

# Book Reviews

## A Century of Co-operation

By Ian MacPherson

Published by Canadian Co-operative Association, Ottawa, 2009.  
ISBN 978-0-88817-101-6

Reviewed by Erin Hancock, Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia and Founding Director of Co-operative Enterprise Council

Written in recognition of the 100-year anniversary of the Co-operative Union of Canada, known as the Canadian Co-operative Association since 1987, *A Century of Co-operation* attempts to provide a historical profile of the last 100 years of co-operative experiences in Canada. By virtue of trying to summarise and highlight the diversity of co-operative experience in Canada over such a period in a 234-page publication, the reader may not expect much depth of description, but by offering an abundance of images and biographical inserts, this publication succeeds in highlighting the breadth of co-operative experience throughout Canada over the past century.

As the author describes the historical lineage of the various streams of the co-operative movement (including producer, financial, worker, consumer, education, and housing co-operatives), a number of themes emerge. The values of inclusion, self-help, community development, sustainability, the alleviation of poverty and a focus on the local are highlighted throughout this book. MacPherson also discusses the important role of volunteers in the movement as well as the adaptability and innovation of co-operatives not only to meet needs, but to compete in the marketplace as well. This book also describes the international connectedness of co-operatives, as illustrated through the early roots of the co-operative movement from the United Kingdom. Likewise, this book chronicles the role that Canadian co-operatives play in co-operative development in developing nations, motivated by a desire to alleviate poverty and promote community empowerment. This book further illustrates the role of organisations such as the Co-operative Union of Canada/Canadian Co-operative Association in building international ties through

co-operative study trips as well as the International Co-operative Alliance.

This book illuminates that co-operatives are not only significant to a large percentage of the Canadian population (17 million memberships held to Canadian co-operatives) — throughout history to present day — but also a diversity of people. The author showcases the accessibility and utility of co-operatives for youth to seniors, farmers to bankers, uneducated to academics, the rural to urban, aboriginal people to immigrants, those with disabilities and a spectrum of income levels. The reader is exposed to membership as diverse as the wide variety of activities that co-operatives address.

Some co-operative texts have been criticised for 'cheerleading' too much about the movement and failing to acknowledge the challenges and hardships, but MacPherson offers a fair overview of the past hundred years of co-operation in the Canadian context. He describes the problems presented by succession planning, slow progression through some stages of development, and how public policy and public opinion about co-operatives sometimes hinged on media portrayals. He also describes the successes such as corporate worker buyouts to form worker co-operatives, co-operation among co-operatives for development of the movement, and a continuous commitment for co-operatives to provide education and training. Although the author includes the struggles as well as the triumphs, this book is best described as a feel-good read about the history of co-operatives in Canada. Further to the author's credit, it was evident he made an effort to include the contributions of new Canadians/immigrants as well as women to the co-operative movement.

The scrapbook quality of this publication, combined with the strength of the narrative, is

effective at touching on a number of points in co-operative history in an efficient way. Throughout the book the text maintains a good flow by pairing a fair amount of quantitative information with anecdotal stories about how the various aspects of the movement emerged. Due to the images offered on nearly every page, this book also easily appeals to visual learners and could serve well as a coffee table book to co-operators near and far. I rather enjoyed the picture book feel to the publication, but for those who are particular about formatting, the mix of text and the inserts highlighting certain people or organisations can suggest a lack of stylistic consistency. This book can easily be read in

snippets given that each page gives the reader an easy to digest clip of some part of the history of co-operatives. If the reader wants more information, there is a footnote that can direct one to more descriptive texts. However, if read continuously from cover to cover, some discussions appear redundant (such as the discussion of the development of the co-operative principles).

All in all, this very colourful publication is a rich visual archive of the Canadian co-operative movement and a great tribute to the hard work and dedication of Canadian co-operators throughout the past century.

## Understanding the Social Economy: a Canadian Perspective

By Jack Quarter, Lourie Mook and Ann Armstrong

Published by University of Toronto Press, 2009.

