In 1926–27 the government financed the acquisition of a large group of proprietary creameries, with the intention of transferring viable operations to co-operative ownership and eliminating what were regarded as uneconomic competitive overlaps. This reorganisation sought to reduce duplication of costs, rationalise creamery locations, and improve returns to milk suppliers. According to the figures cited, the quality of Irish butter improved markedly during this period. The proportion of butter meeting the standard proposed for the National Mark reportedly rose from 62 per cent in 1927, to 98 per cent in inspection samples taken during 1928. The article therefore presented the combination of regulation, inspection, training, and industry reorganisation as evidence of the Free State government's success in increasing both the volume and quality of Irish butter exports.¹³

In mid-1929, an editorial in 'The Irish Statesman' examined and criticised aspects of Fianna Fáil's agricultural policy, particularly its support for subsidies to encourage wheat cultivation and other tillage crops. While the article agreed that the Irish Free State devoted too little land to tillage and that increased cultivation would benefit employment, rural society, and agricultural productivity, it questioned whether subsidies were the best means of achieving this goal. The editorial contrasted Fianna Fáil's approach with an alternative vision based on mixed farming, in which tillage expansion would develop alongside dairying and livestock production. To support this argument, it pointed to international examples, especially Denmark, where a highly successful dairy industry coexisted with extensive cultivation. It also cited a study from Oxford University, describing a profitable English farm that combined dairy production with large-scale tillage, demonstrating that arable farming and livestock enterprises could be integrated successfully without state assistance. According to the article, Irish farmers could increase

¹³ Irish Butter Trade Improves 'The Freeman's Journal (29 September 1928).

cultivation by growing crops that supported dairy and livestock production rather than relying on subsidies for cereals. While acknowledging differences between Irish and English farming systems, the editorial argued that mixed farming offered a practical route to greater tillage within existing agricultural structures. The main criticism of Fianna Fáil centred on its reliance on government support. The editorial suggested that the party sought to promote crops, particularly wheat, that couldn't compete profitably without subsidies, while paying less attention to established sectors such as dairying, pig production, and poultry farming. It argued that agricultural development should be driven by efficiency and market demand rather than by state incentives favouring particular forms of production. Particular attention was given to the agricultural proposals contained in the Minority Report of the Economic Committee, which was associated with leading Fianna Fáil figures. The editorial rejected the report's claim that the primary purpose of agriculture was the production of human food. Instead, it argued that farming should be understood primarily as a business enterprise whose objective was to generate income and profit. Farmers, therefore, should be free to produce whatever commodities offered the best economic return. The article further maintained that most agricultural output already contributed to the food supply, whether directly or indirectly through livestock and dairy products. Consequently, the key issue wasn't food production itself but the most efficient and profitable use of land and labour. Subsidies designed to redirect production towards particular crops were criticised as encouraging decisions based on political priorities rather than economic considerations. The inclusion of proposals to subsidise tobacco cultivation was cited as evidence of inconsistencies within the programme. This article highlights the ideological divisions that shaped agricultural policy debates in the late 1920s. Although there was broad agreement on the need to expand tillage and strengthen rural society, significant disagreement existed over the role of state intervention. The editorial reflected the views of agricultural economists and co-operative advocates who favoured profitability, market incentives, and improvements in farming methods over direct subsidies. The debate also revealed competing understandings of agriculture's purpose. Supporters of tillage subsidies emphasised food production and national self-sufficiency, while critics stressed farming's commercial character and the importance of allowing producers to respond to market conditions.¹⁴ These issues would become increasingly important during the 1930s, when Fianna Fáil governments adopted more interventionist and protectionist agricultural policies.¹⁵

¹⁴ Fianna Fáil's Food Policy 'The Irish Statesman (20 July 1929).

¹⁵ Michael Loughman, "Our Cattle Problem": Fianna Fáil, the Irish Cattle Trade and the Economic War, 1932–1938 '(2025) 52 *Irish Economic and Social History* <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/03324893241306418>> accessed 17 June 2026.

