

## Book Reviews

### Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement

By Matthew Hilton

Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0 521 53853 X (paperback) £17.99, 0 521 83129 6 (hardback) £45.00.

Reviewed by Professor Joshua Bamfield

This is a comprehensive and committed guide to the development of consumerism in the UK. Although much of it, rightly, concerns the Consumers Association (and many of the press articles about the book have focused on this important aspect) this is only one part of the book. Hilton discusses the origins of consumerism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the campaigns about prices and unethical practices in World War I; the development of a consumerist ethos in the labour movement in the inter-war period; the pro-consumer pressure in World War II and the 1940s; and the growth of consumerism and the increased respect given to consumer matters since the 1950s.

This book will be of interest to people engaged with the co-operative movement because it discusses the Movement clearly and objectively. The co-operative movement is a major part of Hilton's "historical (consumer) movement" and Hilton gives its work due, but not excessive, credit. Hilton argues that the co-operative movement was a part of the consumer movement for most of this period, but co-operative failure to ally with the consumer movement from the 1950s is regarded as a loss to both sides. The distancing of the co-operative movement from the 'official' consumer movement (mainly the Consumers Association) was caused, Hilton suggests, by a combination of co-operative trading weakness, Co-operative disdain for disengaged middle-class consumerists, and the Consumers Association desire to be completely independent of all trading bodies. Hilton suggests, "The CA (Consumers Association) has never made any significant overtures to the Co-op, and for too much of its history an element of snobbery seems to have led the CA to regard the CWS as a scruffy, if well meaning, working-class relative who is now well past their prime and who ought to step aside to allow in the real professionals". (p333). Hilton contrasts this with the French experience, for example, where the French

consumer movement and the co-operative movement have always worked closely together with testing laboratories, publicity, campaigns, and membership organisations.

An important aspect of his book is the sustained discussion of the implications of the historical incidents Hilton portrays, both for protecting the consumer and the development of the consumer movement. It is especially useful to have this set in an historical context, because we see the same issues coming up again and again. He argues that, compared with several other European countries, there were several reasons for the slow growth of consumerism in the UK. At an official level there was a sustaining belief in efficient markets, which made 'interference' in relations between consumer and supplier unnecessary. Amongst many socialists, consumer issues were seen as a matter primarily for housewives and were less important than production issues and the need for increased wages. William Morris's socialist dream (and that of most other thinkers) was about producer co-operation not consumer co-operation. Hilton also shows that what he calls the *hair-shirt culture* of the British Labour Movement frequently made it uninterested in bourgeois concerns about consumer choice, rejected often as mass-market consumerism.

Hilton correctly shows that a large part of the debate about consumerism amongst the left was between producer socialism versus consumer co-operation. The Webbs are lauded as advocating the adoption of policies which recognised the consuming and producing role of each individual or family unit. Many women became politicised **because of** their role as family provisioners. The work of Margaret Llewelyn Davies and the Co-operative Women's Guild in campaigns to help women as consumers and to improve the lot of women is evaluated. The campaigns covered issues such as credit trading, the standards of co-operative trading, a minimum wage for female co-operative employees, as well as maternity benefits in social insurance

legislation and improved hospitals. To these pioneers consumerism was linked to citizenship issues.

Concern about profiteering, food queues and shortages in the First World War led to the Labour Movement setting up the War Emergency Workers' National Committee with Co-operative involvement. This was followed by the creation of a national Consumers' Council as a quango to relay the public's concerns to the Ministry of Food. Although members of the Consumer Council favoured a strong state role, after the war the co-operative members of the Consumer Council opposed subsidies and controls because these conflicted with co-operative trading needs. The co-operative movement was condemned for thinking only of itself. The Consumers' Council was closed down by the Government in 1921. By the 1930s, the Labour Party with strong Co-operative support was calling once more for a Consumers' Council. However, the Consumers' Council Bill of the Second Labour Government was denounced as an orgy of price fixing by farmers. It failed to reach the Statute Book.

