

THE BLACK ECONOMY IN THE SOAR VALLEY, 1945–1971

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This study, which is based on 113 interviews conducted with respondents who lived in the Soar Valley between 1945 and 1971, engages the concept of the Black Economy; often regarded in historical enquiry at best, as nebulous, and at worst, unknowable. The research undertaken and the source material accessed would not have been possible had not the author, to some extent, been an ‘insider’ in the community during the period examined. This has been an exercise in oral enquiry rooted in living history, informing the notion of the family economy. Given the sensitive nature of the testimony obtained, the identity of respondents has been withheld, where appropriate.

J. Benson in *The Penny Capitalists*¹ and Smithies in *The Black Economy in England Since 1914*² examine the resourcefulness of people in ‘making a buck’.³ The Soar Valley was no different. Whatever the state of the economy, many people were constantly on the lookout to ‘earn a few quid extra’.⁴

The hidden, or black, economy is illegal. Chancellors of the Exchequer have from time to time berated people who defraud the state by avoiding paying tax. Naturally, the high moral tone of well-fed, powerful figures would have had little impact on those ‘living from hand-to-mouth’⁵ or even families who although no longer struggling, still lived without the advantages in life of the middle and upper classes. The viewpoint of those who worked in the shadowy world of the hidden economy was, ‘Everyone else is doing it, so why shouldn’t I? I’d be a fool not to’.⁶

Interviewees who provided evidence of the hidden economy showed no remorse in either being involved or of thinking badly of those who were. Unlike the censorial attitudes towards members of one’s family or neighbours who committed what was considered crime like theft or violence, or those who had children out of wedlock, there was an apparent quiet social acceptance of the hidden or black economy. As long as it was kept discreet and no one got hurt except the taxman, who nobody liked, then it was alright. The idea of ‘snitching’ on someone was practically unheard of ... a far cry from the state-inspired exhortations of later years to ‘rat on a rat’ and ‘shop them’.

¹ J. Benson, *The Penny Capitalists*, Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, Dublin (1985), p.25.

² E. Smithies, *The Black Economy in England Since 1914*, Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, Dublin (1984).

³ Interview: Chris S., 7 June 1998.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Interview: Harry T., 3 May 1999.

⁶ *Ibid.*

There is little surprise at the popularity of such television figures as ‘Del Boy’⁷ shortly after the period under review. The idea of ducking and diving for a living somehow struck a chord that resonates with attitudes evidenced in the Soar Valley from 1945 to 1971. There was a strange but timeless notion that to outsmart the system was not dishonourable. Almost reminiscent of the Robin Hood mentality, the poor were not robbed, ‘As long as the only people ripped-off were the rich, the state, no-one minded.’⁸

In *The Politics of Deference* by D. C. Moore,⁹ people paid lip-service to ‘good citizenry’ but were not uncomfortable with outflanking the rules.

The morality of onlookers may vary from a knowing wink to an attitude of the ‘black’ economy being lower level, suppressed criminality. That, however, is another issue. The key point from an historical perspective is that the ‘hidden’ economy was a very real feature of economic and cultural life in the Soar Valley in the 25 years after the Second World War.

The usual problem with the ‘hidden’ economy is precisely what the name describes – that it is hidden. This investigation conducted into the Soar Valley locality, by its nature, tended to overcome this problem and infiltrate this grey area because the researcher was known and trusted. He had grown-up in the locality and was from a family that had long traditions and associations in the Soar Valley. What would have been perceived by respondents as an ‘outsider’ or ‘foreigner’ probably would have not been privy to such inside information.

As such the insights and evidence gleaned may not enable wider generalisations to be made from the particular, but the information gained does represent facts from inhabitants of the locality at the time and, as such, are a case study in point. In such an unquantifiable medium, they are after all, the only people ‘who truly know what went on’.¹⁰ Where possible, this information has been corroborated, cross-checked and confirmed by other sources.

Poaching of animals from other people’s land may seem the sort of crime associated with the era of the Game Laws, man-traps and the landed estates, prior to the First World War. In terms of the evidence unearthed, poaching continued in the Soar Valley not merely in the austerity years, but through the 1950s and well into the 1960s.