By November 1929, an editorial in 'The Irish Statesman' examined proposals to establish a co-operative milk-marketing organisation in the eastern counties of the Irish Free State. The initiative was seen as evidence that agricultural co-operation, long associated with western, southern, and northern regions, was gaining support among farmers in counties such as Dublin, Kildare, Meath, Louth, and Wicklow. The proposal emerged in response to an anticipated Milk Bill that would regulate aspects of milk distribution and sale. Farmers supplying the Dublin market began considering the creation of a co-operative milk pool through which they could collectively negotiate contracts with urban retailers. The editorial regarded this as a significant step forward in the organisation of the dairy industry. The article contrasted the milk pool proposal with earlier suggestions that farmers should establish their own retail businesses in the Dublin region. While such schemes aimed to eliminate intermediaries, the editorial argued that they would be costly, risky, and outside farmers' areas of expertise. Instead, it favoured a co-operative model focused on collective wholesale marketing, allowing producers to strengthen their bargaining position without becoming involved in retail distribution. A key concern was the need for strong organisational discipline. The editorial argued that members should be required to market their milk exclusively through the co-operative under legally binding agreements. Without such commitments, the organisation would be vulnerable to instability and weakened bargaining power. Drawing on previous experiences within Irish co-operative agriculture, the article noted that some farmers had bypassed co-operatives when higher prices were available elsewhere, undermining collective efforts. It warned that a milk pool would face similar difficulties unless members were contractually bound to support it. Examples from England and Scotland were cited, where exclusive marketing agreements were a standard feature of successful producers' organisations. The article illustrates the continuing development of agricultural co-operation in the Irish Free State during the 1920s. Whereas earlier co-operative activity had focused primarily on creameries and butter production, increasing attention was now being given to collective marketing and market regulation. The proposed milk pool reflected a growing belief that co-operation could improve farmers' bargaining power in increasingly organised food markets. The proposed milk pool therefore represented an attempt to apply established co-operative principles to the expanding liquid milk market serving consumers in Dublin.¹⁶

¹⁶ 'The Free State Milk Pool' *The Irish Statesman* (16 November 1929).

CONCLUSION

The debates on dairy farming and agricultural modernisation that filled the pages of 'The Irish Statesman,' the 'Free State' and the 'Freeman's Journal' between 1920 and 1929 provide more than a technical discussion of milk yields and creamery organisation. They reveal the practical mindset of the commercial farming classes of Ireland in the formative years of the Irish Free State. As pro-Treaty organs deeply embedded in the government of the day, these publications consistently framed agricultural reform as the practical corollary of political independence. For farmers who supported the Treaty settlement, economic recovery lay not in revolutionary upheaval, but in steady, evidence-based progress: better education, selective breeding, scientific hygiene standards and agricultural co-operative organisation. This was reflected in 1920s legislative and policy achievements. The Dairy Produce Act (1924) introduced enforceable quality controls, pasteurisation requirements and inspection regimes that professionalised butter production and improved export performance. Minister Patrick Hogan's creamery reorganisation programme shifted proprietary facilities to farmer-owned co-operatives, cut wasteful duplication and strengthened producer control over processing and marketing. These efforts, along with cow-testing associations, the promotion of stud farms, and initiatives to raise agricultural education, aimed at closing the productivity gap with idealised European states such as Denmark and the Netherlands, as well as addressing public health concerns about the purity of milk.

Irish butter exports had increased significantly in both volume and reputation by the end of the decade, illustrating that the Free State's agricultural policy - based on self-help, co-operation and selective state intervention - was to some extent paying both political and actual dividends. Yet, the ongoing wrangling over subsidies, tillage and the bounds of voluntarism signalled the more interventionist policies of the 1930s. In the end, it was the reformers of the 1920s who demonstrated that the future of agriculture in Ireland wouldn't be built on rhetoric alone, but on the patient modernisation of its most vital industry. Thus, they helped to anchor the new state in the practical support of its commercial farmers and laid essential foundations for the modernisation of Irish dairying.

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