

Atkins, P.J. (1984) Sir Robert Butler (1866-1933) milk and dairy products wholesaler and retailer, pp 531-33 in Jeremy, D.J. (Ed.) *Dictionary of Business Biography* vol. 1 London: Butterworths

Robert Reginald Frederick Butler was born at Shepton Mallet, Somerset on 19 June 1866, the son of Frederick James Butler, a farmer, and Susan nee Swanson. He was educated at Bedford School and entered the milk trade as manager of the North Wiltshire Dairy Co's depot at Eastcourt Street, Devizes. Business grew rapidly with the accelerated demand of London's milk trade, and in 1896 Butler helped to organize Wilts United Dairies, of which he became a principal shareholder. His partner, Charles Maggs, died in 1899, but Reginald Butler helped make the new company one of the most successful in the trade. In 1901 he bought a wholesale milk business at the Paddington terminus of the GWR and made Joseph Maggs (qv) son of Charles, its manager. By 1911 they were able to buy the established firm of Freeth & Pocock Ltd, and in 1915 Reginald Butler engineered a major re-structuring of the trade in the form of a new company, United Dairies.

United Dairies was an amalgamation of the most powerful wholesale firms in London, including the Dairy Supply Co Ltd, Great Western & Metropolitan Dairies Ltd, Wilts United Dairies Ltd, and F W Gilbert Ltd. It was thought best under the then prevailing war conditions to reduce the inefficiency of overlapping rounds and undesirable competition. In 1917 some of the leading retail companies also joined, such as Welford & Sons, the Aylesbury Dairy Co, the London, Gloucester & North Hants Dairies, Curtis Bros & Dumbrill, R Higgs & Son, Welford's Surrey Dairies, West London Dairy Co, Ben Davies & Son, Eastern Counties Dairy Farmers, Emerton & Sons, and many more. In the same year Butler became chairman of this unprecedentedly large dairy combine, a post he held until succeeded by Joseph Maggs in 1922. By the end of the war United Dairies controlled about two-thirds of London's wholesale milk supply, and had been able to cut by 30 per cent the number of its rounds, creating in the process what amounted to a virtual monopoly in some areas. Within a year the group was subject to an excess profit duty.

Sir Reginald (he was granted a baronetcy in 1922) was also active outside the boardroom. As a result of his efforts the National Milk Publicity Council was founded in 1920, and he was at various times president of the National Federation of Dairymen's Associations, and the Metropolitan Dairymen's Benevolent Institution. He was also a leading promoter of the Young Farmers' Club movement.

After his retirement from the chairmanship of United Dairies in 1922, Butler kept interests in a wide sphere of business concerns in the catering and confectionery trades. He became, for instance, a director of the Aerated Bread Co (ABC), and with some friends acquired the rights in several countries of the Hayes gear.

The successful career of Reginald Butler was a result not only of the fortunate circumstances of being in a trade that was expanding rapidly. He was an energetic, astute and forceful businessman to whom 'mediocrity, inefficiency, and any suggestion of failure were abhorrent' {*Milk Industry* 14 (1933) 33}. His talent for organisation was a key asset, although his direct manner was known to cause occasional embarrassment to colleagues.

Butler married in 1895 Rose nee Rich, daughter of Thomas Godwin Rich, a farmer; they had one son who, as Lieutenant Reginald Thomas Butler RN, succeeded to the baronetcy, and one

daughter, Mrs Wayland- Smith. Sir Reginald Butler died on 19 November 1933 leaving £115,555 gross.

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