

# Book Reviews

## **A Life of Sir Horace Plunkett: Visionary, Pioneer, Social Reformer and Humanitarian**

By Maurice Colbert

Published by Irish Co-operative Organisation Society, Dublin. 2009, €19.95.

Reviewed by Martin Large

Horace Plunkett (1854–1932) was an agricultural reformer and a great pioneer of rural co-operatives in Ireland and internationally. This book celebrates his response to the challenges of rural poverty and the industrial revolution by developing successful co-op businesses for jobs, wealth creation, self-help and rural renewal.

His three betters were “Better Farming, Better Business and Better Living”. His core beliefs were that economic solutions create social change; these social changes enrich rural livelihoods; and self-help through co-operatives is the best way of achieving this. He saw how farmers and rural communities could take control of their lives and work through community-based co-operative creameries, which enabled them to compete in national markets. Better access to processing technology, marketing, management and finance led to lower costs, higher quality and more income.

His message was that co-operative businesses were good businesses, and that they were the secret of the economic, social and cultural development of rural communities, not just in Eire, but also across the world. As Peter Couchman writes in his Foreword to the vision of The Plunkett Foundation:

Take the message of the benefits of co-operation to rural communities; share and receive information worldwide; do all this to make rural communities places where you can live and work, now and in the future.’

Horace was from the aristocracy and went to Eton and Oxford. Lung trouble in 1879 led to ranching from 1879-1889 in the Bighorn Mountains, Wyoming, where he said he “learned more about men than about cattle”, and “that everyone in this country is worth talking to”. This formative period made a deep impression on him, and probably shared his democratic outlook. He also made a substantial fortune and gained useful experience for agricultural development. On his return to Ireland in 1889, he saw the wretched conditions of

the rural poor, which renewed his interest in co-operative, self-help solutions. He had learned these from American farmers, and from Scandinavian co-operative models. He put these ideas into practice first amongst dairy farmers in the south, founding Ireland’s first co-operative with dairy farmers at Doneraile, Co Cork, with the first creamery at Dromcollogher, Limerick.

Setting up co-operative creameries was a great success. Plunkett inspired farmers to establish these to process and market their own butter, milk and cheese to a quality suitable for the British market, rather than poor quality produce for local markets. Farmers dealt directly with their co-operatives, with fair prices that cut out the middlemen. His slogan ‘Better farming, better business, better living’ was adopted by President Theodore Roosevelt for his conservation policy.

Plunkett’s radical ideas did not always meet with unqualified support. A lukewarm response turned hostile as traders, shopkeepers, butter-buyers and some of the press denounced co-operatives and Plunkett as ruining the dairy industry. But, undaunted, in 1894 Plunkett founded the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS), which encouraged co-operatives, with 33 affiliated dairy societies and banks. Four years later there were 243 affiliated societies and within ten years there were 800 societies with sales of three million pounds.

Pioneering the vision of systematic, long-term rural development, Plunkett influenced many international reformers. The Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) for Ireland was established in 1899, with Plunkett appointed vice-president. This gave him control of the department, policy and work for the first seven years, focusing on improving the quality of crops and livestock, dealing with animal and plant disease, encouraging fishing and planting of forest, collecting data on farming and rural Irish life. The IAOS flourished: in 1903 there were 370 dairy societies, 201 co-operative banks and 146 agricultural societies; 1914 saw over 1,000

societies with nearly 90,000 members.

But nationalist politics undermined Plunkett's work in agricultural co-operation. His controversial book, *Ireland in the New Century* (1904), described Irish economic needs saying that the Irish cause was really more of a question of economics than that of politics. He also commented on the power of the Catholic priesthood. At this time, suggesting that anything but Home Rule might be the answer to Ireland's problem was unpopular. The Nationalists drove Plunkett from office even though he had probably done more than anyone else of his generation to help ordinary people. Plunkett retired from the DATI.