Me and me brother used to go down on the land by the railway line, y’know near the river. It were owned by them with the big houses on Cotes Road ... Towles, Coleman and the like. We used to go after tea, between six and eight. Mainly it was rabbits, particularly before the myxamatoxis. We’d got anything though ... fishing out of season or on private banks, a few chick. Guns were a bit difficult ‘cos of the noise ... but we often had a pheasant or a partridge.¹¹

Graham S. related how he and his friend, *Roddie R.* went out in the area between Barrow-upon-Soar and Quorn.

⁷ The ‘spiv’, Derek Trotter, in *Only Fools and Horses*, B.B.C. Television.

⁸ Interview: Douglas K., 8 March 1998.

⁹ D. C. Moore, *The Politics of Deference*, Harvester Press, Hassocks (1976), p.129.

¹⁰ R. Smith, *A Few Kind Words*, Penguin, London (2004), p.38.

¹¹ Interview: Alf K., 7 June 1999.

Full moons were the time ... or when it had been snowing and the land stood out like it was nearly daytime. Of course, we set traps for rabbits. It was a wire noose. We would find where a rabbit run was and set the trap. Sure enough, the next night there would be a fat old rabbit, strangled, with its eyes bulging.¹²

Rabbits caught wild were considered part of a family's diet.

I frequently had rabbit with two veg. And the following days would be made up of rabbit stew. It died out by the late 1950s, but when I was younger, it was a regular feature. There were always rabbits someone had caught wild and sold on.¹³

The pubs, the backs of local people's houses well-known to 'go out' and butcher shops (where rabbits caught wild, locally, would be cheaper) were the points of sale, if the meat was not consumed by the poacher and their family.

Pheasants and partridges would almost always be sold to local butchers or a 'middleman'.

Though pheasants and partridges were poached, people like us didn't eat them ... it was considered a rich person's dish. It did go on though ... catching them.¹⁴

An extensive check of crime records for the locality in the 1950s reveals no evidence of any prosecutions for poaching in the Soar Valley. One can only theorise on the balance of probabilities that were anyone caught red-handed, summary justice may have been the preferred punishment. That poaching was not informed on by an accepting community is echoed:

No-one I knew of ever said anything. And some of the poaching went on off my land, so I would have liked to have known.¹⁵

The notion of the consequences of being caught in the act is suggested:

Well, of course, working on the land you hear things. It never happened to me, but I know of one or two who were nabbed and were given a good kicking ... They still came back though.¹⁶

It was a different world then. The time-shift of morality and rules puts retroactive perception at the disadvantage of not seeing things as people in the Soar Valley saw them then. In the 26 years following the Second World War, perceptions, needs and attitudes resonated more with the essence of pre-war give-and-take than of the more politically correct ideas of today.

The system was understood but not liked. Therefore, getting round it in a passive way was accepted; particularly if the individuals benefiting in a secondary manner were local people.

This mindset appeared to operate with a degree of poignancy in the post-war years of austerity. The return to peace in 1945 did not bring a respite from the rigours of wartime, but rather an intensification of them. Rationing was more severe after the war than during it. Bread was rationed for the first time in 1946,

¹² Interview: Graham S., 30 May 1999.

¹³ Personal knowledge: Stephen Joyce, 12 January 2002. Recollections of family oral history.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Interview: Les S., 22 October 1998.

¹⁶ Interview: Ken L., 6 December 1998.

while potatoes were rationed in 1947. Both were bitter experiences for the British public. Expatriate Britons and foreigners visiting the county expressed their view cogently. ‘I just can’t understand how you exist on the rations’, said a former inhabitant of the Midlands.¹⁷

In America people ... probably throw away as much as is eaten in England.¹⁸

Sudden shortages often hit the shops. If people had the necessary coupons but the product was unavailable, they went without completely. In such circumstances, the black market filled a void. As *Betty D.* of Sibley commenced,

Well, there were often shortages. But there were plenty of farmers around ... in the areas around the village. They might keep some sacks of potatoes back or have some eggs. One way or another, we got through.¹⁹

Ethel F. of Barrow-upon-Soar had lived through shortages during two world wars and in the misery of austerity.

