**The Cleeves and the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland.**

**A History and Business Analysis of its Rise, Peak and Stunning Fall.**

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**Table of Contents**

[Introduction 3](#_Toc210314904)

[Limerick and the dairy industry overview. 3](#_Toc210314905)

[Cleeve’s Arrival in Ireland and early life 4](#_Toc210314906)

[Cleeve in J.P Evans and introduction to Dairy 5](#_Toc210314907)

[Why pick condensed milk as a product? 6](#_Toc210314908)

[Cleeve first dairy factory 6](#_Toc210314909)

[Formation of the Condensed Milk Company 7](#_Toc210314910)

[Early expansion of the Condensed Milk Company 7](#_Toc210314911)

[Other major Factories outside Limerick City. 9](#_Toc210314912)

[Cleeves’s success and company output. 10](#_Toc210314913)

[The Lansdowne Factory History 11](#_Toc210314914)

[The Renovations of the Lansdowne factory in 1898. 12](#_Toc210314915)

[Company Strategy and Overview Pre-World War One 15](#_Toc210314916)

[Thomas Cleeve’s Life, Legacy and Impact. 17](#_Toc210314917)

[Cleeve’s Impact on Limerick 17](#_Toc210314918)

[Cleeve’s Death 19](#_Toc210314919)

[World War One and Changes to International Trade 20](#_Toc210314920)

[Economic effect of World War One: Limerick and the Condensed Milk Company 21](#_Toc210314921)

[World War One’s influence on Condensed Milk 23](#_Toc210314922)

[Post war Aftershocks Affecting Limerick 26](#_Toc210314923)

[Irish War of Independence and the Creamery Attacks 27](#_Toc210314924)

[Effect On the Condensed Milk Company 28](#_Toc210314925)

[Start of Limerick Soviet And its Causes. 29](#_Toc210314926)

[The Limerick Soviet and the Condensed Milk company 30](#_Toc210314927)

[The Strikes Spread out from Limerick. 32](#_Toc210314928)

[The last gasps under Cleeve Ownership. 34](#_Toc210314929)

[The Long strike and the Civil War 35](#_Toc210314930)

[Collapse, Liquidation and New Ownership. 36](#_Toc210314931)

[The Condensed Milk Company and the Co-operative price war. 38](#_Toc210314932)

[Government intervention, Purchase and the Formation of the Dairy Disposal Company 39](#_Toc210314933)

[Conclusion 41](#_Toc210314934)

[Authors note 42](#_Toc210314935)

# Introduction

This dissertation will seek to provide a complete narrative and business history on the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland. This paper will explore the history of Limerick that led to the economic environment the company would flourish in. An introduction and examination of Thomas Cleeve, the leading man behind the firm and discussing his actions and impact on the company and Limerick city. The main body of the paper will be exploring the economic, social, and political history of the Condensed Milk Company, and will try and examine the complex web of events that led to its liquidation and eventual Nationalisation.

The period of time covered on this paper will be from Cleeves arrival in Ireland in 1860 to the Nationalisation of the company in 1927. There will be an intense focus on the company’ years in operation from 1885-1927.

## Limerick and the dairy industry overview.

The was a massive shift in land use after the great famine in Munster. The Irish population was halved, and this meant that the dominant tillage that had been a staple in Munster began to decline. With a lower population density land prices and demand for food fell, and this opened the door for an increase in pastureland and cattle. This was aided by the increase in large farms, which could facilitate large cattle herds. Limerick was at the heart of this dairy boom.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Limerick was the northern point of the Irish dairy belt stretching from Kilkenny, Tipperary and reaching northern Cork. This was some of the best dairy land in the United Kingdom and had the Shannon River connecting much of the area to Limerick. From Limerick port the opportunities for trade, both home and abroad, allowed for many different industries to flourish. Dairy would be one of those industries to boom.

Limerick was on the cutting edge of dairy production. As the 19th century drew to a close Creameries had sprung up all across the county. These creameries took butter production from the farms and brought them to their own separate factories, the specialisation of labour improved the production in the county.[[2]](#footnote-3)

In the pre-Creamery era of the Irish dairy industry, a majority of milk was processed at home on the farm. Milk would be skimmed, and butter churned all by hand and then packed into barrels. These barrels, manufactured in the local area, were called firkins and could hold 70 pounds. Firkins would then be sold at the local market.

In the 1850s, the industrial revolution began to change the dairy industry across the British Isles. The average family was benefiting from the Victorian Golden age and better wages saw increase in purchasing power. This increased consumer demand for previously luxury products such as dairy.

In the post famine era, butter was exported from Ireland to England in larger amounts. From 1870 to 1875 30,000 tonnes of Irish butter was exported annually. In 1860 other European countries began selling dairy to the British market so Irish dominance did not last long.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Innovations from abroad also began to increase the level of competition within the Irish market. In 1879, Dr Gustav De Laval of Sweden invented the continuous cream separator and began to manufacture and sell it. This innovation together with the central fugal separator and the powered driven churn, were enabling technologies for the initial creation of centralised creameries[[4]](#footnote-5)

All over Western Europe creameries opened their doors and Denmark lead the way. In 1882 an organisation of cooperative creameries was created in Denmark and by working together greatly improved the quality and consistency of the butter reaching the British market.

The first cooperative society that established a Creamery was in Drumcollogher, Co. Limerick in 1889, its creation was negotiated by Horace Plunkett, thanks to his connections with Limerick’s Lord Monteagle.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Other European dairy exports to the British market grew and in some cases were of higher quality than Irish supply. Irish suppliers had become complacent with their relative monopoly in the British market. Between 1877 to 1879 there was a collapse in the Irish butter prices that caught many farmers off guard. The seven-month average price of Cork butter tumbled from 137 shillings per CWT in 1876 to only 100 shillings in 1879. This was a massive 29% price drop.[[6]](#footnote-7)

## Cleeve’s Arrival in Ireland and early life

Thomas Cleeve was born in Quebec in 1844. Quebec was a popular destination for Irish emigres as there were many Catholics compared to the other British North American colonies as it had been originally colonised by the French. His mother, Sophia Journeaux, was of Irish descent, and was from a French Huguenot (Protestant) family. Thomas’s father, Edward Elmes Cleeve, was an English immigrant to Quebec, they were an Anglican family. Thomas Henry Cleeve was the eldest amongst six sons and one daughter.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Cleeve was educated in Canada and left for Ireland at the age of 16. Cleeve initially lived with his mother’s family in Limerick together with his brother Fredrick. They travelled to Ireland to be apprentices for a trading concern called J.P. Evans & Company. The Cleeve’s uncle on their mothers’ side, Mr Ben Journeaux, had ran the business for many years and was happy to take his nephews on board.[[8]](#footnote-9) It is likely Mr Journeaux had no children of his own, none were found in a search of the national archives, as the Cleeves brothers would ultimately gain control of J.P. Evans & Company. In addition, there is no record of any cousins during this time.

# Cleeve in J.P Evans and introduction to Dairy

J.P. Evans & Company was a mercantile house based in Limerick that operated as a distributer of a variety of goods. The brothers worked in the firm with their uncle for many years. [[9]](#footnote-10)

Upon the departure of Mr Journeaux, who retired in Dublin[[10]](#footnote-11), as the older brother and the most experienced, Thomas Cleeve took control of the firm. When Cleeve took over the firm, he began baling hay for military contracts with the British Army, starting with the local Limerick Garrison. He eventually made his big break through by supplying hay for the British army during the Anglo-Zulu war in 1879.[[11]](#footnote-12)

This early experience in international trade would be valuable when running the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland. Cleeve owned a premise in Limerick which pressed the hay for them, this was located in Howley’s quay, and was eventually taken over by the Bedford Motor Company. From Limerick port they shipped baled hay directly to England - mostly on military contracts. The Cleeve brothers also owned a steamer called” Fanny” that transported their bailed hay.[[12]](#footnote-13)

JP Evans and Co expanded in the following years and began selling agricultural tools and seeds as their staple products. Thanks to his pre-existing family ties in the region and his hay bailing connections with farmers, Thomas Cleeve built up a network of farmers that he sold farming and cultivating tools. These relationships, with the largest stakeholders in the Irish milk production industry, would later benefit him when creating the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland.

In 1882 while at an agricultural show in Clonmel, Thomas Cleeve watched a demonstration, by a Danish firm, of a machine separating cream from milk and immediately realised its potential. Denmark was leading the way in dairy production at the time and had made significant inroads into the British dairy market. Centralised creameries were popping up all over Denmark and Cleeve realised that such a system could work in Munster.[[13]](#footnote-14)

Cleeve saw a niche in the growing industry of Dairy Production. Milk and Dairy products were becoming easier to produce as new methods of farming and revolutionary technology emerged in the latter part of the 19th century. As managing director of JP Evans and Company, he combined his business connections and intimate knowledge of Munster’s dairy market to create a business proposition.[[14]](#footnote-15)

## Why pick condensed milk as a product?

The titular product sold by the Condensed Milk Company was condensed milk. It was not a new product at the time, being first produced at a small scale in France in the 1820’s. The first large boom in condensed milk production was in the United States. The distances between the urban and dairy producing regions in the U.S proved a large obstacle for farmers. America was plagued by illnesses derived from poor quality milk, soured over long journeys to consumers.[[15]](#footnote-16)

Gail Borden combined condensed milk with new innovations in canning to make the product that Cleeve would sell. The canning innovations, like the vacuum can, created a consistent vacuum, which allowed food to be preserved for much longer.[[16]](#footnote-17)

Condensed milk stored in cans made its big break during the American Civil War. The U.S civil war, beginning in 1858 created a very large demand for preservable food and condensed milk became a staple on both sides of the conflict.

In the 1860s, mass mobilisation and trench warfare tactics required far more complicated supply logistics to feed so many men. Militaries at the time became more reliant on non-perishable goods to supply frontline soldiers.

Troops returning home at the end of the Civil War remembered and adored condensed milk and its popularity boomed in the US. Decades later when World War One commenced, military contractors in the British Empire turned to condense milk as a key part of its food supply for the frontline troops.[[17]](#footnote-18)

## Cleeve first dairy factory

The first factory the Cleeve brothers established was for the manufacturing of prepared coffee in 1881.[[18]](#footnote-19) This factory was in the Lansdowne area of Limerick by the old shipyard, opposite the present Condensed Milk Companies Lansdowne factory in Limerick.

