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Speaking for Co-operation: The Rise of the Co-operative Press

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The early British co-operative movement was a rich and complex one. It was one of commerce and business but it was also a social movement and one which was drawn, against its will, into the world of politics and shaping public opinion. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, to proselytise and spread the co-operative message, and latterly to defend the movement against its competitors and enemies, who came to resent the burgeoning success of British consumer co-operation in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This article will chart the emergence and growth of the co-operative press, especially the *Co-operative News*, and will outline how it became just one part of a flourishing publishing empire, which, though diminished, still exists today.

One of first important co-operative publications appeared in the late 1820s, and was the work of Dr William King, an erudite and committed co-operator, who was instrumental in the establishment of two co-operative societies in Brighton. King's *The Co-operator* reached a national audience (especially in the north and midlands) and was instrumental in building support for the first attempt to create a truly national movement, culminating in a series of national co-operative congresses in the early 1830s. A downturn in support for the movement culminated in the discontinuation of *The Co-operator* until 1860 when a new national consumer co-operative movement, based on the Rochdale Pioneers' model, emerged. The consumer co-operative movement grew more quickly and impressively than any earlier manifestation of co-operative organisation and led the Manchester and Salford Co-operative Society to re-launch *The Co-operator* edited by Henry Pitman, younger brother to Isaac Pitman inventor of shorthand and founder of Pitman & Sons printing and publishing company. Henry Pitman took complete control in 1861.

For most of the 1860s this first monthly, and eventually weekly, publication was the principal mouthpiece of the movement in England, though north of the border, J. T. McInnes established *The Scottish Co-operator* in 1863 (Birchall, 1994). As with the earlier adventure into journalism, the emergence of these periodicals reflected an urgent need to drum up political and public support for new co-operative initiatives — particularly the formations of the Co-operative Wholesale Society in 1863 and its Scottish counterpart just a few years later. The letters pages of *The Co-operator* trace the growing opposition of grocers and private traders to the movement. In December 1864 one John Hough highlighted this, signalling an opposition that would grow steadily in strength. The paper provided a running commentary on current affairs, the arts, and the seemingly relentless growth of co-operation, recounting the establishment of new co-operatives and the growth of established ones. During the course of the 1860s, however, *The Co-operator* fell out of favour with many British co-operators. By the last years of the decade there were moves afoot to establish a new journal, much more firmly under the direction of the movement. While the reasons for this are not entirely clear, some of Pitman's strong convictions seem to have caused concern. Pitman was a fierce opponent of vaccination, and eventually 'Anti-Vaccination' was worked into the journal's title, a move which almost certainly caused concern, associating as it did the co-operative movement with quite a controversial stance¹. The upshot was the creation of the Co-operative Newspaper Society (CNS), a co-operative the members of which were individual co-operative societies, and later became the National Co-operative Publishing Society, and then in 1934, the Co-operative Press. In addition to *Co-operative News*, CNS published a range of publications including *Women's Outlook*, and *Reynolds News/Sunday Citizen* newspaper (Hadfield, 2021; Lonergan, 2011).

Co-operative News, first published in 1871, served several vital functions for the movement. Firstly, it bolstered the morale of the movement at a time when it was coming under attack

