



Rita Rhodes: An Excellent Co-operative Woman (1934–2025)

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Rita was involved with co-operatives from an early age — it was a regular childhood routine for her and her mother to go shopping in the local Co-op on Saturday mornings. When her parents were married her paternal grandmother gave them two shares in the London Co-operative Society; and later her mother took a mortgage from the Co-operative Permanent Building Society (now Nationwide). They lived in a two up two down semi-detached cottage with an outside wash house and toilet.

Her father worked on the railways (London North Eastern Railway); but managed to save money and rent a field for horses, pigs, ducks, chickens, geese, and even a goat! Eventually they managed to buy the field from the local farmer and had the good fortune of it increasing in value. This frugal upbringing influenced Rita's attitude to life; growing up during the war involved rationing. At school she didn't pass the 11+ plus exam so went to a secondary modern school.

Although politics were not discussed much at home, her parents had left-wing sympathies, judging from the newspapers they read; and in 1926 they took in children from destitute Welsh mining families and looked after them for some months. From a young age, through family and friends, Rita's influences were from Labour and working class culture. She also emphasises "Subliminal Propinquity": i.e. the visible presence of co-operatives in the neighbourhood. The 1955 general election was exciting, and she helped form a branch of the Labour League of Youth and was elected its secretary.

The links with the Labour Party provided stepping stones to the co-operative movement. Subsequently, she became a delegate to the constituency Labour Party and attended its monthly meetings. Rita describes herself as having a voluntary apprenticeship, comprising: debates, youth parliaments, speaking contests, conferences, and summer schools. She was subsequently elected to be the constituency's delegate to the national Labour Party conference at Scarborough. Meeting many people from the Labour and co-operative movements was very formative, opening connections and facilitating opportunities throughout her life. Whilst still a voluntary constituency secretary, she became the election agent, despite being only 20 years old, and not yet eligible to vote. She was the youngest election agent in the country.

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A senior co-operative colleague advised her to further her education. At that time, prior to the Open University being founded, the choice was between Ruskin College for trade unionists, and the Co-operative College for co-operative members and employees. She took that advice and succeeded in gaining entry — the Co-operative College changed her life, both with regard to the education she received, and regarding connections with current and former students, which would be a rich network resource for the rest of her life. She got a scholarship from the London Co-operative Society which paid her tuition and accommodation, as well as the princely sum of £30 for each of the three terms of the academic year. She took a two year course which led to a Diploma in Politics, Economics, and Social Studies, awarded by Nottingham University Extra Mural Department, in the mid 1950s.

On leaving the Co-operative College she applied for and gained the position of membership secretary of the Fabian Society. This didn't seem to have great prospects for political activity, so she applied to Birkenhead Co-operative Society for a position as political secretary/organiser.

Rita first met Bernard, her husband to be, in 1956, at a Co-operative Party speaking contest. After several years of courtship, they were married in 1960. He was a Catholic, so she converted to Catholicism. And as she wrote in her autobiography:

I must admit that not once did the co-op intrude on our honeymoon. It did appear in various ways during our engagement and wedding. Our engagement ring was bought at Leeds Co-op and the actual engagement introduced me to many of Bernard's co-operative friends and colleagues. Our wedding breakfast was held in the restaurant at the Birkenhead Co-operative Society and our early furniture was bought at Harrogate Co-op. The mortgage for our first house came from the Co-operative Permanent Building Society, (now Nationwide). (Rhodes, 2020, p. 54)

Rita expected to have children and so stayed at home as a housewife actively supporting Bernard, for several years. During this time, she also began writing, as well as typing up Bernard's writings and speeches. She also began researching and writing, for example on pre-Rochdale co-operatives such as Ripponden — published in *Agenda*, a journal produced by Co-operative Press for co-operative directors. She continued her 'co-op apprenticeship', through Bernard's work, his friends, and attendance at Co-operative Congress as a spouse.

The title of the biographical book of Rita and Bernard's lives is *Co-operative Adventures: We Joined the Co-op and Saw the World* (Rhodes, 2020). And during the first decade of their marriage, they moved for Bernard's work six times, including from Bradford/Leeds to Manchester, to Forest Hill (South London), then Leeds, before moving to Glasgow. Bernard had succeeded in gaining the job to implement some of the major findings of the Independent Commission (1958) which reported its findings on reforming the co-op movement. This job was in the newly created Co-operative Union Development Department.