After the initial success of this business, Cleeve was still adamant about his ideas for a centralised milk manufacturing facility and wrote a pamphlet setting out his plans. He documented his goal to create a business focusing on dairy production, especially condensed milk, in Leinster and had it sent to many major farmers and businessmen around Limerick city.[[19]](#footnote-20)

In Limerick at the time, there were few conglomerated dairy firms, instead many individual farms had small scale manufacturing operations on site, but these were not very productive. Cleeve's believed that centralised production would reduce costs and boost overall production compared to the individual farmers.

Cleeve worked for many years after the publishing of his pamphlet to persuade farmers across Munster to work with him on his idea. Cleeve started small, producing condensed milk and butter on a modest scale to find the optimal production process and create a streamlined system for when his business scaled in size. He did this in his factory by the shipyard, gradually replacing his coffee business.

They embarked on the small-scale manufacture of their dairy products in the coffee plant. After proving the feasibility of their operations, they began to scale up their factory and the opportunities this industry provided were quickly observed by prominent Limerick businessmen looking to join with the brothers.[[20]](#footnote-21)

# Formation of the Condensed Milk Company

Cleeve entered into business with Edmund Russell and William Beauchamp in 1883. These three men brought a diverse set of skills and experience which allowed them to work together to create a successful business. Edmund Russell a milling and shipbuilding magnate from the influential Russell Family in Limerick, owned the factory in Lansdowne that would become home for the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland.[[21]](#footnote-22)

Russell was a descendant of John Russell, the Russell family patriarch. Beauchamp was an influential lawyer who later on his life would become a Clerk of the Crown and Peace. With this local support, especially by one of the most powerful men in Limerick, the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland began operation. Upon the formation of this new partnership the company began a massive renovation project on the adjected Lansdowne Rd factory. They would lead to a new factory in 1889.[[22]](#footnote-23)

The Russell mill, purchased by Thomas Cleeve, was originally built to be used for textile production, but at the time of purchase it had been redesigned as a flour mill. Cleeve quickly transformed it into a factory specialising in the manufacture of Condensed Milk and other dairy products. The factory will be explored in depth later in this document.

## Early expansion of the Condensed Milk Company

After the initial success of the business, three more of Thomas’s brothers would arrive from Canada to assist their brother, with a fourth brother arriving several years later. The arrival of his brothers was a great help to Cleeve who gave each of his brothers a division of his enterprise to manage. They developed a network of smaller factories and creameries that ran efficiently and autonomously. [[23]](#footnote-24)

The arrival of Thomas’s brothers to Ireland benefited him. Trust was a cornerstone of business during this time and due to the high risk of fraud by financial partners, having close family relatives assist you in operations meant that Cleeve had people he could fully trust. Cleeve was still an outsider to many in Munster and having so much family support was reassuring to Thomas. He could afford to give his brothers a small measure of autonomy and they were independently able to spread out across the County of Munster, establishing a number of creameries to support the factory.

This arrangement proved lucrative and it was deemed advisable to expand the company rapidly. The company embarked on creating a chain of creameries and condensing stations throughout Munster. The hotspot areas for condensed milk company expansion were in Tipperary, Knocklong, Kanfurk, Clonmel, Carrick On Suir and Bruree in these early years.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Farmers who hadn't signed up initially with Cleeve noted their compatriots who had were able to sell more milk at a higher price. This began a cascade effect with many farmers throughout the Munster region attempting to join up with Cleeve, creating a lot of interest in the company.

This led to very fast initial growth and by 1892 the factory was using the milk of more than 10,000 cows to produce butter for home and export markets and 60,000 tins a day on average. Cleeve produced more than enough for the Irish market, so set up offices in London and Liverpool to aid in the export of his products.[[25]](#footnote-26)

Finding themselves now with a surplus in Dairy a large chocolate manufactory was constructed adjacent to the Lansdowne factory. The Chocolate Factory only operated for a short period of time and eventually was replaced by toffee and other confectionery plants. This factory was located in Charlotte Quay. Toffee proved to be far more lucrative and Cleeves toffee flourished as an enterprise.[[26]](#footnote-27)

The growth of the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland was both notable and phenomenal for its time. They had broken the mould of previously failed companies who were unable to create a foothold in the dairy production industry like the Irish Condensed Milk Company, not to be confused with the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland. [[27]](#footnote-28)

The company was aided by one of the finest waterways in Ireland - the Shannon. Having such a large port made the export of the dairy products very feasible and cost effective. One difference between this condensed milk product and previous other failures, was the material quality of the cans that stored the milk. New machinery and expertise steadily overcame previous engineering hurdles and allowed for the condensed milk to be preserved for an indefinite period while maintaining the highest quality.

Due to how many farmers wished to work with the Cleeve brothers. Cleeve was able to impose very strict quality standard for the milk the factory accepted. Farmers had to change their miking and transport methods to adhere to these high standards of cleanliness in the handling of the milk. Overall, this created a higher quality of dairy produce compared to smaller operations. When the business expanded to its new factory it was one of the best in Europe. The Lansdowne factory was said to have attracted the eye of everyone who sailed on the Shannon as a magnificent pile of ashlar masonry.

## Other major Factories outside Limerick City.

In 1888, a large factory was built in Mallow,[[28]](#footnote-29) and in 1889 another large construction took place in Clonmel. This factory was situated on Queen’s Street in Clonmel. It was a great success and within two years the Clonmel factory was moved to Suir island. A new premise was opened on the island after it was vacated by the Malcolmson cotton mill. [[29]](#footnote-30)

The repeal of the corn laws was a boom to the dairy industry in Clonmel and the new Condensed Milk Company factory would be a jewel in the town’s crown. Thomas Cleeve’s brother Joseph Cleeve took control of the company in Clonmel and he purchased two homes in the town, where his family would reside until the 1960s.[[30]](#footnote-31)

In the Clonmel factory, an average work force of men and women would staff the machinery, and at peak season this number would swell to 300. Clonmel factory was also an opportunity for women to work in areas outside of domestic jobs, and the factory was the only source of employment for a very large number of women in Clonmel.[[31]](#footnote-32)

The wages at the Clonmel factory were above market average pay for its time. The factory produced mainly butter, condensed milk and casings, all of which were exported from Clonmel. The Clonmel factory, like the majority of the Cleeve Factories, reached its peak prosperity during the First World War.[[32]](#footnote-33)

By 1897, the Condensed Milk Company was the largest proprietor of dairy in Ireland. [[33]](#footnote-34)

In addition to the enormous factory at Lansdowne, the company had well equipped and working factories in the important agricultural centres of Mallow, Carrick On Suir, Kanturk, Bruree, Lattin, Birdhill, Clonea, Cranna, Bansha, Clonmel, Kilmallock, Dromkeen and Tipperary. [[34]](#footnote-35)

The factory in Tipperary is one of considerable size, being 300-foot-long with a 60-foot width and 44 feet high. The construction of this plant is estimated to have cost £30,000 and was constructed almost completely with steel.[[35]](#footnote-36)

The Tipperary factory opened in 1898 and the Condensed Milk Company began to extend its operation in the area. They eventually created a ring of branch creameries circling Tipperary town. The Tipperary farmers began to worry about giving so much power to the Condensed Milk Company whose profits were returned as dividends to its shareholders not the farmers. This was a common fear during this time among the local farming community as the Cleeves family would have been considered outsiders, encroaching into traditionally local economic relationships.[[36]](#footnote-37)

# Cleeves’s success and company output.

The statistics we have conveys the volume of business the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland was achieving at this time. The average amount of produce sold in 1898 was about 5,000 tonnes per month. Freightage paid to transport this produce cost £3,000 monthly.[[37]](#footnote-38)

The turnover of the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland is fully seven or eight times larger than that of any similar company of the United Kingdom. The manufactured products of the Condensed Milk Company used 350,000 gallons of new milk per week, or an astonishing 18,200,000 gallons per year. [[38]](#footnote-39)

In 1898 the Cleeve's interconnected enterprises now consisted of a network of creameries and 19 factories. altogether this network employed nearly 2000 people and consumed 350,000 gallons of milk, produced by 25,000 cows a week. The tins used in the condensed milk division of his business were produced by his own company, which required nearly 100,000 tins everyday keep up with the demands for the home and export markets. [[39]](#footnote-40)

The company sold product under five separate brands called The Cup, The Calf, The Goat, The Shamrock and Cleeves Full Cream Milk. The entire industry was under the direct management of the Cleeves brothers, with Sir Thomas Cleeve being the leader. The six Cleeve brothers all worked together to manage the firm’s different aspects Thomas H Cleeve. Mr F.C. Cleeve. Mr U. A. Cleeve, Mr E. B. Cleeve, Mr J. W. Cleeve, and Mr F. J. Cleeve. [[40]](#footnote-41)

As the Condensed Milk Company and its associated businesses grew, so did Thomas Cleeve’s personal wealth. With the success of his business empire, he accumulated a vast amount of wealth and influence across Munster. Cleeve began to gather political power in Limerick and was appointed to the Limerick Harbour Board and the Limerick Chamber of Commerce of which he served as the president. [[41]](#footnote-42)

Thanks to Cleeves unionist leanings and personal influence, he was elected as the city councillor for three years from 1899 to 1902. Thomas was able to run for this position thanks to the passing of the local government act of 1898. Thomas Cleeve was also the High Sheriff of Limerick on several occasions (1899–1901, 1908).[[42]](#footnote-43)

## The Lansdowne Factory History

The coffee factory ran by Thomas and Fredrick Cleeve became a Dairy plant in 1882. They used this smaller factory from 1882 to 1889. It was in 1889 when Thomas, Russell and Beauchamp came together and opened a massive plant on the north bank of the Shannon. There was an adjacent, unused factory next to the Lansdowne Road factory the Cleeves Brothers had been using, which was owned the Russell family.[[43]](#footnote-44)

The factory’s original construction was in 1851 by Russell and Sons. They were shipbuilders, flour millers and a powerful industrial family in Limerick at the time. In 1851 Russell and Sons had diversified into a number of industrial concerns, that employed a large number of people in the Limerick area and were one of the largest contributors to the revenue of Limerick ports. This revenue came in both imports of grain and coal and exports of flour and other manufactured commodities from their industrial empire. [[44]](#footnote-45)

Most of this trade was undertaken by vessels owned by the Russell firm. These ships were built in Limerick Harbour at the Lansdowne shipyards by Russell and Sons. In 1851, the Russell firm began to erect the building at Lansdowne, designed to be a flax spinning and weaving mill to create more products to export abroad[[45]](#footnote-46)

