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# Cooperative Rule: Community Development in Britain's Late Empire

By Aaron Windel

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I welcome this book because it makes a significant contribution to co-operative literature. It also adds to works dealing with co-operatives within the British Empire, particularly my book *Empire and Co-operation* (Rhodes, 2012).

Windel is an American academic originally from the United States and currently Associate Professor of History at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada where he teaches classes on modern Britain and the British empire, colonialism and post-colonialism, the history of technology, and the history of capitalism. Windel's focus on movements campaigning for independence from the late British Empire could thus be expected. His examples come from India and southeast Asia and later south, central and east Africa. Especial attention is paid to Uganda. His belief that co-operatives play a significant role in community development leads him to also pay attention to how they responded to tensions arising from independence campaigns.

Windel first defines his use of the term 'co-operative rule' along with the pedagogies of community development, and different British responses to freedom and independence movements, some of which were more violent than others. Being part of official community development, co-operatives were often caught in the middle. Windel illustrates this well by what he notes in Uganda, particularly the strain on co-operative registrars. His book ends with a focus on British home views on decolonisation which, as Robert Burns noted, gives us the gift of seeing ourselves as others see us<sup>1</sup>. Many views of co-operatives are included, with discussion of left wing political positions, including alternatives to capitalism, and postcolonialism, which leads me to argue that he could have paid greater attention to more of the middle of the road views, such as those of the Fabian Society and the Plunkett Foundation. Nevertheless, his text reads easily and is augmented by extensive footnotes and a mighty bibliography.

Sadly, Windel makes no mention of *Empire and Co-operation* (Rhodes, 2012) published only nine years earlier. Indeed, his sources come heavily from his side of the Atlantic. Whereas I explained why and how the British Empire encouraged co-operatives, Windel focuses on their fate at its close. He tells us little about two important trains of thought, namely the Tory (Conservative) and Whig (Liberal). Of the latter, it has been said that it gave the British Empire an almost self-liquidating quality. Its supporters readily spoke out against atrocities and recognised what British territories could become as its dominions were illustrating by virtual independence. From this liberal milieu came ideas of how relevant co-operatives could be in social and economic development in the British Empire. Largely overlooking the liberal influence, Windel takes insufficient note of the Plunkett Foundation and the Fabian Society. The latter was decidedly socialist. Both influenced the framework and methods of colonial co-operative registrars who would find themselves central to the effect of independence and freedom movements in British territories.

The Plunkett Foundation was set up by Sir Horace Plunkett who pioneered co-operatives in Ireland. He argued that to develop successful co-operatives, the exchange of experiences would be helpful. Towards that end he first began a co-operative library in Dublin and moved it to London, where he established the Plunkett Foundation in 1919<sup>2</sup>. It became a meeting place for colonial co-operative registrars when on home leave. They could access its considerable

library and participate in the training sessions the Plunkett Foundation organised for them. From these came some interesting developments. A few wrote extensively on co-operative law, principles, and practices during the interwar years, but sadly Windel concentrates on C. F. Strickland. He overlooks Margaret Digby, an acolyte of Sir Horace and later leader of the Plunkett Foundation. Together with several of the leading colonial co-operative registrars, she produced training manuals that were subsequently used in courses mounted in a number of British territories. The Plunkett Foundation also became a significant advisor on co-operatives to the British government and colonial administrations, thus helping shape their co-operative legislation.

Also significant was the considerable contribution the Plunkett Foundation made to a Colonial Co-operative Commission established by the Fabian Society in 1944. Its purpose was to help clarify and promote colonial co-operative development when peace returned. Its recommendations heavily influenced the programme of co-operative development undertaken by the 1945 Labour government. The Commission brought together representatives of interested organisations including the International Cooperative Alliance and the UK Co-operative Union. Its chair was Arthur Creech Jones MP who later became Colonial Secretary in the 1945 Labour Government. The Fabian Society's Colonial Bureau was also an important earlier influence. Now Lord Passfield and ageing, Sidney Webb remained a strong influence in the Fabian Society. Earlier in the 1929 minority Labour Government, Webb had been Colonial Secretary and had declared that British colonies needed more co-operatives.

The Fabian Commission proved significant. It heavily influenced post war British policy on colonial co-operatives, particularly on community and economic and social development. This is where Windel comes in, but rather than detailing the work of the Plunkett Foundation and Fabian Society, he focuses more on how colonial governments deployed co-operatives in countering violence against colonial rule and attempts to gain independence.

Of central importance is Windel's description of 'co-operative rule' and I think this could have been strengthened had he focused more on antecedents. Nevertheless, this is a fine book that usefully contributes to co-operative literature. I hope it will be widely read in Britain and elsewhere particularly by co-operative readers.

## The Reviewer

Dr Rita Rhodes first studied at the UK Co-operative College at Stanford Hall and later completed two degrees with the Open University. After teaching in further education, she undertook co-operative educational posts at regional, national, and international levels and later became a lecturer at Ulster University specialising in co-operative studies. She took early retirement during which she turned to co-operative history and was appointed a Visiting Research Fellow in the Co-operative Research Unit at the Open University. She also served twice as Chair of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies and undertook for the International Labour Organisation and the European Union co-operative assignments in Malaysia, Egypt, Sri Lanka, and Mongolia.

## Notes

- 1 Line from a Robert Burns poem (circa 1786), *To a Louse, On Seeing one on a Lady's Bonnet at Church*. <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/louse-seeing-one-ladys-bonnet-church/>
- 2 For more information on the history of the Plunkett Foundation, see <https://plunkett.co.uk/our-story/>

## Reference

Rhodes, R. (2012). *Empire and co-operation: How the British Empire used co-operatives in its development strategies 1900-1970*. Birlinn Ltd.