Hilton argues that in creating the building blocks of post-war consumerism, much work originated in the organisation Political and Economic Planning (PEP). This was a group of opinion formers, including journalists, civil servants, academics and businessmen rather than politicians and trades unionists. During

the 1930s PEP looked into the feasibility of national economic plans and the need for a consumers' organisation to empower consumers.

By 1938, the co-operative movement's own PEP, the Carr-Saunders Report, argued that co-operative societies needed to regain their leadership role with all ranks of consumer by embarking on consumer education, teaching discrimination, aesthetic consideration and value-for-money criteria societies should extend their interest to more affluent goods and engage in the type of testing associated with the Good Housekeeping Institute. The Report urged societies to become more consumer-focused and give consumers what they wanted.

This fascinating book shows that we can identify a historical consumerism - owing much to the moral economy of the eighteenth century - and perceive the co-operative role within it. The renewed enthusiasm of the co-operative movement for ethical values in trading shows us that co-operative trading can meet new needs and by so doing demonstrates something of what has been lost by the indifference of much of the post-war consumer movement to what co-operatives can offer. One does not agree with everything that Hilton puts forward. In developing his thesis of a 'historical (consumer) movement' he provides a clear-sighted agenda for 21st century consumerists and co-operators alike.

**Thomas A Finlay SJ 1848-1940:** Educationalist, Editor, Social Reformer

By Thomas J Morrissey SJ

Four Courts Press, Dublin. ISBN 1 85182 827 3 €35 (£30) - reduced rate for Journal of Co-operative Studies readers using flyer.

Reviewed by Jim Moloney, Chair, Irish Agricultural Wholesale Society Group and former Trustee of the Plunkett Foundation

Everyone who is interested in the history of Ireland over the past century or so will be deeply indebted to Father Tom Morrissey for his recent publication of the life of Father T A Finlay. This task was made exceedingly difficult by the fact that Father Finlay left no papers.

The subtitle of the book, "Educationalist, editor, social reformer", gives an idea of the range of Father Finlay's interests and activities. As an Educationalist, he was the Rector of Belvedere College in Dublin and at the same time a prominent member of the staff of the fledgling University College Dublin (UCD). He was in turn Professor of Classics, Philosophy and Political Economy in UCD. Each one of these disciplines was a major task in itself, but it was obvious that Finlay was able to turn his mind to the challenges of each of these professions. As an editor, he was involved in the production of the *Lyceum* and the *New Ireland Review*. He encouraged many contributors to these magazines.

He was also the first editor of the *Irish Homestead*, which was the organ of the Agricultural Co-operative movement in Ireland. This was a very important journal, published weekly and it played a major role in the development and extension of agricultural co-operation in the country.

I recall many years ago discussing with Patrick Quinlan who was then President of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS), his experience of the *Irish Homestead*. He told me that as a young boy going to his local national school near Fermoy in Co Cork, the teacher said to the class one day "Ask your fathers to give you a penny every Friday so that you can buy the *Irish Homestead* and read English as it should be written". The contributors to the magazines with which Finlay was involved not only made major contributions in their chosen subjects but, of equal importance,

they wrote English in a style and form that had an influence on succeeding generations.

Finlay was central to all this work and indeed all this work would have been of such a demanding nature as to last for a lifetime. In addition of course, Finlay was a Jesuit priest and had duties and obligations to his Order. However, this did not preclude Finlay from becoming very actively involved with Sir Horace Plunkett in the very early stages of a co-operative movement in Ireland. The first co-operatives were formed in 1889 and Plunkett, with a number of helpers, visited many areas to explain the principles of co-operation. In order to put the matter on a formalised basis, the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) was formed in 1894. At its first meeting in 1895, Father Finlay is recorded as being a member of the committee. He was therefore one of Plunkett's earliest collaborators.