It was worse in the Second World War and after it. We made nettle soup and my husband worked on his allotment all hours ... We got food and materials where we would. There was always someone, or someone somebody knew. I remember we were short on petrol, but Steve Squires (the car mechanic) came up with some. God knows where he got it!²⁰

There was genuine concern people were not getting enough to eat, whilst the absence of even modest luxuries had lasted a long time. The situation could hardly have been more favourable for the expansion of crime and the hidden economy.

As Arthur Helliwell, well-known columnist on the *Sunday People* newspaper, pointed out:

We’ve developed into a nation of bribers. Everyone is on the game, from the big shot who buys the motor dealer’s wife a fur coat and gets delivery of a new car in a week, to the housewife who slips to the fishmonger a packet of cigarettes after the queue has gone. The butcher runs a car, but he can’t get much petrol – slip him a couple of coupons and get an extra steak for yourself. The coal merchant can’t get eggs – send him a couple of dozen and there’s a ton of coal in your cellar. A page of clothing coupons to your tobacconist – and there’ll always be a packet of twenty under the counter for you.²¹

Few respondents alluded to knowledge of any kind of pilfering, but common sense indicates that would have been a source for contraband goods. No doubt some kind of favouritism may have operated from time to time by shop keepers towards pals with something from under the counter. However, once more oral evidence for this was not forthcoming. Service personnel may have contributed to black marketeering through NAAFI ‘fiddles’, though nothing was said on the subject by interviewees.

¹⁷ E. Smithies, *The Black Economy in England since 1914*, Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, Dublin (1984), p.87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Interview: Betty D., 20 September 1998.

²⁰ Interview: Ethel F., 29 September 1996.

²¹ Arthur Helliwell, his column, *Sunday People*, 20 December 1947, p.7.

Black marketeering in provincial towns between 1945 and 1950 invariably involved overcharging, failing to take coupons or buying and selling unauthorised goods.

The problem with wider research into the Soar Valley in this period is that respondents express little knowledge of these types of activities. It may be that interviewees genuinely were unaware of such activities – which makes the locality unusual compared to evidence collected from the West Midlands and the South East. It may be possible that even if the respondents knew of such goings-on they preferred only to talk about the activities they felt comfortable with.

Charlotte H. mentioned the fact that,

‘There were some spivs about ... though there was nothing like that which were down in London.’²²

Shirley J. spoke of an ‘entrepreneur’ from his home village of Sileby.

He had a finger in everything going ... half of it was legal and the other half wasn’t. Before the war he just had a bicycle. By 1953 he owned a boatload of properties on the front at Skegness.²³

Like any successful criminals, black marketeers tended to betray their ill-gotten gains through their exceptionally rapid affluence. The conjecture in the minds of respondents was compromised by the uncertainty as to legitimate, as opposed to illegitimate, wealth in the absence of concrete proof. Records do not support the concept of widespread, serious crime; anecdotal evidence merely hints at it. Perhaps a judgement could be made in the assertion that the Soar Valley survived the immediate post-war period without a major black market emerging.

Theft from the employer, as evidenced by the interviewees in the Soar Valley locality, was a phenomenon related to by four respondents who spoke of it; which occurred in the period of affluence – from 1950 onwards – in their experiences. Paradoxical as it may seem perhaps this was not so strange. Prior to the growing abundance of goods, control and watchfulness would have been greater. Therefore, pilfering would have been more difficult. Also, this remains a sensitive subject. The curious moralities that seem to be operative in giving evidence by people who still live in an area and may be discussing people they still know, or knew, can bring about odd attitudes. There is little doubt some pilfering did go on in the age of austerity. Perhaps respondents were genuinely not in possession of any knowledge of this. Perhaps pilfering doesn’t seem so bad when there is more for everyone.

The 1950s and the 1960s, though different in that the former was considered a ‘stable’ decade whilst the latter an ‘unstable’ decade, had one fundamental difference to the immediate post-war period – it was a time of growing, conspicuous, relative affluence. After the ‘boom’ period of the 1950s, consumerism continued apace in the 1960s despite the attempt by the Labour government to restrict rising inflation. It seemed that though the average wage was

²² Interview: Charlotte H., 20 February 1998.

²³ Personal knowledge: Stephen Joyce, 12 January 2002. Recollections of family oral history.

increasing and living conditions improved markedly compared to just twenty years before, somehow there was a growing sense of discontent.