Since 1900, a grant of about £4,000 had been made annually by the DATI to the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society. But despite this, creamery co-operatives continued to develop around the country, such as the Lee Strand Co-operative, still thriving in 2007, having been founded in 1920 in Tralee. The 1914-18 war saw co-operatives badly hit as farmers supplied inferior produce direct to Britain, at a boom time for Irish agriculture. During the Troubles, the creameries were alleged to be centres of sedition. British forces wrecked factories, destroyed stocks, and stopped business. Plunkett's demands for compensation were rejected.

Although Plunkett became a senator in the Irish Free State Senate, hostility towards him continued.

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## **Horace Plunkett in America: An Irish Aristocrat on the Wyoming Range**

By Lawrence M Woods

Published by Norma Okla, University of Oklahoma Press, 2010, \$36.95.

ISBN: 9780870623943

Reviewed by Jade Bashford

Horace Plunkett (1854-1932) is famed for his contribution to the co-operative movement, particularly farmer co-operatives and is known for his work in his native Ireland. His name lives on in the Plunkett Foundation, which he established.

This biography of Horace Plunkett is about his experience in America. Whilst Plunkett's time in America was only a portion of his life, it was significant and formative. In all Plunkett spent a total of 10 years of his adult life in America. From

Whilst in the USA, which he visited regularly, his house Kilteragh, south Dublin was burned down by the IRA with over 300 other country houses. "The healthiest house in the world", he wrote, "and the meeting place of a splendid body of Irishmen and friends of Ireland destroyed". This was the end of Plunkett's residence in Ireland. He moved to Weybridge in Surrey and launched The Plunkett Foundation in 1919 with £5,000. He continued to promote agricultural co-operatives and rural development until his death. In celebration of the contribution of Irish agricultural co-operatives to the country's economic revival, *The Times* obituary wrote that, "Before him, Irish agriculture was in the depths of depression". Since he did not marry and left no children, the Plunkett Foundation is his living legacy and continues to promote rural co-operative regeneration to this day.

Maurice Colbert's biography, which includes a series of splendid photographs, offers a colourful, lively account of Plunkett's eventful life and work, in the context of stirring times. He was someone who got things done, was clear about his values and vision and had the will to see things through. Remarkably for our time, he was born a privileged member of the landed aristocracy but used the power of his position, wealth and connections to serve the common wealth through the co-operative movement.

the age of 25 to 35, he was engaged in cattle ranching but even after that period, he crossed the ocean more than 60 times to follow an extraordinary range of interests, latterly political, including pursuing an influential role in the beginning of the American agricultural co-operatives to further rural development.

The author draws on Plunkett's diaries as a source. These candidly reveal his failures as a judge of others and his relationships with business

partners, for whom his appreciation was often short lived. Aspects of his character, including his courage and tenacity are illustrated. However this book offers only a part biography, revealing little about his personal and family relationships and less about his Irish and childhood influences.

The first chapters of the book give a tediously detailed account of Plunkett's business affairs eg:

The Plunkett & Roche cattle sold in Council Bluffs Iowa, at 4.15c per pound, a total of nearly \$6,000 less than the Frewen contract would have yielded. After selling the cattle, Plunkett returned to Cheyenne and met with Tom Sturgis, who wanted him to sell Union Cattle Country stock in England, promising a 5% commission to sell \$500,000 of stock ...

etc. The reader without a specialist interest is however spared from any soporific effect by the frequent insertions about the demands of the lifestyle of the time, including perilous journeys by horse and on foot, a dead body, and improbable and crude treatments for Plunkett's ongoing poor health. These are accompanied by some striking old photographs of the primitive conditions on the ranches.

Plunkett was an Irish aristocrat who took up ranching with audacity. He invested great sums of money, often other people's, raised from gullible investors in his upper class circles. His business ventures were often bold, some were spectacularly unsuccessful and overall did not reward him particularly well, even in the long term. His financial interests included tile manufacture, electric lights, irrigation and land speculating. He learnt a great deal about business, became a skilled manager and made good use of his contacts. He was a powerful thinker, able to play chess blindfolded.

