



Book Review

The Co-operative College and a century of social change: Internationalism, co-operativism and learning

Edited by Tom Woodin, Keith Vernon, and Linda Shaw

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The decision taken in May 2026 to dissolve the Co-operative College marked the end of more than a century of educational and training activity provided by the College to the British co-operative movement. “We know that the College holds much affection and nostalgia for our movement and for good reason”, said the College’s last Chair Chris Jardine at the time, adding “but nostalgia alone doesn’t educate a movement” (Harvey, 2026).

The College’s dissolution, generally seen within the co-operative world as necessary realism in changing times, nevertheless has had the effect of turning this recently published history of the College into something of an obituary. Obituaries, though, have their own valuable role to play. Nostalgia by itself may not be enough to nourish a movement but a knowledge of history remains essential for anyone looking to plot the future of co-operation in the years ahead.

So Tom Woodin, Keith Vernon, and Linda Shaw are to be congratulated for their carefully researched and rigorous historiography producing a history of what in its day was a significant institution in the British co-operative world. Tom Woodin and Keith Vernon approached the task from an academic background, Vernon as an honorary lecturer in history at the University of Lancashire and Woodin as Professor of the Social History of Education at UCL. Linda Shaw, a former Vice Principal of the College as well as with many years’ experience in international co-operative development, provides a welcome practitioner perspective. Together they’ve woven together a story that hangs together well.

Britain’s Co-operative College went through a series of manifestations. For older people in the British movement it is likely still to conjure up memories of Stanford Hall, the stately home in the Leicestershire countryside. Stanford Hall was “an audacious purchase” (p. 118) when it was bought for £54,000 for the movement immediately after the Second World War. This was the time

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when trade unions too were looking to pick up country houses going cheap for use as conference centres, holiday homes, or training centres. Stanford Hall came with all the trimmings of a proper English country estate: ample grounds with among other things a cricket field and an ornamental pond. It was eventually sold in 2001 (a decision at that time also seen as sensible realism) when the College and the educational work it was undertaking relocated to the co-operative heartland of Manchester and the College entered the third and final stage in its history.

But this is getting ahead of the story. The authors take their account back to the later years of the nineteenth century when the idea of a Co-operative College, or indeed a Co-operative University, was regularly discussed within the movement. As they write, "A central theme for co-operators, as for other working-class associations, was to arrange for their own learning, to complement and counter the limitations and restrictions of the type of education delivered by established authorities" (p. 11). Individual co-operative societies, to a greater or lesser extent, directed a small sliver of what would otherwise have been dividend profits into educational work, although few managed the 2½% of profits for education recommended in an 1897 report of the Co-operative Union. Education was clearly a Good Thing, but money to fund it was not necessarily all that forthcoming if it meant smaller dividends for the members.

Funding indeed remained challenging when eventually, in the aftermath of the First World War at the 1919 Carlisle Congress, the British co-operative movement did commit to the College. For much of the inter-war period advanced courses at the College were undertaken at the Co-operative Union's Holyoake House in Manchester, with students in Manchester accommodated in suburban villas on the edge of the city. The authors' verdict is that "during the interwar period, co-operative education expanded impressively, in breadth, depth and reach" (p. 58). But they go on to add: "All this contributed to work 'of a college type' and effectively constituted a Co-operative College of a kind. Yet it was not really what either its supporters, or the resolution passed at the Carlisle Congress, envisaged as a Co-operative College" (p. 58).

Another war would be necessary before the College acquired its 'college'. But whether during the time in the Leicestershire countryside or during the more 'virtual' years in Manchester before and after Stanford Hall, the College had to wrestle with some challenging dilemmas. What were the educational needs which it was created to meet? Were these to be met by the sort of higher education in the humanities or sciences which conventional universities may have been offering but which were traditionally not available to many from the working classes? Or was the Co-operative College there to provide what we would now call vocational training — how co-operative staff or elected management committee members could better handle the practical work of running a retail business, cope with the book-keeping and accounts, avoid fraud, and so on? It was a dilemma which the College effectively had to face throughout its existence.