from private traders, who increasingly saw local co-operative stores as a direct threat. Private commerce had its own mouthpiece, *The Grocer*, which had been in circulation since 1862². It regularly attacked consumer co-operation as a kind of confidence trick, in which naïve working people were seduced by the dividend, which did not compensate for the higher prices it alleged were common in co-operative stores. *Co-operative News* frequently rebutted negative stories in *The Grocer*. On 5 August 1876, for example, an editorial responded in detail to the supposed ‘futility’ of the co-operative store system claimed in *The Grocer*. It also highlighted efforts by private traders to sabotage local co-operative societies. On 8 May 1886, the *News* reported that in Maryport, local traders pressured the Maryport and Carlisle (M & C) Railway Company to discipline or dismiss several employees who were leading figures in the Maryport Co-operative Society. The traders threatened to arrange their transport needs to avoid the M & C, but to their shock, M & C refused to comply — the principal reason being that it did more business for the Co-operative Society than any other local business! (Webster, 2019, p. xiii). On 24 January 1887, the *News* reported how a mob, supported by local traders, disrupted a meeting to form a co-operative society in Salisbury, Wiltshire, and how the co-operators reconvened in a local pub to continue their deliberations (Wilson et al., 2013). Such reports boosted the morale of co-operators facing local opposition, and rallied them when more concerted campaigns were conducted against co-operation in Scotland and the North West of England in the 1890s and early 1900s. Subsequently the *News* was to be crucial in helping mobilise the movement during the First World War against government policies which imposed new taxes on co-operative societies and excluded co-operators from key government wartime committees. The upshot was the emergence in 1917 of the Co-operative Party.

As important as this external and national political role was, the *News* was also crucial in reporting and commenting on the internal political battles within the movement, especially on issues such as the extent to which societies should source their stock from the CWS and SCWS, the relationship between consumer and productive co-operatives, and the question of the role of labour in the co-operative movement. In the late nineteenth century, the pages were replete with articles by leading co-operative thinkers like Holyoake and E. V. Neale, while the letters pages bristled with combative exchanges on a wide range of questions. Debates at quarterly meetings of the CWS were covered in great detail, as were the deliberations of the annual conferences. In this way the *News* became — and remained — the principal public forum in which the burning questions of co-operation were brought to individual co-operators.

Figure 1: The Wholesale New Tea Warehouse, London (Co-operative News, 1897)



But the *News* also addressed hard-nosed and complex commercial questions affecting the movement. Especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *News* provided regular quarterly updates on the performance of the CWS, together with quite complex narration of key developments. Regular reports on the performance of individual societies also appeared, with ‘potted histories’ i.e., the main facts about them and detailed analysis of their commercial

position. Especially in the early years, these were both sophisticated and lengthy, lending the *News* a considerable authority within the movement. The rapid growth of the movement was celebrated, and new local society and CWS buildings were celebrated by illustrations and eventually photographs (Figures 1 above, and 2 below).

Figure 2: Gateshead Co-operative (Co-operative News, 1899)



By the 1930s, the *News* trumpeted the use of the latest modernist designs for new society department stores and other buildings (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Co-operative society's Emporium, "Beacon house", Southport (Co-operative News, 1935)



The *News* always enjoyed a close relationship with the CWS and SCWS; and by the 1930s, when a new generation of large-scale chain stores began to compete fiercely with the movement, the *News* became a powerful source for promoting CWS commodities. Some of the techniques were quite modern in flavour, though they demonstrated social attitudes towards women, and controversial products (cigarettes) that would be unacceptable today. A favourite advertisement for CWS goods popular in the mid-1930s was the 'family at No. 13', supposedly a typical (and surprisingly suburban and middle class) family and ardent consumer of co-operative produce (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4: CWS Cigarettes (Co-operative News, 1935)



Figure 5: Pelaw Boot Polish (Co-operative News, 1935)



The educational priorities of the movement were expressed strongly by the *News*, with regular articles on wider news, international politics, literature, and the spread of co-operative ideas across the world. It created a special *Women's Corner* section in 1883, which proved instrumental in the emergence of the Women's Co-operative Guild (see Woodward, 2020). It provided articles from time to time on a wide range of subjects: co-operation in Australia and other parts of the world, current trade policy, as well as developments after 1917 in the newly established Soviet Union. It also brought to the attention of the wider movement existing and

rising 'stars' of the movement, with short cameos of the careers of key co-operators, usually accompanied by a photograph.