Being a younger son, he anticipated a poor inheritance and hence worked hard to secure his fortune in business. In the event, when his father died he did inherit more than expected, which freed Plunkett to follow other interests in public life, including election as an MP and advising American presidents on agricultural co-operatives. He had a desire to serve. During the war he took up a role as an unofficial diplomat for both Britain and America. The book's descriptions of Plunkett's political work paint an interesting picture of the period. He was pioneering in business on a grand scale in a vast landscape and went on to pioneer some big picture thinking, which is his legacy.

Some of his American experience and endeavours will resonate with co-operators and

the Plunkett Foundation today, and some will not. He suffered from trouble with staff, poorly worded contracts and a prolonged legal case. He addressed cash-flow issues and raised capital. Visitors came with "authoritative inexperience" (an insult occasionally levelled at farm advisors today). He travelled 60 miles over rough country which proved "a waste of time, there was no agenda for the meeting and nothing was accomplished". As a rancher he suffered from variable beef prices, over grazing and unpredictable weather and attempted to control distribution and shorten supply chains. Though 100 years old, some of these accounts could be describing a present day farming business which might rightly prompt a similar interest in contemporary agricultural co-operation.

Plunkett's responses to difficult farming conditions included illegally fencing common land. He joined the Wyoming Stock Growers Association - who attempted to cut costs by cutting wages and ceasing to provide for laid off cowboys out of season, a collaborative effort that made a dubious contribution to rural development. And another attempt to monopolise and control beef marketing failed - due to lack of co-operation.

Horace had a class arrogance that would not have been an attractive qualification for a position as a social enterprise advisor for the Plunkett Foundation now. His enthusiasm for co-operatives seems astonishing given his record of recurrent conflict with his business partners - it would be pleasing to think that this characteristic was not familiar to co-operators now. His advice that rural needs would be well served by educating city people about rural issues can still be considered insightful. It might be of comfort to some in the movement that even Horace had to engage in fundraising for his co-operative work, including an approach to the Carnegie Foundation. His work to promote agricultural co-operatives was strategic, persistent and dedicated.

Plunkett took up a dialogue about eugenics and harboured some racial bias but did support education for black students. He was also outspoken about women's suffrage. The origins of Plunkett's interest in agricultural co-operatives are indicated in this book, but his ethics are not so obvious, only implied. There are some references to his commitment to address rural poverty, but readers might be left wondering *why* he took up this cause unless they are already well versed in the story of his Irish roots. For a full picture of the man, this book needs to be read alongside one of the biographies of the rest of Plunkett's life (see

the review of *A Life of Sir Horace Plunkett: Visionary, Pioneer, Social Reformer and Humanitarian*, Maurice Colbert; reviewed by Martin Large in this issue).

In his latter years he had a phoney premature obituary published about him, suffered X-ray burns and depression, was addicted to morphine, was shot at, had his house burned down and was exiled to England in the Irish troubles. Such mishaps barely affected his tremendous productivity. He died childless in 1932.

Peter Couchman is the present Chief Executive of the Plunkett Foundation and a quote from him

**Jade Bashford works in the local food sector, to enable decentralised local food systems and social enterprise . She has worked for the Soil Association for more than 10 years, and has been involved with the set up of two local food co-operative enterprises, Stroud Community Agriculture and Stroudco Community Interest Company.**

## **Consumerism and the Co-operative Movement in Modern British History: Taking Stock**

Edited by Lawrence Black and Nicole Robertson

Published by Manchester University Press, 2009, £60.  
ISBN: 9780719076848

Reviewed by Edgar Parnell

Under the sub-title of 'Taking stock', the editors provide an introduction and a collection of thirteen contributions by a similar number of different authors, which documents elements of the history of Consumerism and the British Co-operative movement. The book is intended to demonstrate the range of broader issues that can be addressed via the study of the history of consumer co-operation - 'the Co-op' as the editors call it.

