

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.