ISBN 978-0-80209-645-6

Available in Europe through NBN International

Price £22.50

Reviewed by Jan Myers, Senior Lecturer at Cardiff School of Management and a researcher with Cardiff Institute for Co-operative Studies. Jan formerly worked at Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, and continues to be part of a Canada-wide Social Economy and Sustainability Network.

The authors of *Understanding the Social Economy: a Canadian perspective* – all associated with the University of Toronto and with a great deal of knowledge and expertise in social economy, non-profits and social enterprise studies – have brought together an interesting and useful volume geared at raising the profile of social economy organisations as significant contributors to Canadian (and by implication broader global) society. The book is organised into three parts, the first of which provides a basic overview: facts and figures and specific characteristics of the social economy as distinct from private and public sector organisations; the second part explores the different types of organisations that are included in the umbrella concept of the ‘social economy’. As well as providing critical overview and a series of case studies of specific organisations from across Canada throughout the book, the final part focuses on specific management and operational issues such as governance and accountability.

The authors define the social economy as a bridging concept – an umbrella for organisations that have social objectives as a central tenet to their existence. They are also quick to identify that while the two dimensions of social mission and economic value in their definition are interlinked, this does not privilege discourse or practice relating to market activities and, as an example, they point to their work on the market value of volunteer labour. However, without dwelling too much on definitional issues, the authors outline a range of common characteristics, including co-operative principles, and organisational models which are brought to life in a range of in-depth and mini case studies. Examples of case studies include: worker-owned organic food retailers (such as Big Carrot in Toronto); second-tier co-operatives (such as Arctic Co-operatives Ltd); social enterprises and social firms (such as Summer

Street Industries in Nova Scotia - a range of social enterprises for adults with intellectual disabilities; non-profit and consumer co-operative health centres (for example in Saskatchewan); credit unions (the large Vancity credit union in British Columbia), and micro-lending schemes (such as Kiva – a web-based resource administering funds like the Vancouver based and young persons’ managed micro-credit fund, Global Agents for Change).

The case studies offer a real insight into the complexity and diversity of social economy organisations across Canada ranging from small, community-focused service and retail organisations to large finance, producer and consumer enterprises. The descriptive overviews of the size, structures, ownership, governance and management of a range of organisational types provide working examples of the particular concepts and ideas being discussed in each of the chapters and are both educational and, in some cases, inspirational. If this were not enough to bring the theory and concepts surrounding the development and categorisation of social economy organisations to life, the final section on critical issues starts to get to grips with some of the key issues linked to studying more mainstream organisational and strategic development: organisational design and strategic choice, boards and governance and specifically governance for member-based organisations; financial and operational performance - including social financing, social accounting and accountability.

The social economy in Canada has received a great deal of attention in academic, practitioner and some policy circles over recent years, not least because of a Canadian-wide funded research programme through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and through specific Community-University Research Alliance funding arrangements. The book is an excellent addition

to the growing number specifically concerned with profiling typically neglected contributors to social and economic development. It will certainly be of interest to anyone working in or alongside non-profits, co-operatives, credit unions and social enterprise as a general and informative read, but it is also specifically geared towards relating concepts of the social economy to the 'work' of business schools. As such, the

book is also an aid to informing and teaching business studies students, and the structure and organisation of the chapters includes suggestions for further reading, review of 'real-life' practice, and a range of key discussion questions. In addition, there are supplementary materials available should it be adopted as a text for teaching and learning.

## The Oddfellows 1810-2010: 200 Years of Making Friends and Helping People

By Dan Weinbren

Published by Carnegie Publishing, Lancaster, 2010.

ISBN 978-1-85936-207-5

Price £25

Reviewed by Molly Scott Cato, Director of Cardiff Institute for Co-operative Studies

I was so pleased that this book came into my hands for review because, since my days as a student, I have noticed Oddfellows halls in many of the towns and cities I have visited, but have never heard this movement mentioned in my fairly wide-ranging studies of social and economic life. At last this book has obliged me to pay greater attention to what is not, as I had secretly suspected, an esoteric secret society, but rather a flourishing expression of civil society and mutual values.