The firm was dedicated to the new factory and invested heavily in its speedy construction, taking only two years and finishing October 1853. Shortly afterwards the firm built a power loom factory next to it. This created a large number of jobs in the manufacture of yarn into linen. The factories exterior was a well-proportioned brick building, constructed out of limestone. This was a great addition to Limerick City and employed many young people who otherwise would have been working out in the fields. However, the flax mill closed in 1869.[[46]](#footnote-47)

According to local history, the closure of the linen mills was due to sabotage. This infamous event involved a specialist who was brought in by the company to supervise work at the factory. One day the gentlemen made a hasty departure from Limerick by train and was pursued by hundreds of displaced workers. It’s more likely the factory was unprofitable or other issues led to its closure.[[47]](#footnote-48)

The Mills remained closed for several years until later it was reopened as flour and corn mills. It continued in this state until 1889 which is when it was purchased by the Condensed Milk Company and it was retrofitted as a dairy factory.[[48]](#footnote-49)

## The Renovations of the Lansdowne factory in 1898.

The equipment used in the construction of the machinery within the factory was some of the finest and most complete in the world. The outlay on the construction of the internal production equipment in the factory was up about £100,000. This was an incredibly large investment for its time, especially in the city of the size of Limerick. This large capital injection shows the level of trust that was placed in Cleeve to create a very profitable business. [[49]](#footnote-50)This would be around £13.1 million pounds adjusted for inflation, but the purchasing power of that much money would be far more. [[50]](#footnote-51)

Specialists were drafted in by the Condensed Milk Company to create streamlined system of operations with clear and defined production lines. The milk production processes were designed to be as efficient as possible and this prior forethought paid dividends. Cleeve would have had seven years’ experience in producing Dairy in 1889 and would have helped craft the factory designs. [[51]](#footnote-52)

A number of transport docks were created to facilitate the transportation of so much milk into the factory. The departures section was large as well, to facilitate the large scale of transportation of condensed milk leaving the factory. A majority of the supplies of milk were brought by dairy farmers to the factory individually leading to an immense number of carts lined up daily at the factory awaiting discharge.

There was a special district service through Munster’s nascent railway network which brought milk to Limerick. These trains only serviced certain areas and were expensive, meaning only larger milk producers used them. These special trains were emptied constantly by wagons drawn by specifically chosen Clydesdale and Chester horses purchased by the Condensed Milk Company for this task. [[52]](#footnote-53)

The various processes used to treat the milk at the factory were highly technical, and we have details on how the different stages of manufacturing were completed inside the factory.[[53]](#footnote-54)

The first stage of the milk’s journey through the factory was the inspection phase. The incoming milk is inspected and sampled by man specially allotted for this important job. These men would be extremely experienced in handling milk and be experienced in identifying spoilt or tainted milk. This played a very important role in the quality control of the factories products as even a small amount of bad milk could spoil many litres of milk.[[54]](#footnote-55)

The milk was then funnelled into vats, where it was passed through plated wire strainers of a very fine mesh. This fine mesh strained the milk, removing small impurities like dirt or other undesirables. This improved the overall quality off the milk and helped it flow through the other machinery.

The milk was then funnelled into the pasture room where using high temperatures all germs and diseases are destroyed. This clean and disinfected milk was then cooled, and transferred into large tinned, copper vats. The temperature was risen once again, and the milk was permitted to boil for defined period of time. During this process imported crystalized sugar was then introduced into the mix.[[55]](#footnote-56)

This stage of the production process was highly monitored by a number of employees. When the boiling of the milk had reached completion, the milk was transferred through block pipes into condensers. These large copper vessels, each measuring 9 by 6 feet, are also known as vacuum pans. Each of these condensers had a capacity of 15,000 Imperial gallons and were fitted with elaborate valves and sluices to aid in their operation.

The operation of vacuum pans was a highly skilled job and the people in charge had a complex task with the timing the duration of the boiling and evaporation of the milk. Each of the vacuum pans had a number of thermometers and other measuring implements those employees were kept under constant attention. For condensed milk production, any overboiling or significant temperature drop rendered the product unusable.[[56]](#footnote-57)

After the period of boiling in the condensers, the milk was passed through thin copper tubes into tin vessels set in iced water tanks. The milk was stirred until cooled to the correct temperature. When this temperature was reached the milk was carefully placed in large cisterns. From these cisterns the milk was funnelled into awaiting tin cans. These cans were filled by expert hands and precise machines and the finished products were sent off to the general public.

These tin cans were produced on the premises. The sheer scale of the work done in the plant can be gathered from the fact that no less than 100,000 tins were produced by the factory and many are sold to other concerns. In the old premises, the tin cans had been fashioned by hand and this new tin can manufacturing machine has increased production significantly.[[57]](#footnote-58)

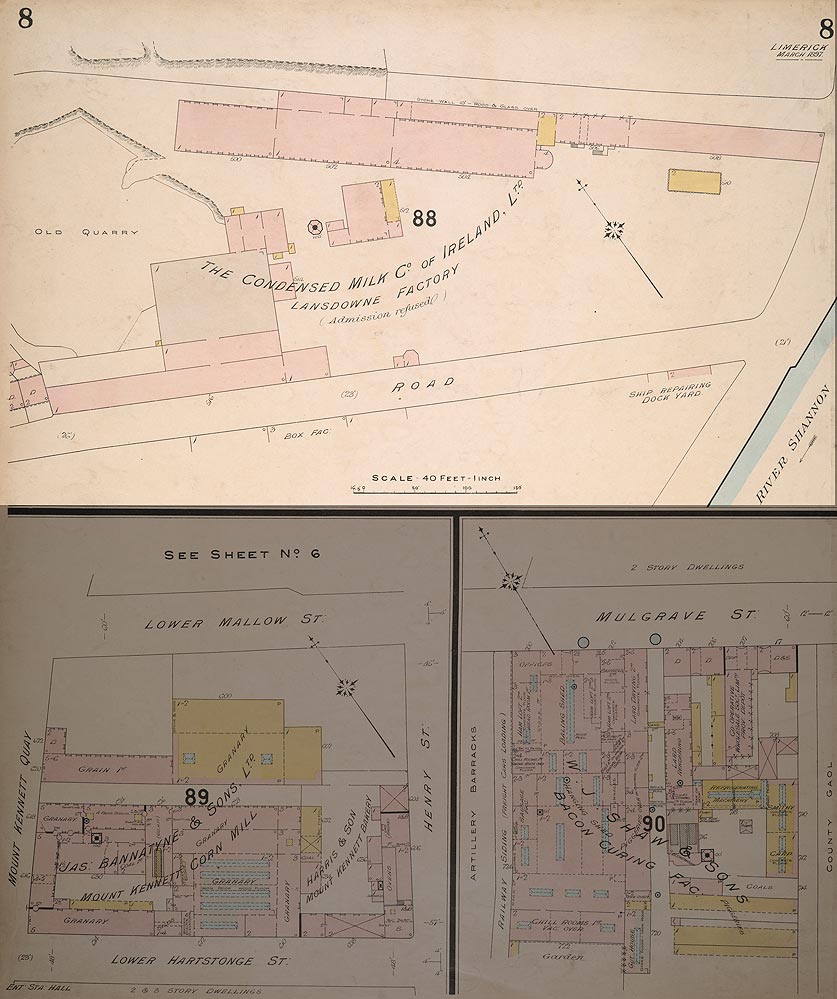
The tin can department had cutting edge machinery which was specifically selected by Sir Thomas Cleeve himself on a tour of similar European and American factories. Cleeve saw great promise in canning to preserve food and opened Cleeve Canning and Cold Storage Co in British Columbia, Canada. This worked to can fish for sale across the world. It was created in 1897 and sold in 1902 to the BC Packers Association who were conglomerating the industry. When it was sold it had machinery worth over 11,000 dollars.[[58]](#footnote-59)

Another important section of the factory was the woodworking department. This area of the factory was involved in box making and other accessories for packing and transport. This integration of the entire supply chain of the company makes the Condensed Milk Company’s condensed milk production entirely in-house. There was large labelling and dispatch departments within the factory premises. They were also well equipped with modern machinery and appliances. In this area the packaged Condensed Milk were sent off to a diverse number of destinations home and abroad. The forward shipping offices were extensive, provided with all the necessary convenience for dispatch of the product to enable the vast output of produce to be dispatched.[[59]](#footnote-60)

This was an energy intensive factory and a large amount of steam power was required to keep it running. This was achieved using five Galloway steam boilers. These massive steam engines were each 30 feet by 7 feet. The steam engines were purchased from Davy Paxman and Co from Colchester in England, each with 300 horsepower.[[60]](#footnote-61)

Another very interesting Department in the factory was its laboratory. This highly technical workspace was operated on scientific lines and was supplied with every appliance which modern science had produced. It had been an essential cog in factory and the laboratory has been inspected and toured by many of the leading dairy and industrial authorities and has been suggested to be the most equipped in the country.[[61]](#footnote-62)

The Goad fire plans for Limerick City, made in 1897, give us a snapshot of the factory’s size and layout during this time.

[[62]](#footnote-63)

# Company Strategy and Overview Pre-World War One

Thomas Cleeve had many traits in business that helped the Condensed Milk Company grow and expand during its first 10 years. Thomas was the Managing Director of the firm and used some business practices that would be very recognisable today. One of his favoured tactics was the integration of the entire supply chain of condensed milk production into his ownership. Cleeve bought and sought control of all the inputs and outputs the firm possessed.

There was an intense focus on the forward integration and downstream vertical integration in the business. Forward integration is a business strategy in which a business purchases the business activities that are ahead in their products value chain. Downstream vertical integration involves the purchase of business supplying or competing with your firm.

Thomas Cleeve's was not content to just produce Dairy goods, but also wanted to produce the milk they used, the tin cans they were stored in and the transport links that sold them. He wanted complete control of the entire industry from farmer to customer.

His initial focus on getting his brothers to set up their peripheral creameries and factories was to secure a constant and cheap supply of milk for his main factory. He then created working relationships with farmers and would purchase their entire supply. While these farmers were not employees in the traditional sense, they relied on the Condensed Milk Company for all their income, making them dependant on him.

Cleeve’s management career was also defined by how he identified processes that would add value to existing products through manufacturing. Cleeves constantly diversified their product portfolio added items such as cream, toffee, and chocolate. Instead of selling just butter, that butter would go into chocolates and toffee and sell for far more than the butter would, thereby adding value.