Bernard began to get health problems and caught jaundice twice; he took a break, and freelanced — writing articles for *The Grocer*, *The Grocer's Gazette*, *Co-operative News*, and the *Scottish Co-operator*. Rita worked together with Bernard on these articles, typing them (but learning in the process). Bernard was offered some teaching at Harrogate FE College; but illness prevented him taking it up; Rita took the class, enjoyed it, and ended up taking a one year teacher training course at Huddersfield Teacher Training College.

They moved to Scotland for Bernard to become Head of Planning and Research of the Scottish CWS. Meanwhile Rita, after some difficulties finding a teaching position, managed to get one at Coatbridge Technical College. She did well teaching — co-operative studies in the first year, but unfortunately this was interrupted by serious health issues resulting in a hysterectomy, at the age of 35 (Bernard 45). They had hoped for 3 children, so this was dreadful news, for both of them.

The 1970s was much more settled, and they stayed in Glasgow which she liked, from 1969 until 1983. Rita teaching at Coatbridge technical College. But by the mid 1970s, after a major financial crisis, Bernard and Rita both joined the Co-operative Union's Scottish Sectional office, he as Sectional Secretary, and she as Sectional Education Officer.

These were interesting times in co-operative education, the rise of consumerism led to new initiatives to address its significance in retailing. Also, there was a growing interest in worker co-operatives, particularly in their potential for job creation. Rita helped form the Scottish Co-operative Development Committee (SCDC), which had a seminal influence in supporting worker co-operative development. The Labour government set up a National Co-operative Development Agency (NCDA).

Rita's mother was becoming senile, and this prompted a move south when an opportunity to join the National CDA arose, in 1979. Rita's work with SCDC provided a stepping stone to a position with NCDA.

Unfortunately, there were frustrations working for the NCDA, mainly to do with the different cultures of those with civil servant backgrounds and those with co-operative backgrounds. But one successful outcome was the formation of the co-operative education working group CEWG. Her time at the NCDA also brought her into contact with others who would help influence her future, including the Co-operatives Research Unit at The Open University, the Plunkett Foundation, and various people at the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) office in London, including Will Watkins who had been ICA director, and was active in the Society for Co-operative Studies; and Anne Lamming in the ICA library, who helped with discussions of a future PhD topic.

Rita was about to become chair of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies (UKSCS); she was also a member of the Co-operative Employment Commission. But she faced redundancy at the NCDA, which was never one of Thatcher's favoured QUANGOS! She took a well-earned break, but faced increasing problems looking after a senile mother, who eventually had to go to a local nursing home.

In 1982, she managed to get a temporary and part-time job providing administrative backup to the women's committee of the ICA. Shortly afterwards there was a vote to move the ICA HQ, and Geneva was selected. Rita gained the position of education and women's officer, liaising with co-operative colleges all over the world, and supporting the Women's Executive Committee — which included administering the awards of scholarships to women co-operators in developing countries. She worked for the ICA for three years, at a time of great flux within the organisation. But this experience was invaluable in building her international network and developing her understanding of co-operatives globally.

After she left the ICA, her next appointment in 1985, was as temporary lecturer in co-operative studies at the University of Ulster, in Derry. There were political and other issues to do with the certificate in co-operative studies; this included whether it should be regarded as educational or a training course. The Northern Ireland CDA favoured the latter. This eventually led to its demise, and in 1987 Rita took up a position in the Community Studies Unit, where a certificate in community studies was taught with a co-operative element.

As Rita was considering retirement, she was offered a month's research in Geneva for the ILO Co-operative Branch; and this allowed her some time to explore the ICA archives as a source of material for a future PhD. On her return, she contacted the Co-operatives Research Unit at the Open University and registered for a PhD under the supervision of Alan Thomas (later professor). Bernard, recently retired, was in the early stages of his research on British post war co-operative history. Thus, in the early 1990s neither was in full-time employment, each engaged in research on co-operative history.

