



Civilising Rural Ireland: The Co-operative Movement, Development and the Nation-State, 1889–1939. By Patrick Doyle

Ray O'Connor

How to cite this article:

O'Connor, R. (2021). Civilising Rural Ireland: The Co-operative Movement, Development and the Nation-State, 1889–1939. By Patrick Doyle [Book Review]. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 54(1), 57-59.
<https://doi.org/10.61869/GGIP2702>

Civilising Rural Ireland: The Co-operative Movement, Development and the Nation-State, 1889–1939

By Patrick Doyle, Manchester University Press, 2019, pp. 248.
ISBN (eBook): 978-1-5261-2457-9; (Hbk): 978-1-5261-2456-2

A key strength of Patrick Doyle's *Civilising rural Ireland: The co-operative movement, development and the nation-state, 1889–1939* is that it situates the co-operative movement in wider economic, social, political, and cultural contexts. Therefore, this book is a welcome contribution both to the literature on the co-operative movement in Ireland and to the economic, political, and social history of this period more generally. The central thesis of this book is that the role played by the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) and co-operative movement in influencing Ireland's economic development has been both underestimated and under-appreciated. It makes a compelling case that the story of the early co-operative movement deserves a better fate than that which it has received — being reduced to little more than a footnote in Irish history.

Doyle demonstrates how Horace Plunkett and the IAOS first created an “imagined community” and, through sheer persistence and determination guided it into “existence across the Irish countryside through its network of societies” (p. 9). He explores the challenges faced by the IAOS, first to bring a co-operative movement into existence, and then once established, to ensure its survival and perpetuation. In six chronological chapters covering fifty years, the author traces the origins and expansion of the co-operative movement in Ireland. The early chapters explore the evolving nature of the IAOS's relationships with its target membership and key organisations and institutions. They examine the battle for the hearts and minds of reluctant, unconvinced, and suspicious small farmers; the conflict with the more established Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS); and the fall-out from Plunkett's criticisms of the Catholic Church.

What began as a cordial relationship with the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) deteriorated rapidly when Plunkett realised that the co-operative model promoted by the CWS, while ideally suited to British consumer-based markets, was not best suited to Ireland's agricultural producers' needs. Doyle also explains that when Plunkett “criticised the malign economic effects of the Catholic Church in Ireland” in his book *Ireland in the New Century* and when in particular “he criticised the ‘excessive and extravagant church-building ... at the expense of poor communities’” (p. 46), it not only impacted the IAOS's relationship with the Catholic hierarchy and clergy but also had serious political consequences. That criticism caused irreparable damage to its relationship with John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party:

The fallout with the Nationalist leader proved so toxic that Redmond wrote to the IAOS Secretary to ‘remove his name from the list of past and present members of the Society ... and to assure him that no other use has been made of his name since his resignation’. Thus, ended any hope of a rapprochement between the IAOS and the leaders of nationalist sentiment represented by the IPP (p. 47).

To succeed, the new co-operative movement had to be more than determined and persistent, it also had to be creative and imaginative. It had to embed itself as a key organisation within the wider Irish Revival which had constructed a popular narrative for modernisation that emphasised continuity as much as change. The IAOS, through local co-operative societies provided a structure that maximised economies of scale for small farmers. It sought to

modernise Irish agriculture and to make it more competitive internationally. However, to appeal to the widest possible audience and be successful, it had to do this in a way that framed their narrative of modernisation within older and deeply ingrained rural traditions. To do this it repurposed the system of co-operation known in some parts of Ireland as 'meitheal'. In fact, across the island of Ireland there were nearly forty words (each with distinctive geographies) for this practice of mutual on-farm assistance. The co-operative movement used such practices as a basis for inserting itself into the heart of rural communities, by providing an economic benefit for what had evolved as social practice.

In later chapters, the author charts the progress of the co-operative movement through a chaotic period of political upheaval both in Ireland and abroad — World War I, the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War before concluding in the early years of the 1930s. He examines not only how the co-operative movement navigated its way through this turbulent period and remained relevant both nationally and locally, but also how the IAOS profoundly influenced economic thinking in the pre- and post-Independence eras.

As the co-operative movement became integrated into the economic and social life of the country, involvement with creameries, credit, and agricultural societies very quickly became a routine and daily occurrence in rural communities. However, as its social and economic importance grew, politically its fortunes waned. It migrated from a position of centrality and influence (when Plunkett was a Member of Parliament for South Dublin between 1892 and 1900 and Vice President of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) between 1899 and 1907) to a position where it operated outside of such official arenas of power.

The War of Independence and the establishment of the Free State in 1922 represented watershed moments not only for the IAOS, but also for local co-operatives. The author demonstrates how Sinn Féin infiltrated and used the co-operative movement to migrate from its urban political base to garner new support in rural areas after 1916 and into the 1920s. Doyle adroitly illustrates that despite Plunkett's loss of direct access to the political levers of power, the IAOS acted as a gateway to the rural electorate for Sinn Féin. Because "the co-operative movement exerted a significant intellectual influence within the Sinn Féin movement" (p. 124), it retained a central place in influencing economic policy, particularly as it related to the agricultural economy and rural life.

The significance of George Russell (AE) and to a lesser degree, Father Thomas A. Finlay as key thinkers and visionaries within the co-operative movement are well documented by Doyle. Foregrounding the monumental intellectual influences of Russell and Finlay will allow scholars the opportunity to reflect on the origins of the ideas that directed and shaped the IAOS' agenda in the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres. In particular, the influence of Russell who used his position as editor of the *Irish Homestead* (1905-1923) and *The Irish Statesman* (1923-1930) to both seed and cultivate ideas, and his success in doing so, is illustrated by Doyle's use of both journals as key sources in his book.

The author argues that a "history of co-operation provides detailed insight into the mundane concerns and priorities that mattered to people. Co-operative societies provide an entry point into complex agrarian situations" (p. 8). However, while an attempt is made to embed the local through an analysis of co-operatives in County Kerry, Doyle's account of the IAOS and the co-operative movement is predominantly articulated at the national level. Perhaps a more granular study of the local and the use of individual co-operatives as a lens through which to gain new insights into local life from the perspective of the small farmer is a topic to which Doyle may return in future publications.

Overall, a key strength of this book is the way it weaves together so many diverse threads of Irish history. Through its focus on the IAOS, it highlights the interplay and interconnectedness of social, cultural, political, and economic histories, as it operated where these various strands intersected. This book illustrates the value of using a single organisation such as the IAOS as a lens through which to explore a much wider historical canvas. When done properly with rigour

and scholarship, as in this case, the result is to provide the reader with rich and deep insights that can only enhance our understanding of this pivotal period in Irish history.

The Reviewer

Dr Ray O'Connor is a Lecturer in Historical Geography in University College Cork and an Associate Member of the Centre of Co-operative Studies, University College Cork.