The vertical integration of the firm can be seen in the production of condensed milk. The milk supply was controlled by the company, the tins are made on site, the boxes are made on site, the finished product were distributed, transported, and sold all by the Cleeves Bro and Co, the distribution arm of the Condensed Milk Company. This forward integration of the company allowed for more controls on the cost of pricing supply and production all which allow for more profits to flow back into the business.

Thomas still ran J.P Evans in Co as well. This company became centred around providing dairy engineers and agricultural tools for farmers in Munster. Most of these farmers were selling milk to the Condensed Milk Company and this allowed Cleeves to create a two-way business relationship between him and the farmers who supplied him. J.P Evans and Co also ran an emporium and several wholesale warehouses in Limerick along with a pharmacy and sold a diverse offering of products including oils, varnish, cement, glass, seeds and lamps. [[63]](#footnote-64)

Branches of the Cleeves Bros and Co were established in London and Liverpool to facilitate sales into the British market. As the scale of production increased from 1889, the British market became more and more important to the firm.[[64]](#footnote-65)

In Limerick, Cleeve factories were employed in excess of 1000 workers in the period from 1900 to 1918. The main Lansdowne Road factory employed 600 workers, a majority of them woman. The other 400 were employed in other section of the business like the Toffee and confectionary factory on Charlottes Quay. [[65]](#footnote-66)

The peripheral creameries that supplied the business employed a further 2000, these creameries drew milk from a network of some 5000 farmers throughout the Munster area. Cleeve family operated some 100 Creamery separation stations and condensed milk factories in Munster and an estimated the 3000 people were directly employed by the company. The company was of vital importance to the local economy, especially for women who had few other employment options during the period. The entire business empire was run from the main factory in Limerick by Cleeves.[[66]](#footnote-67)

In 1913, Limerick had fifty-three co-operative creameries, each handling an average of 400,000 gallons of milk per annum. There would be a big boom in the number of competing creameries during the coming years and would put pressure on the milk supply in the province.[[67]](#footnote-68)

Cleeve’s main national and international competition was the Anglo-Swiss Condensed Milk Company and HOCHDORF. HOCHDORF would get a big coup in getting the British Navy as a customer during the First World War. They would also suffer huge losses in 1920-21 when milk prices would rise dramatically, resulting in many continental factories to cease production.[[68]](#footnote-69),[[69]](#footnote-70)

## Thomas Cleeve’s Life, Legacy and Impact.

By the time of his death, Thomas had become Sir Thomas Cleeve and had collected a number of businesses and titles into his personal portfolio. He had been the first High Sheriff of Limerick City. He was Chairman and Managing Director of the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland, he a was senior partner of Cleeves Bros of Limerick, London, and Liverpool along with his brother Fredrick. He was sole proprietor of J.P. Evans and Company and he was one of the largest shareholders in Cleeve Canning and Cold Storage of New Westminster, British Colombia in Canada.[[70]](#footnote-71)

On the passing of the local government act Cleeve was appointed as the first High Sheriff of Limerick. Cleeve's was also retained as one of the councillors for the customs house as well. He remained in office till 1902 in which he did not seek re-election. In 1906 he sought election as chancellor for the Castle ward district and came first in the voting. He retired in 1908 from this position upon declining health. He served as a member of the Harbour board and the Chamber of Commerce of which he was president for multiple years. Thomas was a big fan of yacht racing and hosted the Cleeve's Challenge Cup on the Shannon. Cleeve’s sporting hobbies extended to gymnastics and horse racing[[71]](#footnote-72)

## Cleeve’s Impact on Limerick

When Queen Victoria visited Ireland in 1900, Thomas Cleeve personally brought 500 employees from Limerick to Dublin to see her. He rented a special train for the event at great expense. This was great for his reputation with the British administration. After the Royal visit he was knighted for his services to industry and the Munster region by the Lord-lieutenant of Ireland. [[72]](#footnote-73)

However, the trip to see Queen Victoria was perceived poorly by many in Limerick city. When returning from Dublin they were greeted by a hostile crowd many throwing stones and breaking the glass on the train. Cleeve had always been an outsider but this fealty to the crown was aggravating to the Irish nationalists in the city.[[73]](#footnote-74)

The identity as Unionist and British would stick with the Cleeves family and the Condensed Milk Company. As nationalism and trade unionism on the rise, the Cleeves family would become a common target of their rhetoric. The Cleeve family did attempt to integrate and ingratiate themselves with the people of Limerick. Thomas Cleeve was quite active in many societies and sporting clubs, and Lady Cleeve was a poplar socialite and philanthropist. The Cleeve family were not above using their businesses to aid in these charitable acts.

Lady Cleeve helped run a charitable organisation known as the Shamrock League. The charity was set up in Limerick in 1901 by the Countess of Limerick and was to help the poor and destitute of Limerick by selling shamrock badges throughout Ireland and Europe. The Cleeve’s factory on Howley's Quay in Limerick was used for several days just to sort and package the Shamrock, instead of their normal sweet production.[[74]](#footnote-75)

Many women worked in the factories all night long packaging the shamrocks and notable figures purchased boxes including the Emperor of Germany and Queen Alexandria. The financial aid given to the people of Limerick boosted the reputations of those involved. But this didn’t do enough to turn back the tide of dissent towards the Cleeves family. People would bear with Cleeves while the times were good, when times turned bad, there would be little love lost.[[75]](#footnote-76)



A Shamrock League Box, 1903[[76]](#footnote-77)

## Cleeve’s Death

Cleeve had been feeling quite unwell in 1908 and called for specialist doctor from Dublin, a Dr Taylor who he was familiar with. Dr Taylor and local doctor’s Dr Fogarty, Dr Kennedy and Dr Laird operated on Thomas. The operation was initially successful but unfortunately his condition deteriorated, and he died. His death was caused by peritonitis.[[77]](#footnote-78) On Thomas Cleeves death he had a personal estate valued at £107,606 pounds.[[78]](#footnote-79)

By the time of Thomas’s death in 1908, his business ventures had reached every corner of the world. The Condensed Milk Company sold butter, cocoa, chocolate, caramel, confectionary, condensed milk, and cream. The Cleeves Brothers distributed their dairy products internationally. He died the 19th of December 1908 and was buried in his family’s mausoleum. Cleeve was survived by his wife Phoebe, together they had three daughters and two sons.[[79]](#footnote-80) His funeral was the largest seen in Limerick for a generation.[[80]](#footnote-81)

Following his death in 1908. His brother Frederick became the managing director of the Cleeve’s companies and his son Francis Cleeves became chairman.[[81]](#footnote-82)

The impact of loss of Thomas Cleeve cannot be understated for the Condensed Milk Company. As the leading figure in its growth and management since its founding. Thomas was a guiding presence and a figure people looked up to and respected. Fredrick and the other Cleeve brothers lacked the same qualities that Thomas embodied, and this lack of leadership would be felt after the war. Six years after his death World War One would begin and the decline of the Condensed Milk Company will follow soon after. The problems they faced were organisational, structural and personal. I wonder how the firm would have fared during the tumultuous times ahead had Thomas lived to tackle them.

# World War One and Changes to International Trade

On the 28th of July 1914 the world the Cleeves’ knew ceased to exist. International tensions had been rising steadily for the last few decades across Europe. Wars between great powers had not uncommon in the 19th century, but as the diplomatic revolution and the success of the second industrial revolution combined with numerous other factors to make this war “the war to end all wars”. As the Balkan Crisis reached a tipping point and the Austrian-Hungarian empire declared war on Serbia, the European house of cards came tumbling down and the world burned.

International trade had been growing in the period leading up to World War One. The western European powers were far more engaged in international trade due to a number of factors. England, France and to some extent Spain had relied on their strong navies to extend power to their overseas colonial possessions. Britain in particular had a strong focus on naval military power and mercantile activity.

Most British colonies were thousands of miles away from the British Isles, places like Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa and Canada all required extensive seaborne trade to supply and maintain an economic and military foothold. One of the motivating factors for World War One was the German fleet build-up which encourage Britain to enter the conflict.

World War One would have military innovations like chemical weapons, tanks, aircraft and the machine gun. While at sea a new menace begun to impact trade, U-boat. The submarines of World War One bear little resemblance to the submarines of today. However, these early submersibles were still hard to spot and were lethal to trade vessels.

The British Empire found it could no longer reliably depend on its international colonies for supplies. Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa had become important agricultural components in the British economic system. The reduced access to their goods, increased prices across the United Kingdom. The reduction in the number of farmers due to deployment on the front lines also reduced the agricultural output of England. With the increase in demand to feed the troops in the trenches on the Western Front prices rose. [[82]](#footnote-83)

This was a boon for the Irish farmer. The prices for animal meats and dairy products rose significantly. On average the prices for Irish agricultural produce roughly doubled during the course of the war even when factoring the increase in the costs of manual labour and raw materials. The Irish farmer was one of only cohort to benefit from the outbreak of war. The poet Patrick Kavanagh wrote in his autobiography The Green Fool: “the price of foreign produce had soared everyone was in good humour they had money in every pocket”[[83]](#footnote-84)

# Economic effect of World War One: Limerick and the Condensed Milk Company

Ireland was not unaffected by the German Empire’s submarine warfare. It removed access to many foreign imports. In the decades leading up to the war, like many countries in Europe, a lot of what was consumed in Ireland was imported.

Upon the beginning of the war the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) began to educate farmers on the dangers of selling off all their breeding stock at the beginning of the war. The high prices at the beginning of the war were very attractive and many farmers sold a large share of their cattle. The dramatic increase in agricultural prices affected the consumers within Ireland. In Limerick in 1915, calves which would have sold at 33 shillings we're now selling as much as four or five pounds.[[84]](#footnote-85)

The farmers were seeing immediate financial benefit from the conflict, but consumers were not able to match the high prices the British Army were able to pay. This led to a public backlash against the farmers who were accused of profiteering. It is interesting to explore this concept of a disconnect between the farmers and milk producers and their consumers. In the face of these rising prices, the population may have seen the dairy industry as exploitive or predatory.[[85]](#footnote-86)

We will later explore how the Condensed Milk Company will suffer from frequent strikes and deliberate damage to property during the Irish war of independence. I wonder if animosity towards dairy producers over this period was later expressed in the post war era.

As the war began in 1914, there was a concerted effort to turn some of the pastureland into tillage to help make up for the food deficit caused by the inability of the Irish government to import as much food as before. This was the direct result of the submarine warfare undertaken by the German empire and it had great initial success. A combined effort by government ministers and the DATI had great swaths of land was converted from pasture to tillage.