Whilst researching for her PhD, Rita conducted a number of international assignments including what she describes as the biggest adventure of her life! An assignment in Mongolia. This was commissioned by the Co-operative Branch of the ILO, and Rita's six month assignment was to implement a co-operative training programme, using ILO Matcom materials. It was a harsh assignment during the Mongolian winter. This was a difficult transitional time, when liberalisation from being a Soviet satellite was underway. The project, which began at the end of 1991, was proposed by the UN agency for women, UNIFEM, to help women who had become unemployed

as state industries were privatised, with the aim of creating new jobs through the development of worker co-operatives, supported by the Mongolian Federation of Women.

The final few pages of her joint autobiography provides her views on the decline of the co-operative movement, and the reasons for this: growing size, lack of localness, decline in democracy and member influence, managerial capture and the appointment of outsiders, decline in fraternity/solidarity, a growing lack of co-operative self-confidence, a decline in wider social activities — choirs, brass bands, music festivals, amateur theatrics; decline in federal structures, decline in knowledge of earlier co-operative innovations, and decline in universality of provision (from the cradle to the grave).

Finally, after retirement Rita was a lively force for co-operation on Facebook where Rita kept up a delightful series of postings on all things from co-operative issues to nature, to Gaza, Martin Luther King, and great works of art. At Rita's funeral in early June, I met someone who had never met Rita in the flesh, but who had become friends through Facebook.

In 2025, Rita died in Rayleigh, Essex, 20 years after her husband, Bernard.

Annotated Bibliography of Rita's Main Publications

Rhodes, R. (1994). *International Co-operative Alliance during war and peace, 1910-1950* (Publication No. 64366) [Doctoral dissertation, The Open University]. Open Research Online. <https://doi.org/10.21954/ou.ro.0000fb6e>

The research focused on the changing character of the ICA during the period 1910 to 1950, and in particular how it survived as a single body during these years when huge geopolitical changes were taking place. It was completed in 1994 just before the major ICA conference of 1995 when the model rules were re-written. Rita continued her association with the Co-operatives Research Unit, as a research fellow, taking part in international research conferences, as well as taking on development assignments for international bodies for many years. She took up three assignments in Egypt for the Plunkett foundation, funded by the EU in 1993, 1994, and 1997.

Rhodes, R. (1998). *Arsenal for Labour: Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and politics 1896-1996*. Holyoake Books.

This was a project funded by the Political Committee of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RACS). Unusually, the RACS was directly affiliated to the Labour Party, rather than indirectly through the Co-operative Party as many other societies were. The aim was to examine its distinctive political tradition. Thanks to Ron Roffey, its retired secretary (and a former Co-operative College student) the archives had been well preserved. The RACS was in a highly politicised and working class area of South London. It needed to carefully monitor the activities of local councils and parliament to manage challenges in its environment. The decision to directly affiliate to the Labour Party stemmed from developments in the London Labour Party where Herbert Morrison (Labour minister) was very influential in the inter-war years. His influence on the RACS was indirect but he frequently spoke at its public meetings and attended many of its events. He and his supporters argued that there should be only one party of the left in Britain and believed the Co-operative Party unnecessary. This positioned the co-operative more closely with state socialism, than with the more collective form of social ownership supported by the Co-operative Party. The research culminated in the publication of *Arsenal for Labour*, launched in 1998 with Baroness Glenys Thornton hosting a reception in Westminster.

Rhodes, R. (2022). *The International Co-operative Alliance during war and peace 1910-1950* (2nd ed.). Independently published.

This book was based on ICA archive materials and draws on her doctoral thesis. Throughout the First World War, the ICA managed to maintain cordial relations between its member organisations even when they were on opposite sides. Rita argues that this was because as a working class organisation, the co-operative movement saw the war as an imperial conflict that should not divide the interests of the working class. There were issues around co-operators' involvement in the conflict and the nature of the post-war settlement, but differences within

the ICA were dealt with through the members of the Alliance making statements about their involvement, anticipating the truth and reconciliation movement in South Africa. The Second World War presented a more difficult case for neutrality, and the ICA was on the side of the allies in what it saw as a moral cause. During the Cold War, the ICA managed to avoid a split with the communist bloc by setting up a non-voting associate membership. The ICA also established a strong presence in the newly established United Nations. This neutral strategy was not uncontested — some argued vigorously that there should have been a division into two alliances, one western and the other communist.

