THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

‘ON HEARING IT WAS IRISH [THEY] SAID IT COULD NOT BE GOOD’: A WEEK IN THE LIFE OF A WATERFORD GLASS TRAVELLING SALESMAN, 25 AUGUST–1 SEPTEMBER 1832

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This paper takes as its focus the days between 25 August and 1 September 1832. It was during this week that two representatives from the Waterford glasshouse arrived in Southampton, England, with a cargo of glass, which they hoped to sell by auction. Taking a design historical approach, this paper seeks to investigate the methods by which the manager of the glasshouse and the travelling salesman set about organising and advertising their upcoming auction. Also explored are the reasons why, approximately seven days after their arrival, the representatives were forced to pack up their stock in failure, having sold little or no glass. A range of primary sources has been used to piece together the experiences of those involved in this unsuccessful venture. These include the surviving business correspondence (known as the Gatehell Letters) and the account ledgers associated with the Waterford glasshouse. Since 1956 these valuable and hitherto underused business records, purchased by Dudley Westropp in the early years of the 20th century, have been housed by the National Museum of Ireland. By using these primary sources in conjunction with Hampshire newspapers, it has been possible to gain an insight into the reality of selling Irish glass in early 19th century Britain. In doing so, a valuable snapshot of the business practices used at the Waterford glasshouse is provided. It also gives an opportunity to reflect on not only the perception of Irish glass in England at this time but also the broader spectrum of the glass trade within and between England and Ireland during the early 19th century.

With a view to providing a context for this sales trip, this article will address both the market in Ireland for luxury cut glass and the nature of contact which existed between the Waterford glasshouse and various individuals involved in the English glass trade. After recounting the details of the sales trip, this article will present some observations on the perception of Irish glass in England and will conclude by considering the nature and origin of this perception.

BACKGROUND

The name of Waterford is synonymous with heavy, richly cut glass. Significant quantities of cut glass have been attributed to the Waterford glasshouse when only a fraction of it could possibly have been manufactured there. In 1920, Dudley Westropp commented on this when he wrote that ‘so much modern glass and also continental glass is, at the present day, passed off as old Irish, or as ‘Waterford’ (1978, 204).

Analysis of the statistics for duty paid in each country in 1833 demonstrates that, in comparison to the glass industry in England, the Irish glass industry was in fact relatively small (Wakefield 1982, 20). These statistics are supported by evidence within the Waterford glasshouse accounts, ledgers and business correspondence. These sources reveal the difficulties faced by the glasshouse managers during the economic depressions experienced in Ireland following the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815.

Flint glass production in Ireland had always incurred high production costs. At great cost to the Waterford glasshouse, coal was imported from Wales and materials such as sand, clay, saltpetre and lead were purchased from suppliers in various parts of England. An account entry, dated 27 July 1827, records a reference to a steam engine being used at the Waterford glasshouse (Account ledger, registration no. 1956.138). While comparatively late to start using steam-powered cutting, this investment nevertheless ensured that the Waterford glasshouse would be able to produce glass in the same rich cut style as that of their counterparts in England and Scotland.

In 1832 the glasshouse at Waterford was under the management of the partnership Gatehell, Walpole and Co. However, the day to day running of the glassworks was the responsibility of Jonathan Wright, glassworks manager between 1830 and 1835, and the Gatehell Letters testify to the tireless attempts by Jonathan Wright and the partnership to increase sales (Moran 2003). The account ledgers show that glass was sold both through their retail ware room in Waterford and through a linen shop owned by a family member in Skinner Row, Dublin. Their travelling salesman, George Saunders, who travelled the country loaded with casks of glass, also played a vital role in securing wholesale custom from country retailers. However, with insufficient demand for the cut glass produced, they found it difficult to cover their labour costs, let alone recoup the cost of the steam engine.
Those at the Waterford glasshouse were not alone in their plight. Other Irish manufacturers of glass and other goods likewise found it difficult to compete with the competitively priced imported goods which, thanks to the advances made in steam shipping, speedily flooded into Irish ports. Irish consumers of luxury goods had a long-nurtured tendency to favour imported products over native-made goods, and since the early part of the 18th century Irish manufacturers had struggled to persuade their consumers to support Irish manufacturers, through the purchase of Irish-made products (Foster 1997).