This was possible due to the fact many cows have been sold in 1914-1915 due to the high prices offered by the British. This meant a lot of pasturelands had no cows and was open for tillage. The Limerick County Committee of Agricultural Technical Instruction noted that in West Limerick there was ten times the amount of wheat produced in 1914 compared to 1913. Similar trends can be seen in East Limerick in which five times more wheat was sold compared to 1913 and this was repeated across the country.[[86]](#footnote-87)

The large number of cattle sold in the early years of 1914 also lead to the underperformance of the Irish butter industry. The Irish butter industry was still comprised mainly of individual farmers and co-operatives and British army suppliers often complained about dirty or low-quality butter arriving in England.[[87]](#footnote-88)

DATI informed farmers that their actions in selling poor quality produce would overtime damage their ability to access the English market. This behaviour of unscrupulous farmers sending bad agricultural produce extended to poultry, with many gone-off eggs being shipped to the front lines, reflecting very poorly on Limerick.[[88]](#footnote-89)

The return of tillage increased the demand for labour. Tillage was far more manpower intensive and while a number of schemes were put in place to attract farm labourers, they were not overly successful.[[89]](#footnote-90)

By summer 1915 the amount of land under tillage in the Limerick area was 83,000 acres greater than in 1914. While in Limerick the amount of tillage increased year on year, nationwide by 1916 the overall acreage under tillage had actually decreased compared to 1915 numbers. As the war entered its third year, the lack of access to international goods began to severely affect the Irish economy, food and fuel became scarcer as the winter of 1916 to 1917 was especially harsh.[[90]](#footnote-91)

Feeling the pressure under these intense circumstances, the British government Introduce the Defence of The Realm Act which forced large farm owners to create tillage. The most impactful part of the bill was for every landowner who owned 10 or more acres of land would have to increase their tillage output by 10%. With the Corn Production Act Of 1917, price controls were also put in place and controlled where crops could be exported.[[91]](#footnote-92)

This dramatic increase in the amount of tillage land exacerbates the labour shortage and drove up the value of labour. There was a high demand for labour in England, especially in the big cities in military factories. This was in part due to the large number of young British men being sent to the front lines in France and Belgium. With their labour now more valuable farmhands across the country began to use their newfound power and what revitalise the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. [[92]](#footnote-93)

Condensed Milk Company wages had been competitive pre-war, but now no longer were substantial enough as the war continued. Jobs in England was a pull factors for young men and the wages these jobs advertised were higher than in Limerick and travel expenses would be covered in some circumstances.

By mid-1917 the labour problem came to a head, a further request for a 5% increase in tillage across Ireland meant many fields went untended. This generated a great deal of tension in Limerick with the threat of strikes even before the 1918 harvest. thankfully in 1918 the war ended, so many men returned from the front lines. But the problems in Limerick remained.[[93]](#footnote-94)

## World War One’s influence on Condensed Milk

The war was great for the Condensed Milk Company in the short term. The entire Irish agricultural industry saw amazing prosperity from 1914 to 1920. Prices almost trebled, with an average base price for agricultural produce of 100 in 1911 to 1913, by 1920 it had risen to 288. Butterfat prices increased from 7 cent a pound in April 1914 to 20 cent a pound in March 1920. [[94]](#footnote-95)

During the First World War, the Condensed Milk Company products were distributed on all war fronts where the British Army was engaged.[[95]](#footnote-96)

Condensed Milk had become a staple of war time supply since the American Civil War and the long-lasting nature of condensed milk made it very valuable. Supplying the front lines was difficult and supply could take weeks to reach the troops. Condensed milk fit the niche for wartime good perfectly and their sales increased proportionally.[[96]](#footnote-97)

The Cleeve family were strong unionists and had helped promote recruitment campaigns for the British Army during the First World War. With the anti-British sentiment increasing throughout the country during the war, this damaged the perception of the family among the people of Limerick. The 1916 rising was a radicalisation point that also turned the public away from British rule. [[97]](#footnote-98)

The gathering of Irish Volunteers in Limerick County on Easter 1916 shows how the feelings of resentment had spread far beyond Dublin.[[98]](#footnote-99)

The Condensed Milk Company suffered financial losses through damages and looting in the 1916 rising. Cleeve made four claims to the government for £316 of stolen produce. These were mostly taken by civilians and the British army. The compensation received still left the company with losses totalling £188 pounds and was a big blow to the company.[[99]](#footnote-100)

J.P Evans and Co received the only wartimes munition contract in Limerick. They produced components made for artillery shells. Other firms in Limerick did receive contracts for goods like clothing but Cleves was only firm producing munitions. These were very lucrative contracts and is indicative on how closely the Cleeve family worked with the British government even after Thomas’s death.[[100]](#footnote-101)

Cleeves had always been a defender of British interests and as mentioned before served in the British administration in Limerick. His journey to see Queen Victoria and aggressive business tactics had soured the Cleeve family name in the minds of the young and increasingly radicalising workers in their factories.[[101]](#footnote-102)

This growing animosity towards Cleeve was also powered by wage disputes. There was an increase in the cost of living due to the war, so demands for an increase in pay were constantly being made by the workers.[[102]](#footnote-103)

Some demands were met in the beginning of the war but in 1914 the wage packet for an unskilled worker was 17 shillings a week which what is one of the lowest in Ireland. The inflation brought about by the First World War resulted in a decline in the workers standard of living. [[103]](#footnote-104)

The high demand and spending power of the British military machine caused average consumers to lose access to goods like fuel, sugars and red meat with prices almost doubling. Destitution and poverty came to Limerick by 1917 in a wave and while many charitable organisations opened up such as the Cooked Food Depot it was not enough to feed the people.[[104]](#footnote-105)

The termination of war exports at the end of the First World War was brutal blow to the firm. Already struggling financially to meet raising wage demands, the boom during the war had been enough to deal with the situation. Milk prices were dropping in Ireland after the war, reducing demand for condensed milk. The selling price of condensed milk fell considerable once the war ended and the pressure on the company mounted.[[105]](#footnote-106) The high selling price of exports has sustained the new higher labour and production cost during the war, but without them the company no longer produced profit.

The vast herds of cattle sold during the war could not be easily replaced. With a large number of co-operative and private creameries having opened up to capitalise on the war time exports boom, milk prices were still low going into the post war period. The scale of resources required to run the Lansdowne Road factory meant operating costs were soaring.

From late 1918 the internal pressure within the company became incredibly stressful for upper management. The tragic passing of Alexander Stewart by suicide was indicative of stress that was placed on them. Stuart was the manager of the Carrick on Suir Creamery and the pressure to turn a profit was immense. In the coroner’s report of his death, Stuart was said to have been depressed over the internal strife at the plant when he killed himself.[[106]](#footnote-107)

A short period of rural prosperity continued for a short time after the war, but the boom eventually did lead to a bust, and while Ireland was consumed by political and military disaster, Limerick found itself in economic turmoil. Compulsory tillage ended in 1921 and many Irish and Limerick farmers had made a great living from the conflict. but its farmers failed to take advantage of the new capital and opportunities that were presented in the post war period.

While Irish farmers profited from the collapse of the Danish and Dutch markets during the war period, they would now be dwarfed by the new Canadian and American imports to Britain now sea trade was open again.[[107]](#footnote-108)

# Post war Aftershocks Affecting Limerick

With the end of the First World War, the glory days of the Condensed Milk Company were over. Overall, the situation for the company was becoming dire. The beginnings of a milk price war were brewing in Munster. Less cattle and more creameries increased the price of milk across the province. Wartime inflation and the labour crisis made Condensed Milk Company wages uncompetitive and the workers were beginning to become restless.[[108]](#footnote-109)

Limerick Harbour was also heavily affected by the war, the threat of submarine attacks slowed business at the port. The famous sinking of the Lusitania made many feel the West Coast of Ireland was too very risky for merchant shipping during the war. Combined with the labour shortage that affected Limerick through the war, many boats that did make it to the harbour found it difficult to get unloaded in a reasonable time.[[109]](#footnote-110)

When the shipping lanes reopened the rate of sea traffic did not return to the same level it had before the war. The Condensed Milk Company had become disconnected to many of its consumer points of sale during the war and repairing these relationships was not easy. Condensed Milk coming from the U.S and new factories like the Anglo-Swiss (Nestle) plant built in 1912 meant competition was increasing dramatically.[[110]](#footnote-111)

https://inside.hochdorf.com/en/condensed-milk-a-snapshot-of-swiss-industrial-history

Personal relationships and associations were very impactful on business during this time period. While businesses relied on written contracts for legal protection and record keeping, the interpersonal relationships between owners of the different firms cemented trust between organisations. Without Thomas Cleeve and the breakdown of these trading links during the war, it would have been difficult to repair these links.

Trade unionism and left-wing politics had grown in Ireland during the First World War, with lucrative job openings in Britain pulling many young men away from the Munster area. The increased cost and shortage of labour from the war gave individual employees more power to bargain and negotiate with their employers. This empowered the working man of Limerick and eventually led to many of them joining trade unions. Limerick was a hotspot for this militant trade union activity and the Condensed Milk company was plagued by strikes following the end of the war.[[111]](#footnote-112)

Cleeves had reached its peak production in early 1919. The Condensed Milk Company received milk from 50,000-60,000 cows in 1919, meaning that it was at least using the milk of 1/13 of the country’s cows. Expansion into cheese production during the war had been very profitable and the company was flying high.[[112]](#footnote-113) It was estimated that the firm made a Million pounds in profit during the war.[[113]](#footnote-114) The high produce prices had papered over the cracks forming in the firm, and with the coming crash of food prices after the war, the company would begin to struggle.