I can agree with Black and Robertson that historians, for the most part, have tended to ignore the contribution of consumer co-operation when documenting economic and social history; although, I would argue that the reasons for overlooking the Co-op has more to do with the class origins of most historians than the reasons cited in the book. I long ago concluded that much of history is a view of the past as seen through the eyes of the educational establishment or the current dominant clique.

The book offers a medley of themes on the history of the Co-op that is not in any way a celebration of its achievements but instead highlights its shortcomings and its regression,

sums up what we might conclude from reading about Horace's vigorous exchanges with America:

One of the passions we share is the frustration that so many of our British colleagues seem to believe that the founding of the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844 in Britain means that the British have no need to learn co-operation from other countries. Nothing could be further from the truth and Plunkett has been making that point for 91 years. The reality is that no one country has got it right. We can all learn from each other ...

which can make for uncomfortable reading but is preferable to the nostalgic tone of much that has been written about the Co-op of bygone days. It is perhaps best to see this book as representing a series of snapshots within an album, each interesting in its own right but not attempting to provide a complete family history. The scope of the topics addressed is surprisingly extensive and ranges from the purely descriptive to the esoteric. The book includes chapters about the decline of co-operative retailing, the work of the 1956 Gaitskill Commission, comparisons with Scandinavian Co-operative movements, the Women's Co-operative Guild's campaigning role, design and innovation etc; all of which are grouped under three headings, namely: Debating and constructing post war decline, Ideologies and identities, and Consumerism and material culture.

Regrettably most of the contributors focus on the symptoms of decline rather than offering any direct help in understanding the underlying causes. Also, while providing a record of some of the events and factors that shaped the Co-op they sometimes jump to erroneous conclusions, no doubt as a

result of the incompleteness of their basic research. The history described often deals with events that are within my 'living memory', having often participated in the proceedings described, so that I found some of the articles annoyingly deficient and potentially misleading. In common with many external observers of the Co-op, several of the authors make the mistake of assuming that it was a homogenous entity, whereas in reality the prevailing personalities made decisions and policies at a local level that were diverse and often contradictory.

Despite my reservations about the content of a number of the articles and sometimes feeling that I was witnessing a picking over of the bones of some recently deceased creature, I do applaud the publication of this book. In the first place, because there exists a poverty of forthright critical historical research into consumer co-operation, and secondly, because it may well encourage more historians to channel their research efforts towards consumer co-operation. However most importantly, this collection of historical research findings, when considered in its entirety, almost coincidentally helps to reveal the underlying causes of the decline of the Co-op; which I contend are

the degeneration of the quality of leadership, the loss of original purpose, and the failure to develop appropriate forms of democratic governance and new financing mechanisms.

Co-operative leaders became predominantly concerned with defending the position of co-operatives as retailing businesses rather than with addressing the question: "how can co-operatives best serve the interests of their consumer members in the prevailing conditions?" The Co-op has moved from being an elemental and practical means of intervening in the marketplace in the defence of the consumer to its current position, where membership and ethical trading are nothing more than a part of a marketing strategy supporting a business that is mainly run in the interest of the incumbent executives.

For me, history is a catalyst for understanding what needs to be done to prepare for the future. Therefore, if the study of the history of consumerism and the co-operative movement can in any way help today's co-operative leaders realise what needs to be done to rediscover the Co-op's original purpose at a time when its business prospects may well be ascending, then it has to be worthy of contemplation.

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## Also Received

### **Fair and Square: Ethical Shopping Matters**

Compiled and Edited by Ruth Bergan

Published by Co-operative College, 2010.

ISBN: 978-0-85195-319-9

The book offers reflections on the Co-operative College's Fair and Square project, which was funded by DFID to explore how the fair trade agenda could offer benefits to growers in poorer countries. This short book offers useful guidance on how fair trade works; some reflections on its relevance to other pressing political topics such as food security and climate change; together with some case-

studies of products including fish, flowers and vegetables.

The book is available from the Co-operative College or for download on the College's website at <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/researching-co-operatives/co-operatives-for-development/publications-and-resources/>