The idealists who had campaigned for the co-operative movement to have its own college in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were looking to expand their own intellectual horizons and those of their working-class co-operator peers — as well as to reinforce the principles and philosophy of the distinctively co-operative way of doing business and living life. But this vision was not without its critics in the movement. The authors report that there were those who feared that "the college would simply spawn snobs and prigs" (p. 32) out just to better themselves and improve their own careers. One leading co-operator from the Midlands Board in 1913 argued for example that the poorest members of co-operative societies would be effectively paying to improve the financial prospects of just a tiny minority of fellow co-operative members.

On the other hand there were difficulties to be confronted when it came to more practical training as well. Even in the nineteenth century societies had proved miserly when it came to educational work, and as the years went by and new generations came into the movement this tendency became more marked. Many local co-operative societies saw little need to invest in staff or committee member training. "The lacklustre enthusiasm of the movement for training was a constant theme" (p. 192) the authors write, and although at this point, they are referring specifically to the movement in the 1960s, something very similar could be said of earlier times in the College's life.

The golden period for the Co-operative College was the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s. The authors suggest: "Stanford Hall was full of learners and rich educational experiences. Although it was a time when co-operatives were being outcompeted in the high street, the College proved to be flexible and generated many new ideas" (p. 171). And they also draw attention to the significant role played at the College by overseas students, primarily from what were still British colonies, during a time when the British state was dealing with decolonisation. What was then the Colonial Office sponsored students to attend Stanford Hall, often those earmarked for civil service jobs after independence, the idea being that "of ensuring a smooth transition, controlling open rebellion and retaining British influence" (p. 139). In the academic year 1956-57, for example, more than a quarter of the 104 full-time students were from overseas, 25 being civil servants and a further seven working for or overseeing the co-operative movement.

This opportunity for an internationalist perspective could have been invaluable for the British co-operative movement, but outside Stanford Hall (and possibly even within it) the cross-fertilisation of ideas did not seem to flourish very much. One overseas student was to write early in the 1960s that "a financially sound organisation built up over a century has become a dividend-conscious concern masquerading by the name of co-operative ... While visiting some of the largest societies in the country, one could not help feeling oneself at the death-bed of a near and dear relative, unable to do anything to help" (p. 213).

The remaining time of the College in Leicestershire could not halt this slide in the British movement's fortunes. Indeed, if my own recollections of a visit to Stanford Hall early in the 1980s are anything to go by, the College seemed to become fossilised into a pastiche of earlier English country house living: at a time when the miners were striking and Thatcherism was in full flow, there were uniformed waiters and waitresses offering up a full silver service dining experience to their British and overseas students. It was, I remember thinking at the time, simply embarrassing. Some years later, also on a visit to Stanford Hall, I heard Mervyn Wilson, by that stage the Principal, defend the decision to relinquish the building and move back to Manchester. It was surely the only sensible way forward.

The Co-operative College and a Century of Social Change is the history of an institution and that can pose challenges to authors, not least when it comes to covering very recent history. The authors have been unfortunate in the timing of their book's publication in a rather similar way to that of the CWS/Co-operative Group history *Building Co-operation* (Wilson et al., 2013) which emerged just as the Group faced its financial and governance meltdown. Anyone tackling near-contemporary history inevitably offers hostages to fortune. Perhaps the history of the Co-operative College should have been left at the turn of the current century, at the moment of the move away from Stanford Hall.

Organisational histories can also sometimes focus in too closely on the goings-on within a single institution, at the expense of taking the wider picture. Particularly in the earlier years of the British co-operative movement, education was seen as a central part of the dream of the Co-operative Commonwealth. I would have welcomed perhaps a study which looked more broadly at the interface between co-operation and education rather than one which was targeted on offering an account just of the College, important though the College clearly was. But nevertheless this is a book which deserves to find its readers, especially as it is available on an open access basis under a Creative Commons licence.

The Reviewer

Andrew Bibby is a writer and journalist with a particular interest in the co-operative business model and co-operative history. The second edition of his *All Our Own Work: The pioneering worker-run co-operative mill in Hebden Bridge* will be published in late 2026.

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