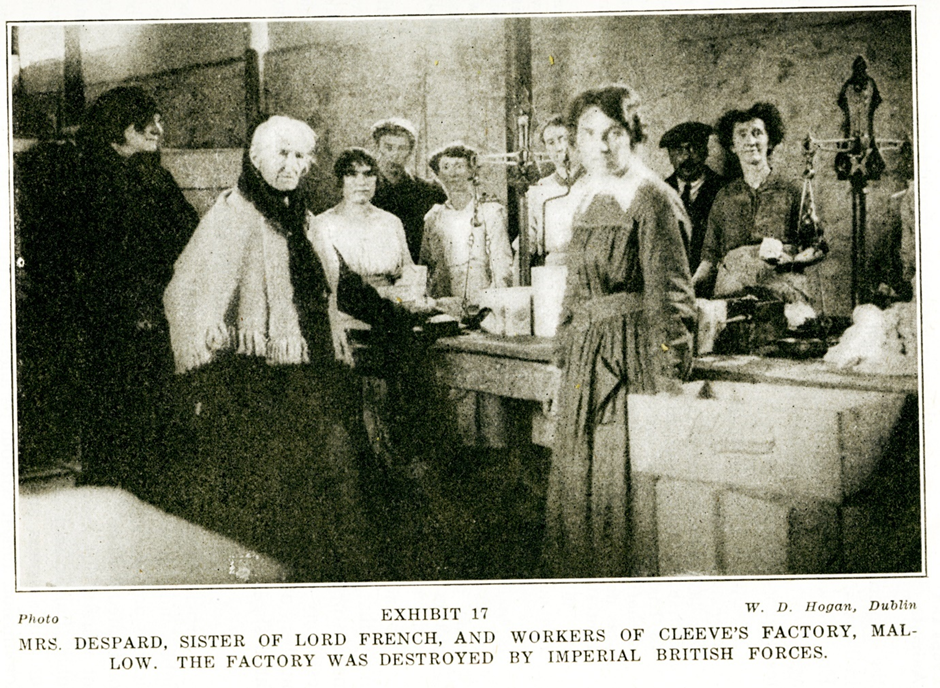
## Irish War of Independence and the Creamery Attacks

The world was not done with The Condensed Milk Company yet. The tensions between the British administration and Irish nationalists reached a fever pitch and war erupted across the nation in 1919. Ireland had been mostly physically untouched by World War One but couldn’t stop conflict from erupting internally.

The Irish War of Independence was a devastating conflict and struck the Condensed Milk Company and its associated network of creameries and factories especially hard. During the Irish war of independence most of the violence took place in rural areas, especially the South West, the centre of the dairy industry. From 1919 to 1921 raids, burnings and attacks were commonplace across the Irish countryside. Despite the staunch unionist slant of the Cleeve family, British Army operations especially in 1920 adversely affected the business. [[114]](#footnote-115)

The British Army targeted co-operative creameries as reprisals and by January 1st, 1921, 30 cooperative creaming societies were declared badly damaged and another 42 completely destroyed. On average 800 farmers were put out of business by each creamery’s destruction. These violent reprisal attacks rekindled tensions between private and co-operative creameries. This animosity toward the Condensed Milk Company spread to many of the affected farmers as well. [[115]](#footnote-116)

The Irish White Cross which was set up by U.S philanthropists to help aid the civilians who were impacted during the conflict in this region. They estimated 60,000 people minimum were impacted by the destruction of creameries during this time.[[116]](#footnote-117)

[[117]](#footnote-118)

The British Army also burnt down a number of key factories and creameries owned by the Cleeve family despite their allegiances. For example, on the 28th of September 1920, there was a British Army raid in Mallow on the creamery and condensing operation ran by the Condensed Milk Company.[[118]](#footnote-119) The creamery employed 150 people during the winter and up to 300 during the summer high season. This was one of seven Condensed Milk Company creameries subject to attack in just 1920.[[119]](#footnote-120)

## Effect On the Condensed Milk Company

This dramatically damaged the firms supply chain. The high level of supply chain integration had benefitted the Condensed Milk Company in the past. Control of supplies and raw materials had helped regulate cost and control their access to these goods. But during this period of conflict, it became detrimental. The losses of these key pieces of infrastructure were hard to replace and the company was not set up to easily transition to new suppliers. This was a large capital loss and also drove up the price of the raw goods that went into their products, increasing costs. With low demand for condensed milk, the company could not afford to increase prices to match this change in production costs.

It became difficult to maintain the existing trade routes throughout Munster due to a number of roadblocks, checkpoints, and curfews. Milk spoilt quickly and these delays and interruptions made a lot of milk unusable. They firm had close ties with the British administration and compensation was received on occasion, the damage to the firm in the short term was priceless. Looting by Irish troops and irregulars would not have been compensated and losses began to mount. [[120]](#footnote-121)

# Start of Limerick Soviet And its Causes.

Trade unions in Ireland began growing in earnest at a national level after the 1913 lockouts in Dublin. The membership of unions rose from 130,000 at the end of 1916 to 320,000 in August 1920. Since 1917 the Irish Transport and General Workers Union had been operating in Limerick. The union originally opened three branch offices in Limerick, and with the Cleeve empire boasting a large urban workforce within the year staff had joined the union. [[121]](#footnote-122)

Republicanism was also prevalent in the workforce at the Lansdowne factory. Statements from Cleeve’s clerical staff admitted to involvement in the Irish Volunteer Army, but their level of participation in the following strikes is difficult to ascertain. [[122]](#footnote-123)

As discussed previously, the labour shortages exacerbated by the increase in tillage and pull factors abroad during World War One had led to the increase in labour costs. This increased the individual importance of each worker as now they could demand wages and now argue for better hours and conditions. This spirit of collectivist industrial fervour spread amongst the people of Limerick and workers’ rights movement became a pressing matter.

The local workers in the Cleeve’s Condensed Milk Company threatened strike action for better conditions in early April 1919. The Company use a tactic of ‘divide and conquer’. It gave a 48-hour week with the wage of 11/4d per hour to the 600 workers at main Lansdowne factory. On the same day they fired the I.T.G.W.U. shop steward. This settled things for a majority of the workers, but things still simmered below the surface.[[123]](#footnote-124)

There was number of skirmishes fought between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British Army and Irish Royal Constabulary (IRC) after the 1916 rising.

By 1919, tensions reached a boiling point and the conflict erupted. On the 21st of January 1919, there was an ambush on the IRC by the IRA in Soloheadbeg, Tipperary. On the day of this ambush, a member of the IRA known as Robert “Bobby” Byrne was in custody in the New Barracks in Limerick city. He was a prominent union leader and had been caught with a revolver at his family home. He was court martialled by the British Army and he was found guilty. Byrne was sentenced to 12 months in gaol with hard Labour and was transferred to Limerick prison to serve his sentence.[[124]](#footnote-125)

Byrne was imprisoned alongside 16 other Republican prisoners and they campaigned for political prisoner status. This was refused and the prisoners lead a prison protest. The cities public heard the commotion and many onlookers arrived as spectators of the incident. The prison authorities called in the IRC to restore order and they were all placed in solitary confinement. This resulted in the prisoners going on hunger strike.[[125]](#footnote-126)

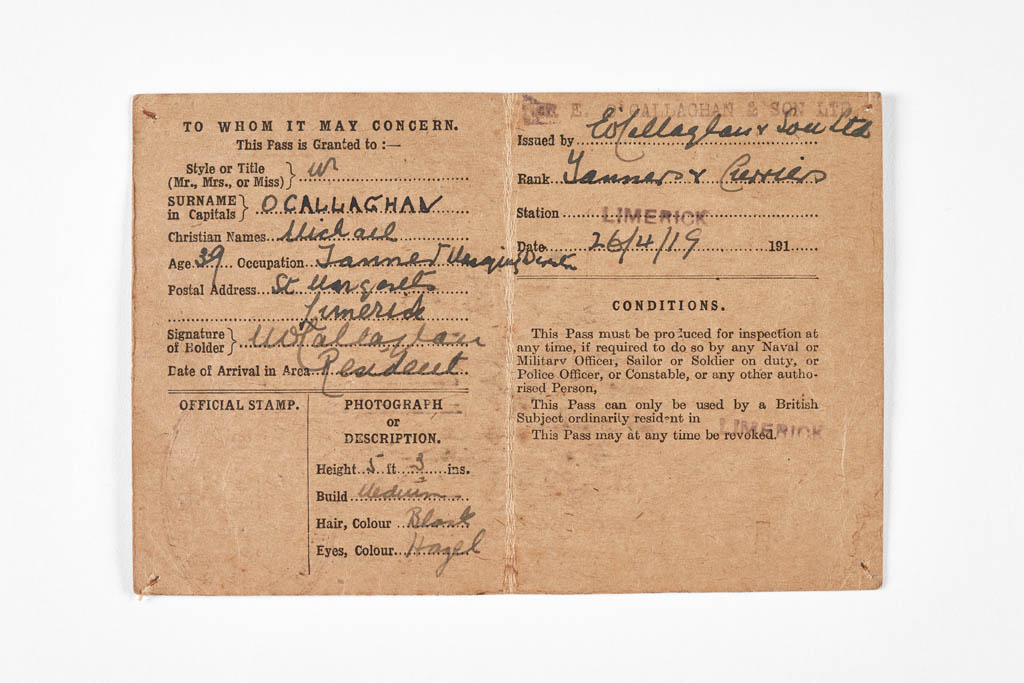
Byrne’s condition deteriorated rapidly during the hunger strike and on the 12th of March 1919 he was brought to the Union Workhouse Hospital for treatment. He was under watch by a six-man guard and the IRA took this opportunity to rescue their now high-profile comrade.[[126]](#footnote-127)

Twenty IRA soldiers were sent into the hospital to rescue Byrne. One of the guards saw the attempt to rescue Byrne and shot Byrne in the chest at point blank range. The IRA men fought through the guard and quickly carried Byrne out of hospital. The two sides exchanged gunfire, killing a policeman as they left. Panic sweeping across Limerick, this was not a common sight in the city. The IRA men escaped on foot and sought medical attention for Byrne. The bullet wound was fatal, and Robert Byrne would die at 8:30 that evening.[[127]](#footnote-128)

This escape attempt immediately led to a military crackdown across Limerick city. The military eventually found the remains of Byrne at the home where he died after a number of sweeps across the city. Five men were arrested in relation to rescue attempt, none of the men had anything to do with the rescue attempt, their only crime being related to or near to Byrne when his body was discovered. Any IRA men who were within the Special Military Area, kept a low profile throughout the proceedings, and efforts to flush them out proved ineffective. [[128]](#footnote-129)

## The Limerick Soviet and the Condensed Milk company

On Monday the 14th of April the city of Limerick would be designated a “Special Military District” A pass was needed to travel in and out of Limerick city. This pass had to be issued by the military and raised tensions in the city. To apply for this pass, you had to appear at the military office on O'Connell St in Limerick. They would document their name, look, and dress and then prescribe the travel document for the day.



(One of the passes issued by the British military in limerick)[[129]](#footnote-130)

The quarantining of Limerick was made possible by the notorious Defence of the Realm Act 1914, the original target of which were public opponents of the Great War. [[130]](#footnote-131)

A crucial factor in raising the tensions was the military checkpoint on the bridges across the Shannon. The Condensed Milk Company Lansdowne factory was on the north bank of the Shannon, so its workers had to cross through the checkpoint every day to get to work, requiring the military pass.