Critics of Britain's economic performance in the two decades detected a preference for 'money makers' over 'money earners'.²⁴

Speculating was rife, satire, angry young men, the anti-materialism of the younger middle classes, resentment of wage freezes and industrial action were all indicators the mood of the nation was not content. Evelyn Waugh stated, 'No honest man has been able to save money since the war.'²⁵

This sense of disturbance may have re-engendered a 'bloody mindedness'²⁶ amongst the less well off. The growing culture of materialism and selfishness may have encouraged theft. Or the traditional past-time of outflanking what could have been seen as an unfair system may have been causal. Indeed it could have been any combination of the three motivating factors. There is little evidence to go on in terms of people's stimuli towards pilfering in a time of unsurpassed plenty and even less of this behaviour is reflected in existing records of court proceedings.

Two of the four interviewees who provided evidence of stealing from employees referred to the same company, Rolls Royce Ltd (aeroengines) at Mountsorrel.

My (husband) John used to bring stuff home all the while ... various bits of metal, tools, even stainless steel. There was a lot of pilfering went on there ... it was a way of life. Nobody ever seemed to get caught out though. They'd put it down their trouser leg, or in a bag covered by their lunch boxes or something. There were guards on the gate, but they never got stopped. There were thousands of blokes coming out at the end of a shift ... so there were plenty to hide among.

There were hedges around the factory. Some men used to throw stuff over or into the hedges. They'd go to the stores and say a tool was broken and get another. When their shift was over they'd go round the hedge from the outside and pick up whatever it was they'd thrown. Plenty of stuff got sold in pubs in the village (Rothley – next to Mountsorrel). The Red Lion was one of the places. I've seen it being done with my own eyes.²⁷

The scams were not restricted just to pilfering at Rolls Royce.

Quite often John would take his own stuff in and do work on it during his shift. The work rates (time and motion) were set so low that they could really take it easy.

The respondent goes on:

The biggest skive of all was when he (John) was on night shift. The shift was from 7p.m. to 7a.m. ... 12 hours. They had sleeping bags and bunk bed 'efforts' in there ... he said they used to 'get their heads down' for six hours a night, on night shift.

²⁴ E. Smithies, *The Black Economy in England Since 1914*, Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, Dublin (1984), p.21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ W. Clarkson, *Hit 'Em Hard: Jack Spot, Underworld King*, Harper Collins, London (2002), p.44.

²⁷ Interview: Joy D., 13 June 2001.

They were all at it. They had to be. If one ‘grassed’ they were all done. No wonder Rolls went bust.²⁸

This interviewee’s testimony is confirmed by *Rose G.*

Both my sons, P. and S., worked at Rolls Royce for nearly 20 years. They never took anything, but they said the amount of stealing was really big. It went on for a long time.²⁹

To many the temptation was too great. To others it was payback for real or perceived instances of the government bearing down too hard. However, the impression for Rolls Royce is that the activity became endemic and was considered by ordinary people as a normal habit.

The writer recalls an isolated example from higher up in the chain at another local company.

My school friend P’s dad worked as financial manager for []. He lost his job in 1963 when they found he had mishandled funds. My friend had to leave school and their family lost their company house. They left the area. I suppose the shame and local notoriety was too much.³⁰

It may be that numbers were caught in various scams, like pilfering, with the company settling it by dismissal rather than the courts. This would account for the negligible official records. Company records that could either endorse or refute this notion are unobtainable throughout the Soar Valley for the period between 1945 and 1971.

There were 13 boot and shoe factories in Sileby alone, in 1969.³¹ Mountsorrel also had several boot and shoe factories. Given the direct consumer nature of the product it would almost be surprising if there was no pilfering. *Harry T.*, who worked in the boot and shoe industry for 50 years in Sileby, testifies,

Yes, it did go on from time to time. There was a spate of it in the 1960s when the new fashions came out. Y’know, pointed shoes and chisel toes ... There was a rumour that one person got the ‘poke’ ... though I don’t know. I remember one bloke used to sell ‘em out the boot of his Hillman at the back of the Freetrade pub Friday and Saturday evenings ... and on a Sunday lunchtime too.³²

This unofficial precursor to car boot sales was the only other evidence given, apart from that of *Joy D.*,³³ of any kind of organised pilfering and sale for profit. The law was probably broken more often than the testimonies available. But the hidden economy had little effect on patterns of organised theft and never achieved anything like the dimensions reached by black markets abroad.