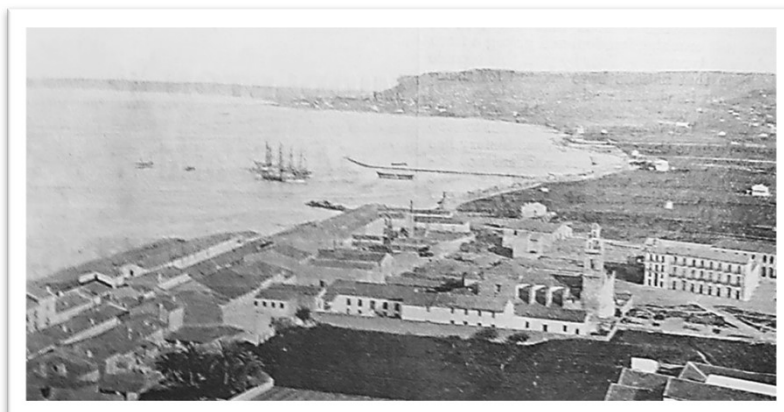
The *News* continued throughout the twentieth century and continues today, though by the latter years it became a much shorter and less cerebral publication. To the modern eye, the *News* of the nineteenth/early twentieth centuries is reminiscent of a modern broadsheet, with attention to detail and analysis as insightful as modern editions of the *Guardian*, the *Times* and even the *Financial Times* (FT). While this had been toned down by the mid twentieth century, the compensation was a circulation of 70,000 copies (Lazell, 2000).

Such was the appetite for publications within the movement that in the 1890s, a string of additional publications emerged, providing information and analysis for particular audiences within the movement. The first of these was the *CWS Annual*, a book length publication which was aimed at serious and educated co-operative leaders. As well as detailed articles on the wholesale and the movement, the annual also provided quite academic and sophisticated political pieces, by such leading commentators as J. A. Hobson, the journalist and commentator on economic and imperial affairs, and Holt Hallett a fierce campaigner for imperial expansion in China and the Far East. It provided an introduction to major domestic and global political questions for the intellectual elite of the movement. It also provided drawings of key CWS buildings around the world (Figure 6).

Figure 6: the CWS Bacon Factory, Tralee, South-west Ireland (CWS Annual, 1895)



Figure 7: CWS Denia fruit depot, Spain (Wheatsheaf, November 1899)



Then in the late 1890s another new publication appeared, this time a monthly magazine reviewing the work of the CWS and co-operative questions generally. The *Wheatsheaf* specialised in detailed articles about the many different branches of the CWS both nationally and internationally, providing an in-depth analysis of these, and of the various depots, factories and businesses which comprised the CWS's activities. Again, there was extensive use of photographs (see Figure 7, for example), celebrating as well as highlighting the growing commercial and industrial might of the movement. The target audience for this is difficult to

define, but it seems likely that the buyers and management committees of local co-operative societies figured prominently in the minds of *Wheatsheaf* editors, who were keen to build CWS sales to them.

Those interested in co-operative ideas and art were encouraged by the publication from 1905 of *Millgate Monthly*, which published articles on social issues, poetry, and co-operative perspectives on culture. It reflected both the growing confidence of the movement and the surge of interest in socialist ideas at a time which saw burgeoning trade union growth, industrial militancy, and the emergence of the Labour Party.

The travails of the First World War, the radicalisation of the movement and the formation of the Co-operative Party meant that the proliferation of co-operative publications continued. From 1916 the *Producer* was yet another monthly magazine, targeted at Co-operative Society managers and active co-operators. It offered articles on a wide range of subjects, including international political and commercial questions. Its aim was to strengthen co-operative managers' understanding of the context in which they managed their businesses. Business organisation was a major subject to which *Producer* returned regularly (see figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8: Business Organisation (*Producer*, April, 1923)

