

William Hazell's Gleaming Vision: a Co-operative Life in South Wales 1890-1964

By Alun Burge

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Thanks to Alun Burge's moving and meticulous biography, William Hazell can now take his place as a major, generative figure, not only in the twentieth-century co-operative movement but also in the wider labour and socialist movements.

Who among today's co-operators outside Wales — or probably inside, for that matter — had ever heard of Hazell before Alun started to write about him? Maybe that's the main thing for readers of the *Journal* to think about. How come Labour leaders haven't dug deep into the dynamic philosophical, socio-political and ethical-associational tradition of which he was one of the makers?

While acting local, Hazell thought global. In a piece on "Transforming Wage Slaves into Financiers and Employers", in the South Wales Supplement of the *Wheatsheaf* for August 1937, he urged his readers to transcend any lingering sense of their own inferiority, and to see themselves as every bit as worthy and as capable as Conservatives like the Churchills and the Cecils. Co-operation, he knew, could surmount barriers of class, race and colour, displace "a spurious competitive system", "rout the profit motive" and prove that "Rochdale might succeed where Geneva had failed in addressing the ills of the world". "He showed", writes Alun, "an almost biblical faith in co-operation". His surety came from his own co-operative society in Ynysybwl and its South Walesian surroundings.

'Socialist' in my first paragraph should be in inverted commas. Hazell's *Gleaming Vision* (his *History of the Ynysybwl Society* published by the Society in 1954) lights the way down an 'associational' path to socialism, away from the statist and collectivist routes taken by the twentieth-century Left. Thanks to the co-operative, transition, commons, green and solidaristic movements — and to what Gramsci called "organic intellectuals" like Hazell — this path is still, just about, open. And even if it doesn't look like it just now, the only way forward is to act as if it can be cleared. "To discover a previously unknown individual", writes Alun, "whose life illuminates a community, a society and a social movement is rare. When that ordinary working man is a writer and thinker as well as a man of action who had a powerful and articulate voice that still resonates over half a century later, it is truly remarkable In 1954 William Hazel wrote *The Gleaming Vision*, a history of the Ynysybwl Co-operative Society. The book is a window into a largely unrecorded co-operative world, which has been previously omitted from historical accounts of life in South Wales. It catalogues in close detail how ordinary people assumed responsibility for organising aspects of their economic and social lives to provide co-operative services for their own community.

Exactly so. Alun knows his South Wales; has traced Hazell's prolific and profound writings through all known Co-operative publications; tells us how much more remains to be discovered and interpreted; has accessed family papers and taken initiatives like "Marjorie Hazell, telephone conversation, 11 and 13 November 2007"; has studied Allotment Committee Minutes, District Council and Committee Minutes and the Minutes of Brecon, Monmouth and East Glamorgan Federation of the Co-operative Party Executive Committee from 1948 to 1964; has visited archives like Mass Observation in Sussex; AND he connects with "William and the Bomb", in Richmal Crompton's *William Carries on* (1942). Alun leaves no pebbles unturned. For such loving, determined, modest and committed scholarship the main thing to say is: thank you.

One of the ways of telling how carefully a book has been made is to look at the index. Alun's is a masterpiece.

And thank you to Hazell and his fellow co-operators for showing what was, and still is possible. Possible but also necessary. Co-operative and mutual forms of owning and belonging may be the only practical, secular tools working people have, with which to contest neo-liberal globalisation without resorting to ugly individualisms, fundamentalisms and nationalisms. As a result of Hazell's and his fellow ordinary members' creativity,

one co-operative society expanded from a single village shop to become a large business undertaking with a million-pound turnover that stretched across and beyond the valleys towards Cardiff .

Think back only fifty years, from 2014 to 1964 when Harold Wilson 'came to power', in the year which was also the year in which Hazell died. Think of the actually-existing power, in that year, of the Ynysybwl Co-operative Society, "which defined Hazell's life's work". This Society, one of many hundreds across Britain and many thousands across the world, was what the great 'Welsh European', Raymond Williams, called an "available form": fully available, seasoned, democratically skilled, self-governing units of belief and belonging for governments like Wilson's to work with. Did they?