Indeed, it can be argued that of all the very distinguished people who were drawn to Plunkett's side in promoting the work of agricultural co-operation, Father Finlay was probably the most significant. He bridged a very serious gap. Plunkett and a number of his friends were Unionist in politics, Protestant in religion and many of them, including Plunkett himself, had associations with landlords. At the time they were trying to establish agricultural co-operatives, the memory of the landlords was very fresh in the minds of the Irish tenant farmers to whom the doctrine of co-operation was being preached. Father Finlay was the man who bridged the gap and made it possible for the message of co-operation to be accepted by what must have been sceptical farmers throughout Ireland.

Father Finlay was not a Dublin co-operator. He travelled the length and breadth of the country to meetings in many cold halls to bring the message of co-operation and, by his presence, he assured many doubting Catholic

farmers of the absolute importance of co-operative endeavour if they were to improve their livelihoods.

He became Vice President of the IAOS and played a leading part in the very important work of that organisation. I never met Father Finlay. He died in 1940 and I joined the staff of IAOS in 1950. Many older members of the staff at the time had very vivid recollections of Father Tom as he was happily called. One of the matters I recall hearing from my colleagues in the 1950s was the recollection of the tact and diplomacy which Father Tom exercised in dealing with many of the problems besetting the IAOS from time to time. This is referred to in Father Morrissey's book and indeed Father Finlay's qualities of tact and diplomacy were often called into use in order to rescue Horace Plunkett from some intemperate words or actions to which he was wont from time to time. Obviously Plunkett and Finlay were a very good team and it is clear from a perusal of the Plunkett diaries that Finlay was a close confidant of Plunkett's. One incident reported in the diaries concerned an action by Plunkett which did not command the support of many of his colleagues in the IAOS in Dublin. The Plunkett diary however records that when Plunkett acquainted Father Finlay of the circumstances of his actions, "Father Finlay absolved me".

Father Finlay was a very active believer in the co-operative movement and despite the fact that he left no papers, he nevertheless addressed the Annual General Meeting of the IAOS each year at some length. Fortunately the text of his addresses are faithfully recorded in the annual reports of the IAOS. It is clear from these addresses that he had a deep commitment to the co-operative movement even before Plunkett started his work in Ireland. As a Jesuit student, Finlay spent a few years in the early 1870s in Germany and took time to study the co-operative movement there, particularly the Raiffeisen Credit System. This left a lasting impression on him.

The history of the co-operative movement in Ireland contains many instances of efforts to rationalise the local co-operatives through bigger combinations. Father Finlay's firm views on this in 1906 were set out as follows:

The trade side of the movement would make or mar it. They should, therefore, concentrate their efforts on the development of the trade organisation of the movement, and by bringing the various societies into some system of combination enable them to bulk their produce in larger consignments, to grade them, and to have some mark which would safeguard them from the operation of fraudulent rivals, and which would secure for Irish products a better reputation and a better place in the English markets.

Again Father Finlay recognised the importance of farmers particularly the need to involve them in consultation about their own business. His view on this is clearly set out in his address to the Annual General Meeting of the IAOS in 1919:

The farmer must be dealt with sympathetically and intelligently. He must be consulted before the regulations, which are intended to control his industry, are issued and before the final decision is taken, as to the price at which his produce is to be sold, and as to the methods by which it is to be distributed. He will not be found to be unreasonable, but, like other men, he wishes to have a voice in the affairs that are peculiarly his own.

Father Finlay was a very clear thinking man. This is obvious from his work on the Recess Committee which led to the formation of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction in Ireland. He saw this as an essential tool in the development of Irish agriculture, and he worked very hard on the Recess Committee to secure the establishment of the Department of Agriculture in 1900 with Horace Plunkett as Vice President, in effect the first Irish Minister for Agriculture.

Father Finlay was a man of many interests. His involvement with Plunkett from the very early days of the co-operative movement was crucial to its success, and probably the movement would not have become as successful and as widespread in Ireland without Finlay's involvement.