Rhodes, R. (2012). *Empire and cooperation: How the British Empire used cooperatives in its development strategies 1900-1970* (2nd ed.). Independently published.

The idea for this project arose when the Indian Society for Studies in Co-operation began a history of Indian co-operatives and sought help from the UKSCS. Financial support was not possible, but assistance with archive material could be provided, particularly if UKSCS undertook its own history of co-operation in the British Empire. Rita's offer to work on this was accepted, under the auspices of the Co-operatives Research Unit of The Open University and with the assistance of Roger Spear commenting on drafts. The scope of this project was greatly under-estimated — it took 10 years. The book comprises 15 chapters, 300 pages, and extensive notes. It is based mainly on archival material, such as in the Plunkett Foundation and the Co-operative Union's archive (now the National Co-operative Archive), as well as sources such as Plunkett's diaries, and of course secondary sources from books and journals.

Empire and Co-operation examines how and why the British Empire came to promote co-operatives as part of its development strategies in its territories, and its subsequent global impact. The book describes how co-operative development policies were implemented in widely varied settings and the results achieved. It also discusses the positive involvement of international NGOs such as the International Co-operative Alliance and the Plunkett Foundation. Despite the apparent incompatibility of co-operation and imperialism, the British Empire, the largest the world has known, found co-operatives a valuable development tool and helped establish them in the four corners of the world. This was despite there being a paradox between a top down governmental strategy for co-operative development and the self-help classic model of co-operative development.

Part one of the book covers the period from 1900 to 1918. Firstly, it reviews the nature and extent of the British Empire, its legal systems, and its diversity. Then it looks at British co-operation in this early post-Rochdale period. It then examines developments, attitudes, and personalities including influential figures such as Henry Wolff, Horace Plunkett, and the fourth Earl Grey. It goes on to examine early examples of British imperial co-operative development in India, southern Africa, and in the dominions (Australia, New Zealand, Canada). Part two of the book looks at institution building and professionalisation. This includes the role of Plunkett Foundation, the role of civil servants both in the UK and in the colonies, as well as the important role of co-operative registrars. It goes on to examine co-operative development in the Middle East between the two world wars — Egypt, Palestine (Arab and Jewish co-operatives), and Cyprus. Part three of the book looks at co-operative development in the final days of the Empire, in the post Second World War period. This includes the role of British co-operative colonial officers, as well as co-operative development in Malaya and Ceylon.

Rita's book is a hugely impressive work covering as it does the massive variety of co-operatives in the Empire. It is a scholarly work which can serve as reference for understanding the history and traditions that shape co-operatives in so many parts of the world, and it is an excellent read!

Some Critical Reflections

Rita argued that the British Empire was pluralistic, and this helped explain the diversity of co-operative experiences in the colonies and dominions. She generally regarded the relationship between the Empire and the co-operative movement to be productive. But she was not

uncritical. For example, she wrote how a degree of mutual coexistence between British and Indian elites operated, but this harmony was fractured for example by the arrival of evangelical Christian missionaries, and the emergence of divisive theories of racial hierarchy; as well as the demise of the East India company “live and let live” approach to governing India and that being replaced by one which set great store by remodelling the country along western lines — thus India became a sort of laboratory for current British liberal, evangelical, and utilitarian thinking.

And although she has been very critical of the decline of co-operation in the UK consumer co-operative movement, she doesn’t bring such a strongly critical eye to the state of co-operatives in the Empire, where state control contributed to a relative lack of member democracy, and manager capture. There are interesting post-colonial studies which demonstrate how the open character of co-operatives can allow regenerative forces to become more present. For example, Baviskar’s (1980) study of the sugar co-operatives in Maharashtra reveals how state politics inhabit the democratic structures of the sugar industry, to the benefit of both the co-operatives, and Maharashtra state democracy. Similarly, Patrick Develtere (1994) in his study of Caribbean credit unions shows through a social movement analysis how post-colonial political nationalism becomes a very dynamic force.

The Author

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