Why not? Conservative (and now would-be Labour) leaders 'put their arms round business'. But has the Labour Party ever embraced the critique of party politics and the plc world represented by the co-operative movement? Labour has always tried to subordinate economic-becoming-social democracy from below, to a Parliamentary presence from above. By means of one sustained example, Alun shows that popularly-created, working and progressive middle-class co-operatives and mutuals have long been available for federal, voluntary, small p political action, alongside voluntary societies of many kinds. From such units of member-owned belonging, even William Beveridge (of whose 1942 Report Hazell was highly critical) hoped to construct a state of a new kind: not 'the state' as opposed to 'the market', but a specifically 'welfare' state in which, for example, Friendly Societies and other mutuals would have a major role. How many UKIP voters in 2015 came from families whose fathers and grandfathers (admittedly not their mothers) would once have met, learned, drunk, dreamed and self-managed through affiliates of the Club and Institute Union, the Miners Federation and adult education Institutes? Has that already-existing power, which Alun documents and Hazell theorises as "the domestic economy of Co-operation", ever been seen by Labour, not as a source of finance for 'the Party' or a climbing frame for its MPs, and not as an object for legislation or regulation, but as the cells or states-within-a-state which are already the components of a new kind of common-wealth?

There are intimations of such a vision in recent publications, for example on behalf of Blue Labour. But the Party with its capital P Politics, runs scared of them, particularly when General Elections approach. In *Blue Labour: forging a new politics* (Ian Geary and Adrian Pabs eds I B Tauris 2014) Jon Cruddas wrote an essay with which William Hazell would have fully engaged: "The Common Good in an Age of Austerity". Hazell knew about commercial imperatives. He and his fellow co-operative members were skilled business people. Cruddas urged "co-operative ties with ethical enterprise such as co-operatives, mutuals and social businesses". He had been in charge of policy coordination between the last two General Elections. Then he was marginalised. To what effect? 'Belonging', including religious belonging of a dissenting kind which was deeply part of Hazell's practice, is important to Blue Labour, as is the nature of work and (another of Hazell's sometimes painful preoccupations) the nature of 'family'. Not 'the family', but families, including socialist and feminist ones.

Such baggage gets safely stored in the guards' van during General Elections. Instead we get Special Offers from on high, what we will do for you, rather than what you can do for yourselves in thousands of voluntary, economic- and -social Societies, Co-operatives and Mutuals, all needing as much judicious, governmental and national assistance as does 'business'.

It is as if working people like Hazell have not been thinking through and practicing, ever since the 1840s and before, what associated self-government (as opposed to 'the government') consists of. This is why books like Alun's are so vital academically, of course, but in no sense merely academic. In an article in *Llafur* in 2012, "From Cwmbach to Tower: 140 Years of Collective Entrepreneurship in the Cynon Valley", Alun wrote that Welsh speakers referred to their Societies as 'siop ni' (our shop) rather than 'the co-op'. In *Gleaming Vision* Hazell saw the opening of new shops and the provision of new services as more than economic growth. Premises were "the genesis of a new social order" which was already there in "the hearts and minds of the people". Criticising the 200,000-word Beveridge Report from the Left as 'ambulance work', in the *Co-operative News* in 1943 (a bravely independent thing to do), he concluded that "every penny spent on co-operative business and so diverted from private enterprise, will in essence and reality, be more important in significance to our social future in the Commonwealth than every thousand pounds in the Beveridge scheme". From the Left, yes, but in one of the finest quotes in Alun's book, when asked by a friend in 1947 whether he was a left or right winger, Hazell answered, "My friend, I think more of the bird than the wings".

The point of bringing Blue Labour into this review is that this formation has begun to think critically about the legacy of the 1945-51 Labour Government. Hazell was doing it at the time. He strongly defended state planning. However, he also thought seriously critically about nationalisation but not, of course, from private capital's point of view. In 1946, before the mines were nationalised, he argued that only co-operative principles could produce the results desired for the industry. Rather than using contrived or ready-made state structures, he urged that co-operation should be more than "a plank in post-war reconstruction" — make it the very platform". Later, although the same government threatened to nationalise co-operative insurance, as Alun observes, "the co-operative movement was largely ignored".