His role in education was vital, particularly in the early days of University College Dublin. He developed and trained many brilliant

students and it must have given tremendous satisfaction to him to see many of his students play such a notable role in the professions but, more particularly, in public service in the nascent State after 1921. The dedicated work

of these public servants was essential to the survival of the State in its formative years and one of Father Finlay's greatest legacies to Ireland is that he educated many of them.

**The Likes of Us: A Biography of the White Working Class**  
By Michael Collins

Granta Books, London. ISBN 1 8620 7600 6 £12.

Reviewed by Rita Rhodes

This book has been reviewed in the national press and promoted in national booksellers from which we may deduce that it is considered to have wide appeal. Certainly, at first glance, its subject matter would seem to be of interest to readers of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

Collins has written his book because of a number of fears he has. One is that the white working class is becoming obscured by successive waves of immigrants. Another is his belief that all too frequently white British workers are caricatured as xenophobes while their tastes and attitudes are mocked. Although he acknowledges that many social commentators have studied and written about the white working class, he fears that in the main they have been outsiders and, as a result, their views have often been patronising.

Collins seeks to redress these wrongs by writing as an insider and concentrates on assembling his families' memories. He then links these to a number of themes - work or its lack, war, slums, redevelopment, music halls, football, the churches etc. In so doing he attempts to illustrate the culture of the white working class which he believes is shaped to a large extent by its location. Collins traces his family from the early 19th century to the present, in their homes in south east London, in particular, Southwark. A sound approach, this undoubtedly adds to the entertainment value of the book which is well-written, as one could expect from a television producer and journalist. Nevertheless, it disappointed your reviewer for two main reasons.

The first was that its claim to be a "biography of the White Working Class" can hardly be sustained. It relates to a very small area of London, and at best can only therefore be partial. For example, just across the River Thames at Stratford there were different industries which gave rise to a somewhat different working class which had

different trades unions, co-operative society and football teams.

The second disappointment is that those interested in co-operative history will find very few references to the Co-op in the book. This is a big surprise. Even the few that do exist are indirect and occur within the context of larger events. An undoubted strength of the book is its extensive use of personal accounts. One of these is a vivid account of a woman returning to Walworth after a bombing raid, late at night and in the blackout. She records:

We turn into Walworth Road. Further down it's pandemonium. Shop's been bombed. I hear someone say "Co-op's been hit", so naturally I panic, thinking about my Bill. Well, it was unbelievable, 'cos the shops are being looted. You can see these shapes - people running down the street with the dummies from the shop windows, with the clothes on 'em. Woman comes running up to me, she's got her apron open and she's cradling bundles of cutlery in it like it's a baby. She comes up right close: 'Go in, mother, get yourself some crockery.'" So I realise it's the Royal Arsenal Co-op with all the furniture and that. Not us at the funeral Co-op.

This is one of very few passing references to the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society founded in south east London in 1868. The Society's operations were well within the book's time-scale. An interesting Co-operative history concept is that developed by the Israeli Co-operative writer, Yair Levi, who speaks of co-operative 'embedddness'. By this he means the extent to which a co-operative becomes part of its community. Up until the 1960s, British consumer co-operatives as vibrant mass membership organisations were deeply embedded in their communities, and thus provide a good illustration of this concept. The

Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society with its ubiquitous shops, extensive cultural and recreational activities, educational courses, youth groups, and services from 'cradle to grave', was a particularly good example. Michael Collins's failure to note such a prominent feature of the area in which his family lived is puzzling. It also seriously detracts from the credibility of his book.

Although his book is a good read do not

expect too much of co-operative value from it. Indeed, one might feel pique that the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society that brought so much trade, employment and service to the south east London working classes has been so disregarded. Co-operative historians have much work to do to redress this imbalance and restore co-operatives as an integral part of working class history and culture.