The demand for imported glass in Ireland during the early 1830s was made apparent by the testimony of Mr Frederick Pellatt of the Clyde Flint Glass Works, which appears in the Appendix to the Thirteenth Report of Commissioners of Excise Inquiry of 1835 (P. Francis and J. Turnbull pers. comm.). In reference to the market for their high-quality glass, Mr Pellatt stated ‘our glass is superior to the Irish glass, and we do a good deal in the Dublin market’. When asked if there was an increased demand for ‘a good article’ in Dublin, he responded

yes; but we find it difficult to keep pace with the taste in quality of the article; Dublin is our best market (Appendix to the Thirteenth Report, App. 39, 142–3).

It is important to be aware of the potential for exaggeration in the evidence presented in the legislative context of a Commissioners’ inquiry. However, the impression gained from Mr Pellatt’s evidence appears all the more credible when seen against the context provided by the Waterford glass business records. While Mr Pellatt found his good-quality glass was in high demand in Dublin, cut glass began to mount up at a worrying pace in the store rooms at the Waterford glasshouse. A note of desperation is detected in the letter written by Jonathan Wright to his brother on 27 June 1830. While enquiring if there was any money owing to them in Dublin, he despaired

send it here, we have almost nothing towards paying the men next 6th day so let it be before that time (Gatchell Letters, document 33).

Slightly later that year, in a letter dated 15 October 1830, he explained that: ‘our sale for cut articles is bad & the stock accumulating’ (Gatchell Letters, document 36). In response to the same amassing stock of cut glass, Jonathan Wright later wrote in a thankful but disillusioned tone ‘our plain goods, we sell as fast as they are made’ (Gatchell Letters, document 48, 27 July 1831 in Phelps Warren 1981, 40).

Clearly a market did exist in Ireland for their plain cut wares. However, it was the English and Scottish glassmakers who met the demand for the more costly cut glass, which was supplied to the Dublin middle-class consumers. In the face of such strong competition, it was vital that the partners developed and maintained contacts which enabled them to keep abreast of the practices of other glasshouses, not just in Ireland but also in Scotland and England.

**Trade Links with Britain**

At the Waterford glasshouse there was a need to source not just raw materials, but also specialist expertise and components such as chandelier drops in England. As a result of this, links were formed between those running the Waterford glasshouse and various individuals involved in the English glass trade. Such contacts proved useful on occasion, as shown when Jonathan Wright wrote in a letter to his father in Dublin, dated 20 February 1831, that he was awaiting answers ‘from Stourbridge which may give some information of what the trade there are doing’ (Gatchell Letters, document 45). In reference to an enquiry which was possibly of a similar nature, Jonathan Wright wrote in a later letter that ‘the man sent some patterns with their prices’ implying that their enquiries were answered (Gatchell Letters, document 51, 27 March 1832). It was against this highly competitive background that this selling trip to Southampton must be seen.

Alongside the methods of sale mentioned above, selling excursions or rather ‘adventures’ as they are called in the Gatchell Letters, were made to locations ranging from New Brunswick to Liverpool. Once there, a temporary sales outlet was leased where the glass would be laid out for viewing before an auction was held. In a letter dated 23 December 1830, Jonathan Wright wrote optimistically of the possibility of ‘opening an intercourse with some of the towns in the south of England’ (Gatchell Letters, document 41). He went on to say that

there is another project started which I think worthy of a trial that is for GS [George Saunders] to be sent out with £200 of goods to Portsmouth which is a very stirring place and where all kinds of goods sell dear.

No further details are recorded in the surviving letters regarding this proposed trip to Portsmouth. However, a letter written by Jonathan Wright on 3 October 1832, records the adventure made in August 1832 to Southampton (Gatchell Letters, document 63 in Westropp 1978, 94). As will be revealed, such selling trips were attended by a certain amount of risk and not just the dangers encountered in rough seas.