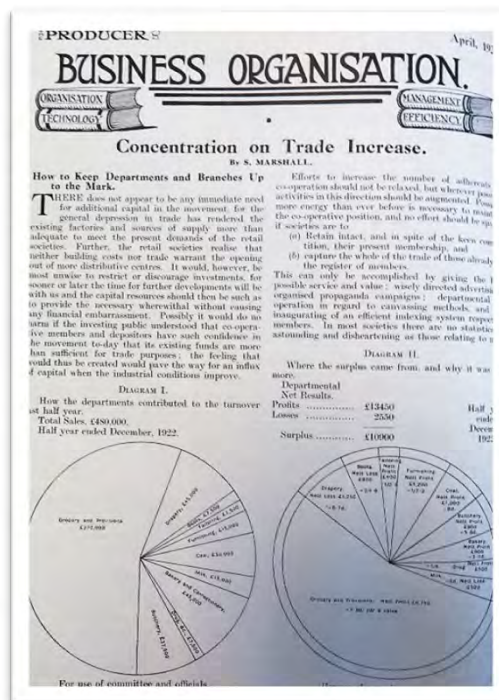


Figure 9: Co-operative and the common market (*Producer*, 1962)



The Co-operative Union decided that it also needed a major specialist journal which would equip its activists with both the political and economic knowledge to promote co-operation effectively. The *Co-operative Review* was launched in 1926, and its remit was wide, addressing not only relevant domestic political issues, but also exploring different models of co-operation developed elsewhere in the world.

In 1929, the Co-operative Press also acquired *Reynold's Illustrated News* a major left leaning weekly newspaper, to reach out to a wider working-class audience rather than just its co-operative members and activists. The aim was to try to build both understanding of co-operation among the wider population and build support for the Co-operative Party. There were other initiatives, including a special war circular which kept co-operative societies up to speed in respect of the latest rules and regulations. But from the 1950s, as the British movement began to lose market share, activists, and members, many of the publications disappeared, one by one. *Millgate Monthly* was closed in 1953, both the *Producer* and the *Co-operative Review* closed in the 1960s, while *Reynolds* discontinued in 1967, after several attempts to relaunch it. Even the *Co-operative News* is monthly now, albeit with a news website (www.thenews.coop) and a remit to look at the global co-operative movement with focused global, UK, and North American web editions. Nevertheless, the constellation of publications which once characterised the movement, and gave it a major national profile in the early twentieth century have mostly disappeared, making it harder to raise awareness of co-operation.

But for the business historian the legacy of this publishing tradition is unique. Few businesses publish as much about their activities, and still fewer choose to conduct strategic debates in public, in the way that the co-operative movement has since the mid-nineteenth century. This reflects the fact that co-operation was and is a social and political movement as well as a cluster of businesses.

The democratic principles of the movement prioritise transparency, and the flourishing of co-operative publications meant that unlike any other business in Britain, and possibly the world, the wealth of material available for the historian is truly a treasure trove. The role of the press in recording the performance of both local co-operative societies and the co-operative wholesales, the debates about strategy and in tracking in depth the complex debates about co-operative business — not just in Britain but across the world — allows the business historian an unparalleled range of sources. Yet wider ignorance of, and in some cases hostility to, the co-operative movement and businesses has led to the neglect of this peerless window into the history of British business. In recent years, this has begun to be addressed in respect of consumer co-operation, especially the wholesales, but many exciting opportunities remain unexploited. In particular, the co-operative sources offer rich insights into the politics of employment and training. The next step needs to be comparative analysis of specific commercial sectors, such as retail and production, exploring differences and similarities between co-operative and non-co-operative businesses. The opening of business archives in recent years makes this an exciting prospect, not least in exploring cross fertilisation of ideas between the sectors, and perhaps through exchanges of personnel. The sheer richness of the co-operative archive means that on the co-operative side, such comparison and analysis is quite possible. It is no exaggeration to say that co-operative publishing as well as individual co-operative society archives offer an opportunity to revolutionise how the history of British business is viewed and being written. It only remains for an emerging generation of historians to seize it.

The Author

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Notes

1. *The Co-operator*, ran from June 1860 to December 1870 when it was renamed *The Anti-Vaccinator* (Jan 1871-2 Dec 1871). Copies available from the National Co-operative Archive, UK: <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb1499-apc>
2. *The Grocer* was launched by William Reed in 1862, and continues to be published by William reed Business Media — <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk>

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