

FREE TRADE BEFORE COBDEN: AUTONOMY AND EMPIRE IN THE IRISH FREE TRADE CAMPAIGN, 1779-1785

Carlos Eduardo Suprinyak (Cedeplar/UFGM)
suprinyak@cedeplar.ufmg.br

Abstract: In November 1779, the group of Irish militias known as the Volunteers rallied around a statue of King William III in Dublin protesting for free trade between Ireland and Britain. The episode kickstarted a series of political negotiations around the topic that culminated in the abortive proposal for the establishment of a free trade area in 1785. From the Irish perspective, free trade was regarded as a strategy for eliminating the restrictions and regulations, emanating from London, which had so far stifled the development of local industry. In Britain, however, the proposal faced hostilities due to the expected dislocations that would result for established manufacturing interests. Newly appointed prime minister William Pitt tried to justify the case for free trade with Ireland before the British public by appealing to its beneficial effects for a unified and coherent imperial trade policy. This, in turn, proved unacceptable to Irish politicians and agitators, who regarded free trade as a step in the route to more – not less – political autonomy. Exploring the public arguments on this topic as they appeared in the popular press, in British and Irish parliamentary debates, and in both learned and polemical writings, the paper will investigate the economic and political meanings associated with free trade during the later decades of the 18th century. In so doing, it will also discuss how these notions related to the literature on political economy circulating at the time.

Keywords: free trade, protection, William Pitt, British Empire, Ireland