Like the Methodists, to whom they appear to have been linked (although there were also Anglican and even Jewish lodges), and the co-operative and other mutual and friendly societies with which readers of this journal will be more familiar, the Oddfellows order and lodges grew up as a response to the dislocation and social breakdown that followed the mass movements into the cities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. On a practical level, the Oddfellows offered mutual insurance schemes and other welfare services, such as donations in the case of unemployment or ill health, medical services, and the opportunity to travel via networks of halls and friendly lodges to visit. Members were required to pay a regular subscription in return for these services, and were responsible, along with other friendly societies, for administering national insurance during the years 1912 to 1948. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the advent of the welfare state — with its the National Health Service and National Insurance schemes — eclipsed the Oddfellows and led to their gradual decline. This having been said, however, there were still 95,000 members of the Oddfellows in 2007.

As well as their practical and social functions, the Oddfellows were important in lending a sense of meaning and purpose to life, and in sharing the more spiritual aspects of working life with others who shared their skills and with younger generations. In this they took forward the role of the Medieval trade guilds, and one explanation for the rather bizarre name suggests that it expresses the need for a lodge or order

for those who were not numerous enough to belong to a craft-based guild of their own. According to Weinbren (p106), 'While it oversimplifies to argue that membership of a friendly society "was the badge of the skilled worker" ... it was often the conventionally respectable skilled workers who played significant roles in running the Oddfellows'.

The movement of the place of association of skilled labour from the guild to the trade union is a complex one, and the involvement of the Oddfellows in this history is clearly of interest. Guilds had been undermined from the Reformation onwards, partly because their attempts to protect their members' skills and rates of pay were interpreted as 'restrictive practices' by the proto-capitalists. The Oddfellows grew up in Manchester, whose rapidly increasing population of labourers were unrepresented in parliament and prohibited from holding political meetings or joining political associations. Like the other friendly societies they provided for practical rather than political needs and although Weinbren finds links to Chartism, this can be seen in the context of this era of disenfranchisement and exploitation.

In their ritualistic aspect they again drew on the guilds, but perhaps can be seen to have more in common with the freemasons, perhaps especially in their focus on ritual and initiation, and their refusal, until the late nineteenth century, to admit women to membership, in contrast to the co-operators. The ceremonial aprons, sashes and collars; the iconography (including the symbol of the 'all-seeing eye') that clearly informed the later trade unions; and the emphasis on rituals and ceremonies all lend weight to the conception of the Oddfellows as a secret society. However, Weinbren, drawing on over 50 interviews with Oddfellows also emphasises the importance of the celebratory side of the society, with picnics, outings and parties. Conviviality and companionship appear to have been at least as important as welfare and ritual.

Physically, the book is weighty, full of

fascinating illustrations — many in colour — and altogether a beautifully produced book such as rarely comes the way of academic journal reviewers. It has clearly been made with love and with the very same spirit which has supported the Oddfellows for the past 200 years. While it is clear where the author's sympathies lie, this is a scholarly as well as accessible account which is built on a wide literature, including the author's own peer-reviewed contributions to the field. Furthermore, through the interviews, many voices can be heard and the book is an invaluable source of information for co-operators who would like to know more about this movement that, in many ways, parallels their own.

This is a history, and as such fills in an important and neglected aspect of our social and economic life. However, as the welfare state passes its seventieth anniversary we may feel the need to reassess its success. An

understanding of what it replaced, the complex system of relationships and mutual aid that the friendly societies represented, may help us in carrying out this contemporary evaluation, and of exploring the role that more locally based and mutual organisations might play in the social services of the future.

The authors state their reason for the writing this book 'was the desire to give people in Germany access to basic rules and operation of co-operative societies'. They have provided an English translation to make their insights available to the wider community. It is a handy guide to how co-operatives work, with a brief history of the co-operative movement in Germany, details of the state of the co-operative movement in Germany today (with a wealth of useful data), and some hints as to how the movement might develop in the twenty first century.

**Also Received:**

**Our Co-op: Idea - Mission - Achievements**

By Werner Grosskopf, Hans-H. Münkner, and Günther Ringle

Published by Neu-Ulm: AG SPAK Bücher, 2010.

ISBN 978-3-94086-501-4