**The Adventure to Southampton**

On 21 August 1832, Jonathan Wright, along with George Saunders and Tom Harney, their packer, set off from Waterford on the steamer to Bristol. Following a two-day overland journey they reached Southampton. They were without their glass as it was being shipped direct. Upon arrival in Southampton, having organised their accommodation, they surveyed the competition posed by glass retailers in the town:

After dining we went out on observation down High Street the shops of which frequently surpass in beauty and taste those in the best parts of Dublin – there is but one glass shop kept by a man named Baker (Gatchell Letters, document 63).

In a positive yet experienced tone, Jonathan Wright went on to describe how he had observed that

Judging from the splendour of the buildings and tide of gentry … we saw that our stock would be easily made off – but the old saying tis not all that glistens was called to mind (Gatchell Letters, document 63).

In order to announce their upcoming auction planned for Thursday 30 August 1832, they placed an advertisement
in the *Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian*, scheduled to appear on Saturday 25 August 1832. Their goods arrived on Sunday, and on Tuesday evening they took possession of the rooms they had hired at Benwell's Auction Rooms on High Street, Southampton. By Wednesday they had unpacked their goods and all was ready for viewing. They waited in anticipation but nobody came. Although Jonathan Wright attributed this to, in his words, the 'deluge of rain', this was not promising considering the auction was planned for Thursday (Gatchell Letters, document 63). The heavy rain was recorded in the local newspapers for that week, as was the visit of the famous Italian violinist Signor Paganini who was due to play on the same day as the scheduled auction.

The next day was finer and in the words of Jonathan Wright 'we attempted an auction but without effect', this we attributed to the gentry being driven off by Paganini the Italian'. He went on to explain that 'numbers called in to admire but bought not on hearing it was Irish said it could not be good' (Gatchell Letters, document 63). That evening, as they drew their unsuccessful day to a close, they received an angry visit from Baker, the local glass retailer. Jonathan Wright explained 'Baker called and threatened to bring us before the magistrate for selling without a license but did not put it into practice' (Gatchell Letters, document 63). Undeterred by the animosity of Baker and the competition from Paganini, they continued to display their goods in the hope of improved sales.

However, as Jonathan Wright's letter continues to explain, 'on the 2nd day we lost all hope of auction and continued at private sale' and they placed another advertisement to this effect in the *Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian*, which appeared on Saturday 1 September 1832. Interestingly, Baker also placed an advertisement in this paper in which he duly thanked the local gentry of the area for their encouragement and emphasized the great reductions he was offering in cut glass.

In a last attempt to remedy the situation, Jonathan Wright set about delivering circulars. He explained that he had directed to upwards of 200 of the gentry whom his name I got out of the Poor Rate book. These on the 3rd and 4th day I delivered myself principally (Gatchell Letters, document 63).

However, no amount of ingenuity could remedy this situation. Back at home in Waterford, Jonathan Wright's brother John wrote to their other brother Nathan on the 7 September 1832 saying:

> the adventure will turn out poor enough, they met with opposition from the shopkeepers who added to the prejudice against Irish goods, preventing their making sales worth mentioning ... they had concluded if sales did not improve to pack up the glass and return next week. Jonathan writes they have had a toilsome and anxious time of it (Gatchell Letters, document 59).

Nearing the end of his letter, Jonathan Wright resolved that 'it would appear that the grand streets are only partially inhabited and that the gentry there are more migratory than resident' (Gatchell Letters, document 63, 10 October 1832).

Before leaving, Jonathan Wright visited Bedhampton where he had arranged to meet a man called Captain Pearce who gave him an order for £60 worth of goods. The remainder of their glass they decided to send to Chichester in the hope that their contact there would be able to sell it (Westropp 1978, 94). The adventure, which had cost them £50 and 7 pence in expenses alone, had ended in disappointment (Account ledger, 1956.139).

**The Perception of Irish Glass in England**

Evidence from the Gatchell Letters shows that those running the Waterford glasshouse were clearly aware that there was a perceived difference in the quality and colour of Irish glass when compared with English or Scottish glass.