The government’s ‘bonfire of controls’³⁴ relating to shortages in 1951 indicated the period of greatest danger to the country’s economic equilibrium had

²⁸ Interview: Joy D., 13 June 2001

²⁹ Interview: Rose G., 3 October 1998.

³⁰ Personal knowledge: Stephen Joyce, 12 January 2002. Recollections of family oral history.

³¹ C. J. B. Ellis, *History of Leicestershire, 55BC–1969*, Leicester University Press, Leicester (1972).

³² Interview: Harry T., 3 May 1999.

³³ Interview: Joy D., 13 June 2001.

³⁴ E. Smithies, *The Black Economy in England Since 1914*, Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, Dublin (1984), p.21.

passed. The evidence in the Soar Valley after that date indicates the black economy was characterised by a lack of organisation or co-ordination. Though considerable ingenuity and energy may have been involved in the crimes, with some small-scale transactions occurring, the benefits were trivial in relation to the risks incurred. Pilferers risked a bad name and dismissal – or ultimately, jail – for a small monetary gain. In the same mentality as a female shopper who cannot resist squandering money she cannot afford to buy another pair of shoes she believes are a bargain, when the woman already has 60 pairs in her cupboard, most of which have never been worn, I believe compulsiveness served as a trigger in theft. The lack of self-control, boredom with the repetitive nature of the work being done, a chance to ‘talk big’ to their pals at the pub, a feeling of getting one over on the system, scoring points against the taxman or employer – all of these in varying degrees could be reasonably hypothesised as motivating factors at different times. Sometimes people did not even know why they stole items or what use they could put them too. *Chris S.* related,

Kenny K. sneaked out a piece of stainless steel from Rolls Royce. He had it for ages showing it to people. In the end he just chucked it in the river. What could you use a piece of stainless steel for?³⁵

Other small-scale pilfering was of a more practical nature and directly intended to benefit families. Respondents have variously spoken of numerous items that suddenly appeared in the household without anyone being aware of them being bought.

Hazel D. spoke of ‘a keg of beer appearing one Christmastime’;³⁶ the writer, of ‘of a crate of fireworks on the day before Bonfire Night’;³⁷ *Adelaine C.* referred to ‘offcuts of materials like that used at Wright’s in Quorn’;³⁸

Noel W. remembers ‘sacks of flour and sugar suddenly out the back’;³⁹ *Stuart T.* talked of ‘a pallet of bricks and a bag of sand’⁴⁰ mysteriously being available; *Herbert B.* mentioned ‘a new bicycle wheel and an exhaust pipe’;⁴¹

Ken L. referred to ‘a saw and pair of shears’;⁴² and *George K.* talked of ‘a crate of Guinness’ that materialised one holiday trip. ‘No-one knew where it had come from. But we polished it off.’⁴³

Interestingly these comments made refer to the product or goods, but make no assertion to how they came to be at their homes or available to them. The purpose these items of very unclear origin had was that they served the families needs directly. Mostly they had an immediate, or at the very least, an anticipated use.

³⁵ Interview: *Chris S.*, 7 June 1998.

³⁶ Interview: *Hazel D.*, 6 March 1998.

³⁷ Personal knowledge: Stephen Joyce, 12 January 2002. Recollections of family oral history

³⁸ Interview: *Adelaine C.*, 15 May 1999.

³⁹ Interview: *Noel W.*, 22 May 1999.

⁴⁰ Interview: *Stuart T.*, 14 March 1999.

⁴¹ Interview: *Herbert B.*, 18 March 1999.

⁴² Interview: *Ken L.*, 6 December 1998.

⁴³ Interview: *George K.*, 1 November 1998.

This direct-use theft was of value to the family economy in the same way as poaching. It had an immediate effect and obtaining it was secretive, even to those closest. Their value was peripheral to people's existence. They were marginal to families' livelihoods. But they were perceived as an asset and played a real part in ordinary people's lives in the Soar Valley between 1945–1971.

