

Regulating the 'soulless combines' of British inter-war retailing

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One contribution of the so-called new retail geography that emerged during the 1990s is to focus much needed attention on the regulation of retailing. The characteristics of national and international regulation and its impact at the local level have been examined afresh, and with renewed vigour and purpose. Consideration has also been given to the role of public-interest and private-interest regulation and the relationship between these types. Much of the work has been concerned to explore the highly contested development of the contemporary economic landscape of retailing. From a broader perspective, it has served to highlight pronounced gaps in our knowledge of the historical geography of retail regulation.

This paper highlights the importance of such knowledge to our understanding of retail change. It does so by exploring the complex nature of attempts to regulate the growth of large-scale retail institutions in England and Wales, the Isle of Man and Ireland during the 1930s, a

decade of intense competition in the retail industry. Three regulatory initiatives are considered: The Report of the Commission on Registration of Shops, 1933, The Irish Free State; The Multiple Shops Regulation Act, 1937, Isle of Man; The Multiple Shops Retail Trading Safeguard Bill, 1937, England and Wales.

The paper considers the significance of these and various other broadly contemporaneous political challenges to the development of large-scale retailing, which were occurring at a variety of spatial scales. It is argued that large-scale British retail firms were forced to recognise and try to defeat multiple attempts to foster regulation aimed at controlling their growth. The paper considers the arguments put forward by advocates and opponents of retailer-regulation and evaluates the methods used by the representatives of large-scale retailers to combat such regulatory initiatives.