One of the North bank suburbs of Limerick was the working-class district of Thomongate, which lay outside the military district. Many condensed milk company workers lived in this area, and with the military office in the heart of Limerick, this meant workers would have to travel between two checkpoints to get to work at another two checkpoints on the way out. Punctuality was incredibly important during this time period. Employees who arrived late for work were likely to be sent home with the loss of the day’s pay. Long delays caused by these military checkpoints incensed the workers at the plant to a fever pitch.[[131]](#footnote-132)

In response to these developments, the trade union council called for a “general strike against British militarism” and was met with widespread support. By that Monday evening 14,000 workers had joined the strike.[[132]](#footnote-133) The city at the time had a population of 38,000.[[133]](#footnote-134)

There was coincidentally a large amount of foreign press in Limerick at the time of the strike. A transatlantic air race was being organised from Bawnmore, County Limerick but was cancelled after the plane of Mayor Woods crashed on route.

The foreign press starved of content, dubbed the strike the” Limerick Soviet” and the moniker has lasted too today. This caused many of journalists from outlets such as Chicago Tribune, the Paris Matin, and the Associated Press of America to take up the story of an Irish soviet and interviewed the organisers. Without this press coverage it would be unlikely that the strike would have lasted as long as it did or be as well known.[[134]](#footnote-135)

The general strike was extended to a boycott of the troops. A special strike committee was set up to print their own money, control food prices and publish newspapers. The businesses of the city accepted the strike currency. Ironically the workers council would put in place far harsher restrictions than the British. No work could be completed in the city without a permit from the Soviet, even driving a horse drawn cart required a permit. [[135]](#footnote-136)

After two weeks the two sides were convinced by leading members of the community to work out their differences, and the Strike Committee issued a proclamation on 27 April 1919 stating that the strike was over. They compromised by letting the employees place of work give out the permits. On the 5th of May the military ended the military zone, but things did not return to normal. The animosity between Cleeve’s employees and management had increased, and a number of other soviets would shoot up across their network of factories and creameries.

## The Strikes Spread out from Limerick.

The echoes of the Limerick soviet reverberated around the Cleeve’s network of creameries and factories. While the Limerick plant workers got a pay rise, the rest of the employees did not and created flash points where tensions boiled over. In May 1919, workers began seizing creameries belonging to the Cleeve family. One of these major creameries was near the village in Knocklong. Cleeve’s pay for unskilled labour was very low, only 17 shillings a week. Cleeve's workers from the Irish Transport and General Workers Union seized Knocklong creamery and flew a red banner with the words "KNOCKLONG SOVIET CREAMERY: WE MAKE BUTTER NOT PROFITS".[[136]](#footnote-137)

Cleeve's local management was forced to negotiate and after five days of strike, yielded to the workers’ demands. A 48-hour week was introduced, and they increased the workers’ wages. This was also with a promise to improve the ventilation within the creamery. There would be smaller strikes at the creamery over the next few months until on August the 26th 1919, Black and Tans would arrive in Knocklong and burn down the Creamery. [[137]](#footnote-138)

It was rumoured the burning was requested by the Cleeve to collect on insurance money as they ensured the Creamery against fire on the 24th of August.[[138]](#footnote-139)

The first seizure of the creamery in Knocklong only lasted a week. The Condensed Milk Company could still afford to make concessions at this point. But as many more strikes rocked the company and the financial situation worsened, things began to escalate.

A year later in August 1921, the Cleeve family-owned bakery and mill in Bruree, County Limerick began a strike. On the 26th of August, the employees raised the red flag and declared the "Bruree Soviet Workers Mill". They sold their food at lower prices and banned management from the building to force them to the negotiation table. The Condensed Milk Company was floundering by this point and the government got involved. The Sinn Fein minister for labour, the Countess Markievicz, was rumoured to have threatened to send IRA troops if the soviet did not accept the terms of negotiation.[[139]](#footnote-140)

At the Clonmel factory, a standoff over wages escalated to a strike, and became known as the Clonmel Soviet. The Clonmel Soviet began in April 1922, they demanded the keys of the factory from the management and hoisted a red flag. Joseph Cleeve has been managing the Clonmel factory since it had opened and led the negotiation with the workers.[[140]](#footnote-141) The Irish Civil War was in full swing and the to the county’s infrastructure of bridges railways roads and postal services left Clonmel economically isolated. Soup kitchens opened in Clonmel for the first time since the great famine, and public support for the soviet quickly evaporated. Irregular troops would raid Clonmel severely and after some short negotiations the strike was called off, aided by the mayor, Frank Drohan [[141]](#footnote-142)[[142]](#footnote-143)

The Condensed Milk Company never recovered in the area and the Clonmel plant was purchased by Newcastle Co-operative Creamery. Joseph Cleeve retired after selling the factory and it was purchased along with the Newcastle Co-operative by the Dairy Disposal Company.[[143]](#footnote-144)

# The last gasps under Cleeve Ownership.

The Condensed Milk Company struggled on until 1921. In December of that year, the Condensed Milk Company declared that it was £100,000 in debt and claimed to have taken roughly £275,000 in losses for the year. The firm declared it could no longer produce condensed milk without making a loss. The firm had been operating at a loss since 1919 and could no longer maintain the deficit. The prices of condensed milk did not seem to be improving any time soon and the situation was becoming untenable. The Condensed Milk Company asked workers to accept a reduction in wages by a third for each employee. They argued that even a small stipend of wages was preferable to the shutdown of the entire industry, leaving them all unemployed.[[144]](#footnote-145)

The company’s request to reduce pay by a third a week was met with great suspicion. Labour unions raised concerns to the government, and Mr Joe McGrath then Minister for Labour in the Dail Eireann, arranged to have the Condensed Milk Companies’ books be examined by a group of experts. Quickly enough the experts came back to the government and revealed the company was correct. It was recommended that unless a substantial reduction in wages took place, the company would collapse. The company would still operate at a loss with the reduced wages and knew this was a short-term solution but was prepared to operate at this reduced pay rate for a period of time. [[145]](#footnote-146)

The workers however were not prepared to work for the lower wages. The workers unions were not willing to accept the conditions put forward by the company and declined every proposal sent to them. The investigating council with the consent of the Labour union members put forward several proposals to the workers in attempts to stabilise the company but each one in turn was rejected. The workers had learned that strike actions had worked in the past and resented the large profits the firm made during the war period. Disbelief that such a massive company could be so insolvent permeated through the workers.[[146]](#footnote-147)

When it became apparent the workers could not be convinced of the nature of the situation the company limped along until April 1922. The Condensed Milk Company announced a 10-shilling wage cut to the Lansdowne factory. If the wage reductions were not agreed to, it was closing down the factory. A wave of resentment and anger reached its climax on the Holy Thursday 1922. [[147]](#footnote-148)

While the majority of the workers proceeded as normal, a small group of hot heads took things into their own hands. They sounded the factory siren and ordered all employees to leave the premises. This evacuation was done in a great panic and workers left their stations quickly. This evacuation occurred while the boilers and machinery were all still running. With no one attending any of the machinery, the entire factory ground to a halt within an hour. [[148]](#footnote-149)

After a brief spell of negotiations, the desperate company acted with a sweeping action. On the 12th of May 1922, The Condensed Milk Company declared a lockout and put 3,000 of its employees out of work.

In response the worker seized creameries and factories in centres in Bruff, Athlacca, Bruree, Tankards town, Dromin and Ballingaddy near Kilmallock all in County Limerick, and centres in Tipperary Town, Galtymore, Bansha, Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir in County Tipperary and finally Mallow in County Cork.[[149]](#footnote-150) Pro-treaty troops guarded the Lansdowne factory from being seized.

A full-blown strike was now in progress and for 11 weeks the strike raged.

# The Long strike and the Civil War

There was no attempt during those three months to reconcile management and the employees and the factory remained silent. The entire dairy community of Munster felt the impact of this shutdown. Not only the 1000 or so workers in the Limerick city factories were out of a job, but the 2000 workers in Cleeve’s creameries around the province. Around 5000 dairy farmers suddenly had nowhere to sell their milk.[[150]](#footnote-151)

Milk prices dropped dramatically throughout Munster at the beginning of this strike. The handful of cooperative creameries were in no position to handle all this extra supply. Food waste became almost epidemic and many witnessed the spectacle of cows being milked into grass.

Workers on strike at the peripheral creameries often took forceful possession of creameries and preceded to work on the plants with no authorization. This only lasted for a few days as the capital to operate these Creameries was not obtainable and the plants eventually abandoned. These occupations took place at a time of lawlessness and lack of central control in Ireland. The Anglo-Irish treaty had been signed in the same month as the lockout and pollical division slowed the process of reconciliation. Many of these seized creameries were in the anti-treaty “Munster Republic” and political leaders didn’t want to put in difficult situations like breaking up strikes.[[151]](#footnote-152)

The farmers union was openly hostile to the soviet creameries and rarely supplied them with milk. Many meetings of farmers unions at the time decried the “attempted communism” and came together to blacklist the creameries.[[152]](#footnote-153) With the general strike on the 24th of April 1922 against civil war dominating discussion, sympathy for the soviets dried up and a general wish for stability returned. [[153]](#footnote-154)

With the burning of some creameries due to farmer and striker disputes and several creameries negotiating with management, the tide turned. In June the Lansdowne plant reopened after 11 weeks and many others followed suit. Pro-treaty troops marched on the Tipperary creamery and the Carrick-on-Suir plant and restored them to management. The red flag was eventually hosted above the Tipperary plant and it was burnt through malicious arson attacks by workers.[[154]](#footnote-155)

## Collapse, Liquidation and New Ownership.

The Condensed Milk Company emerged economically emotionally and physically battered by the last four years. The three-month occupation of their buildings across monster from May to August 1922 was particularly devastating.