With the country's tax burden considered greater in 1970 than in 1946, there was a lingering frustration at the system amongst ordinary people. Some justification was put forward in the perverse notion that, 'the things we helped make partly belong to us. The employer never pays the workman the true value of what he produces'.⁴⁴

Whilst long-term tax evasion or of 'cooking the books' would represent calculated or sustained attempts to defraud, the overwhelming impression deduced from the evidence obtained was that theft was opportunistic without any systematic aspect to it. An example of this is provided by *Chris S.*

Where I worked, at the Hurst Service Station in Quorn, I was like on my own for eight hour shifts. I only 'borrowed' a few quid over the months I was there out of the till to get drinks from the machine. But one day I came into work and the manager was there. He said the till was £12 down from yesterday. But he knew it was the lad on the other shift who took it because it went missing then. The lad had admitted it and had only done it as the manager's son had been in that day and got him to nick the money and share it out. And do you know what happened about it? Nothing. Because it was the manager's son, John didn't even get sacked.⁴⁵

The attitude of employers must also be taken into account. It is inconceivable that competent managers would not be aware of losses. But the lack of records for convictions due to the black economy in the Soar Valley between 1945–1971 may be hinted at by the comment of *Norman A.* who was the manager of Driver's hosiery in Barrow-upon-Soar in the 1960s.

Yes, we knew some thefts occurred. But the way I looked at it was keeping the workforce happy. They were a close-knit lot and it was worth turning a blind eye if losses were negligible.⁴⁶

As Smithies asserts:

No statistical series exists that gives systematic details of black economy offences. The First World War saw the publication of *The National Food Journal* which attempted a national survey of black market prosecutions, but nothing similar was tried after the Second World War.⁴⁷

The scale of the black economy both nationally and locally is perhaps unknowable. Usually, when the offences were discovered, they did not come to the attention of the courts. The 1962 study of pilfering by J. P. Martin⁴⁸ found that

⁴⁸ J. P. Martin, *Offenders as Employees*, Macmillan, St. Martin's Place (1962), p.96.

⁴⁴ Interview: Lord Joseph S., 30 April 1999.

⁴⁵ Interview: Chris S., 7 June 1998.

⁴⁶ Interview: Norman A., 14 April 1999.

⁴⁷ E. Smithies, *The Black Economy in England Since 1914*, Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, Dublin (1984), p.5.

'all' firms were careful to avoid calling in the police. In large firms the police were called in for 31 per cent of cases, while smaller firms did so in only 21% of cases. With the Director of Public Prosecutions starting proceedings only where they felt evidence would stand a good chance of securing a conviction, the scant court convictions for black economy crimes are not a measure of the black economy activities that took place.

The oral and, less reliable, impressionistic evidence is interesting and revealing, but in itself is an indication of the existence of the black economy rather than a basis or foundation for generalisations about the true size and significance of the phenomenon. Whilst the authorities were anxious to suppress the black economy in the forms of the black market, pilfering and fraud, it cannot be emphasised too strongly in this culture of fiddling which is 'characterised by its hidden, submerged or camouflaged nature'⁴⁹ that it was perceived by ordinary people as socially acceptable.

There was an unspoken, tacit acceptance of nefarious activity from poaching to pilfering, as long as it remained non-blattant and minimal. Preserving the status quo may have been a more important consideration.

The hidden economy in the Soar Valley for the 26 years after World War Two is by its definition difficult to assess. Its very nature causes it to be intangible and amorphous, veiled and furtive. As such its exact extent will always remain impossible to quantify and unknowable. However, the evidence that was gained indicates its definite existence and provides clear features as to its character. To what extent it was greed, human frailties or a genuine desire to circumvent the system and provide for one's family, it is a reasonable probability that the family economy did benefit in differing degrees from its existence. The hidden or black economy has always been a problematic phenomenon to investigate but research and the historian's role in an enquiry of this nature would not be complete were this phenomenon to be ignored because it is problematic.

STEPHEN JOYCE recently completed a research thesis focusing on the family economy and kinship culture in the Soar Valley over a 26-year post-war period. He is a previous contributor to *Transactions* with an article on landholding changes in the Soar Valley following Enclosure.

⁴⁹ E. Smithies, *The Black Economy in England Since 1914*, Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, Dublin (1984), p.4.

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