Hazell was an 'open' co-operator who knew that state planning and collective expertise were essential, if national and international gains were to be realised by means of large-scale, complex, local, federal, proud and popular associations. By 1964, a single, more than 'consumer' market, and a multi-cellular state (of affairs) had grown from *Ynysybwl*, with a butchery, hardware, travel bureau, cafeteria, building, painting and decorating service, carriage and coach building workshop, ladies hairdressing, toys, TV radio and repairs, footwear, optical and funeral services, sports, showrooms for baths and firegrates, a supermarket, 18 self-service and seven counter service shops ... "a mini business empire" as Alun calls it. This was the Society of which Hazell was a lifelong member, its President for thirty years, as well as a miners' lodge activist, a local councillor, a writer of scores of articles and essays, a reader of poetry, of Marx, Owen and much else besides, "a husband, father and a committed Christian".

And of course the *Ynysybwl* Society was in membership of the giant, global Co-operative Wholesale Society. Hazell was excited about the CWS as a prefigurative form, while being realistic about the implications of the iron law of oligarchy (not a phrase he used) which could easily routinise both the CWS and the Co-operative Union. He took on responsibilities in both organisations. No wonder his family could feel neglected. In an article about the CWS which he called "A Democratic Romance", he celebrated the fact that the *Wheatsheaf* went to 900,000 homes a month between the wars. (By the way, whatever happened to all the local *Wheatsheaf* Supplements? Every locality had its own pages.) Listing all CWS departments, Hazell observed that "all aspects of your new social order come under one or other of these headings". He knew about the tension between the complexity and presence of this giant co-operative wholesaler and manufacturer, and "local control and self reliance".

Hazell was a practical romantic, what Holyoake called a 'world-maker', not a 'utopian'. He was also a class social thinker, fully aware of what things looked like, objectively, from different social positions. His critique of Alfred Barnes MP and Chair of the Co-operative Party, concerning 'functionalism' in 1941 was unusually acute. Collapsing intention into function has been the bane of social historians, including Marxists, ever since that time. Hazell knew about the dangers of 'institutionalising voluntary associations' as authoritarian states were doing at the

time, and how easily organisations, whether co-operative or state, could subordinate individuals. Then they could be interpreted as always and inevitably doing so, and thus not be worth taking part in. Then they could be written about as not having transformed the world within activists' lifetimes, just because they did not transform the world for ever. And Hazell's reading of Marx's *Capital*, which he thought was essential for all co-operators, particularly the long historical chapters 12 and 13, was beautifully balanced. Coming across analyses of how co-operation was "being used as a cloak for reactionary humbug" and that it was "one of the isolated factors of transformation", Hazell wrote: "Well, let us be proud of having taken some part, however small, in the work of transforming the world". That is a Gramscian 'organic' thinker thinking, at some distance from any ivory tower.

For months I have been unable to write about Alun's book, feeling the need to celebrate and quote it all, then allowing my own puzzled anger to get in the way of sharing it. But the May 2015 General Election is now over, and Labour has lost the old mining seat of Gower, one of the two longest-held Labour seats in the country, for the first time since 1906. My anger is at the labour movement's neglect of a 'narrative', yes, but more than that, of an entire set of beliefs and practices, a tradition in the fully philosophical, even 'religious' sense of that word, to which William Hazell was such an outstanding contributor. The neglect is such that other movements, Nationalist, 'United Independence' and even Tory ones are now tapping the same springs.

Through the first half of the twentieth century Hazel and his fellow members of the co-operative movement continued to develop what the Rochdale Pioneers set out to do in the 1840s: "to arrange the powers of production, distribution, education and government" on Labour's behalf, not Capital's. With the help of books like Alun's, the story of such a project can still be used in a popular way. My puzzlement is why 'the Left' has (mostly) shown such disdain for a working and progressive middle-class tradition which built large-scale units of belief and belonging, of dynamic difference as well as union, and which dedicated itself to reconstructing society by means of Societies NOW, not after the next election or after the revolution. My puzzlement is at the Left's marginalisation of all this 'largely unrecorded' but actually-existing co-operative world.

The United Nations declared 2012 the International Year of Co-operatives because of the mighty contributions that co-operated African tradition, and this legacy of collectivity has stayed with its diaspora in the Americas in a powerful and meaningful way

The Reviewer

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