With no production for three months, the market share of Cleeve collapsed. Other international firms had filled the gaps on store shelves that Cleeve lost when it closed its doors. Many plants did not immediately reopen, after regaining their factories by force many maintained their lockout until they had extracted promises from the workers. Many of the creameries did not open again until February or March in 1923. Lots of creameries suffered damage especially from fire, and during this time a lot of compensation was sought by the Cleeve firm. [[155]](#footnote-156)

They sought damages for up to £120,000 from insurers for their Tipperary Factory, but no amount of insurance money or industrial coercion could save the Condensed Milk Company from going into liquidation. The company folded in November 1923 due to debts and looked for buyers.[[156]](#footnote-157)

The authorised capital of the business was £400,000 pounds and all of the stock was still outstanding at the time of the collapse. Fredrick was still managing director at the time and Francis was still chairman. Other Cleeves family members N. A. Cleeve, J.W. Cleeve and Cecil Cleeve, Aylmer Cleeve and C.E. Cleeve were directors at the firm.[[157]](#footnote-158)

When the liquidation process was announced, The Dail Eireann took immediate steps to intervene as a situation would shatter the economy of the province. Joe McGrath, the Minister for Labour, banded together a group of southern businessmen with experience in the dairy industry and invited them to take over the Condensed Milk Company. [[158]](#footnote-159)

Their initial instructions were to stabilise situation and see if they could continue operations. This takeover was headed by Mr Andrew O’Shaughnessy. O’Shaughnessy was a strong willed and smart businessman who owned several creameries and woollen Mills in County Cork. They had to immediately pay off debts amounting to £35,000 pound owed to milk suppliers when taking control of the firm.[[159]](#footnote-160)

The Condensed Milk Company was reopened under its new ownership's and struggled along for the next few years. It would retain its name and several Cleeve family members retained positions in the company.[[160]](#footnote-161)

The Cork group lacked the available capital to maintain the firm and the new controlling group sought outside intervention. The large British agricultural firm Lovell and Christmas was given a moderate stake in the enterprise for a cash injection. Staff from Lovell and Christmas were appointed to prominent positions within the company and it became evident the firm was gradually being merged under the control of the company.[[161]](#footnote-162)

The situation the dairy industry found itself in was delicate and the government decided something should be done with great haste to stabilise the industry and stop it being swallowed up by an English firm.

# The Condensed Milk Company and the Co-operative price war.

Limerick benefited from being a cornerstone of the cooperative movement which began in the early 1880s but exploded between 1913 and 1920, with about 1000 Cooperatives operating in the area turnover rose from £3.5 million in 1913 to £14.5 million in 1920.[[162]](#footnote-163)

The government began to experiment with legislation to help fix the situation in the dairy industry. The Dairy Products Act came into effect in 1924 and this act directed how dairy was produced and manufactured. The government mandated all creameries register with the state and had to adhere with new standards regarding the quality and cleanliness of equipment. These new regulations had little to no effect on large enterprises like the Condensed Milk Company, but disproportionately targeted small local creameries.[[163]](#footnote-164)

By 1926 there were 580 creameries in operation in the Irish Free State. Four hundred of those creameries were cooperatives, and of the remaining 180 privately run creameries 114 were controlled by the Condensed Milk Company. The Condensed Milk Company had recently acquired the creameries of the Newmark Dairy Company and several other smaller private Creameries which bolstered their numbers post the 1922 strikes.[[164]](#footnote-165)

The sheer size of the Condensed Milk Company gave it an advantage over cooperative creameries due to its diverse products, remaining links to retail outlets in Britain and existing distribution network. On issue that emerged under the new ownership was the escalating milk price war with Co-operative creameries. This had been increasing the operating costs of the plant for both the Condensed Milk Company and the Co-operatives and the situation was becoming desperate.[[165]](#footnote-166)

With the scale of the business and effective marketing of their products the Condensed Milk Company was able to pay a slightly higher price for milk. A majority of cooperative creameries lacked the sophisticated equipment of the Condensed Milk Company and still could only produce butter of which the price was declining year on year. There was a massive collapse in the 1920s, Butterfat prices did not recover to 1920 levels until the mid-1940s.[[166]](#footnote-167)

Many cooperative creameries were forced by the competition to maintain a price of 7d or 8d per gallon of milk, a price which was unprofitable for butter production.[[167]](#footnote-168)

Towards the end of 1926, the milk price war was reaching its climax and the outlook for the entire dairying industry was poor. Had things continued on their current path the result may be the complete collapse of the whole industry, and purchase by British concerns like Anglo-Swiss, now called Nestle or Lovell and Christmas. [[168]](#footnote-169)

This was demonstrated in the Munster region. The Condensed Milk Company was suffering heavily from high milk prices and low condensed milk prices. Their high purchasing price of milk was still winning enough farmers over to their side. Animosity between the Cooperatives and Condensed Milk Company ran deep with many cooperative creameries happy to ruin themselves to damage the Condensed Milk Company. The average farmer still had a measure of loyalty towards local co-operatives that a few shillings could not shift.[[169]](#footnote-170)

## Government intervention, Purchase and the Formation of the Dairy Disposal Company

The arrival of Dr Henry Kennedy as secretary of the IAOS marked a change in institutional policy towards the dairy industry. Dr Kennedy had been a director of the Irish White Cross, which as mentioned previously provided aid for the civilian population from 1920 to 1922. Plunkett once described Kennedy as “a gentleman of great personal magnitude”.[[170]](#footnote-171)

Dr Kennedy would be the architect of legislation that would seek to end the price war between the cooperative and private creameries. This conflict had resulted in the economic degradation of the dairy industry and had to be stopped. The IAOS and the Department of Agriculture worked together form The Dairy Disposal Company. Alongside the leadership of Mr P. Hogan, the Minister for Agriculture, a sweeping change was put into effect in 1927.[[171]](#footnote-172)

It was apparent that no amount of private capital could efficiently run the huge Condensed Milk Company. The government drafted sweeping legislation to purchase the Condensed Milk Company and roll it into the semi state business named the Dairy Disposal Company (DDC).

This was done at a price and the action sent mixed feelings amongst the farming community. Alongside the Condensed Milk Company, the smaller firm Newmarket Diary was also purchased by the state.[[172]](#footnote-173) The government would pay £365,000 pounds for the 113 creameries, 10 condensed milk plans and other assets like cars, the toffee factory and mills from the Condensed Milk Company.[[173]](#footnote-174)

The Lansdowne factory on the North Bank of the Shannon, which up to this point had been the headquarters of the Condensed Milk Company was shutdown.[[174]](#footnote-175) The butter factory was closed and transferred to the creameries at Knocklong and Tipperary. Three experts from the Department of Agriculture were drafted in to control the Dairy Disposal Company. They were adept and innovative and in a few short years the business began to restart anew.[[175]](#footnote-176)

From 1927 to 1931 the Dairy Disposal Company purchased 170 private creameries. Of these 79 of those were closed, 44 were transferred to cooperative ownerships and the remaining 47 were held by the DDC. 17 cooperative creameries were purchased of which 4 were closed and the DDC retained and operated 13.[[176]](#footnote-177)

The DDC owned 75% of all creameries in the Free State by May 1931. [[177]](#footnote-178)

The dairy industry was made exclusively a co-operative industry through the legislation and would made it illegal for cooperative societies to purchase milk from other cooperative societies without permission from the government. The Dairy Disposal Company did eventually acquire all privately owned creameries in Ireland in 1945.[[178]](#footnote-179)

The government did not sit idly by and continued to legislate the dairy industry, trying to increase their share of control. The Creamery Act of 1928 introduced a system of licencing for creameries. These new powers given to the minister of agriculture allowed the government to control the creation of new creameries. This allowed them to stop the creation of new creameries in locations already served by existing operations.

This reorganisation was successful and saved many cooperatives from financial ruin. The biggest losers in this reshuffling were the milk suppliers who often saw a reduction in milk price.

New machinery was eventually installed at the Lansdowne factory and it was reopened. This increased employment in Limerick and improved the relations between the workers and DDC. It was testament to the ability of these three men that Lansdowne factory was restarted and operating in full swing.[[179]](#footnote-180)

The DDC opened a further 67 creameries where there were gaps in the existing network. The government decided to close the DDC between 1972 to 1975. All of the remaining creameries they operated were transferred to large cooperative concerns which emerged in the 1960s.[[180]](#footnote-181)

# Conclusion

The Condensed Milk Company of Ireland left a large impact on Ireland despite its short period of existence. Its massive size and influence on the dairy market meant that when it collapsed it took everything with it. Its importance to limerick during its operation was immense and in the period from 1900-1919 it employed effectively 1/38th of the city. As the prices for condensed milk fell the workers could not believe it could be in such a precarious position. Worker sentiment and the social and political changes within Ireland began to turn on the firm, and it wasn’t able to pivot.

By the end of World War One the firm had become overextended and had also lost any flexibility in the face of so much change. The long-term support for the British administration could be turned back and it made the identity as outsiders stick to the Cleeves long after Thomas’s death. Poor wages and working conditions combined with the wartime inflation and recession was too much to bear for the firms’ employees. The boom years during the war had let the company get away with inefficiencies and bad management, allowing the impact of the coming crash to grow and grow.

Strike action was nothing new to Irish industry, but the scale and frequency that the Condensed Milk Company endured over the period from 1919-1923 was lethal. Without a strong hand at the helm like Thomas, the company floundered and then collapsed to protests, arson, war and lockdown. Its initial buy out and reopening from 1924-1927 was less of a rebirth but a botched resurrection. The strikes and war may have ceased, but the economic situation had not changed, and the demand and prices were just not there to support a business of its size.

The Dairy Disposal Company was a good solution to the problem the government faced and allowed many assets of the company to keep running like nothing had changed while liquidating the failed sections of the company. The recovery of the dairy industry in the region today is testament to how the DDC was able to rescue this industry in free fall.

The Cleeves brand name lives on past the company that made it so famous. Cleeves branded Toffee and chocolate was still produced at the Charlotte’s Quay factory for many years and it’s become what most people associate the Cleeves family name to today. You can still buy toffee and chocolate with the Cleeves branding today, with the trademark being operated by Ampersand one hundred years after the company’s peak. [[181]](#footnote-182) Limerick has even larger reminders of the Cleeve, with the famous Lansdowne factory still sitting on the north bank of the Shannon today. It was purchased by limerick city council for 3.5 million and its story has not ended 170 years after it was built.

# Authors note

I think the Condensed Milk Companies story is one that deserves to be remembered. From such phenomenal early growth, soring highs and one of the most interesting falls I have ever come across. The limerick soviet and its surrounding strikes have seen the most academic exploration of any topic related to the business and I feel it has soured the company’s reputation to modern audiences. I read many pieces where it's painted an oppressor of its worker and a bastion of British power in Munster. In reality it’s the foundation of the modern Irish dairy manufacturing industry and was on the cutting edge of innovation at its time. The Irish dairy industry had been at a low ebb due to international competition when the company was founded, and it gave the whole region the spark and methods to compete once again with the rest of Europe. Like much of history, there are always two sides to the Condensed Milk Company’s story, and I enjoyed writing both of them.

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