In a letter written in November 1832, referring to a potential order for some goods from the glass dealer Edward Eardley of Exeter, the partner Elizabeth Walpole warned Jonathan Wright to choose articles for Eardley 'which will show the colour and other perfections of our manufacture' (Gatchell Letters, document 65 in Westropp 1978, 95). Even more evocatively, Walpole goes on to say in the same letter

> I need not remind George Saunders to choose articles for this market which will bear the keen inspection of an English Eye.

Edward Eardley had apparently told Elizabeth Walpole that 'all the Irish Glass ever he had seen was dark coloured'. However, he gave his word that 'he would judge it as though it were English Glass' (Gatchell Letters, document 69, 7 December 1832).

Whether or not such a disparity really did exist, it is clear that the Dublin glassmaker Martin Crean capitalized on this in his plea for a reduction in duty (Ross 1982, 62). In the evidence he presented to the *Thirteenth Report of Commissioners of Excise Inquiry*, he declared that the difference in the quality of Irish glass when compared with English glass was so manifest that Irish glassmakers should pay duty at a lower rate:

> The coals we get are not equal to those we see in glasshouses in England; we have not the coals I have seen in Birmingham. The great cause of our glass not being so good as theirs is owing to the furnace not being made sufficiently hot to cause the metal to be in a perfect state (Appendix to the Thirteenth Report, App. 45, 155)

As emphasized by Ross, the testimonies by English and Scottish glassmakers presented to the *Twelfth Report of the Commission into the Revenue arising in Ireland, Scotland, &c. of 1825* stressed the fact that large quantities of inferior Irish glass were smuggled onto their shores to the detriment of their trade (Ross 1982, 58–60). The Waterford glass business records illustrate that a large quantity of their sales were met by the demand for plain inexpensive wares. However, it is undeniable that those at Waterford were capable of producing extremely clear and skillfully cut glass. Their skill is illustrated in the service of glass now in the collection of the Provost's House, Trinity College Dublin, which is believed to be the most securely provenanced service of Waterford glass (COLOUR PLATE 82).

However, the Gatchell Letters indicate that as the Irish glass industry began to wane, considerable difficulty was experienced in selling their heavily cut glass both in Ireland and England.
An article entitled ‘The State of Ireland’, which appeared on 1 September 1832 in the *Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian*, raises another issue. The article is based on evidence presented by the Irish Commander in Chief, Sir Richard Hussey Vivian, before the committee on the state of Ireland. In this article, Ireland is alluded to as a drain on government resources and the people of Ireland are presented as a race whom no amount of civilizing could remedy. While the approach taken here is more revisionist than patriotic, this article appeared in the very same issue to that in which the Waterford glassworks advertised their sale, and cannot be ignored. Also recorded in the local Hampshire newspapers for that week was a case of cholera in the locality. Considering the fact that cholera was raging across Ireland during that year and there had in fact been an outbreak of cholera in Waterford in the summer of 1832, it is plausible that the Irish visitors were also avoided with matters of health in mind.

If one attempts to explain the failure experienced during this week, one has to consider a range of social and economic factors. The Irish cut glass industry was small and in spite of the posthumous veneration it has received, it is clear that at the time of most consequence, Irish cut glass suffered from what can only be described as an image problem. While the extension of the Excise in 1825 probably curtailed smuggling of poor-quality Irish glass across to Scotland and England, the precedent which this set was detrimental. One could speculate that the English consumers, who were as fickle as their counterparts in Ireland, began to identify this sub-standard smuggled glass as epitomizing the production of Irish glasshouses.

Regardless of the quality of the glass laid out for viewing in Southampton, with such an unfortunate combination of factors working against them, their adventure to Southampton was doomed to failure. However, whatever the reasons or causes underlying the indifference of the Southampton consumers, this research highlights the value of documentary sources in allowing us to recapture not just the risky and competitive nature of the glass business, but also the personal experiences of those who created this history.

**REFERENCES**

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*Secondary sources*


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