

Editorial:

Johnston Birchall — An Appreciation

I have always been fascinated by the idea of member-owned, as opposed to investor-owned, businesses. It seems to me that the co-operative business model is a serious alternative to corporate capitalism (Johnston Birchall).

In 2020, we lost a great friend and champion of co-operation and member-owned businesses (MOBs). This special issue marks the tremendous contribution Johnston Birchall made to both UK Society for Co-operative Studies and the wider international co-operative movement. It is fitting therefore to start this appreciation and tribute with a quote from Johnston himself and to acknowledge that it is his fascination combined with his expertise and enthusiasm that has inspired many co-operative practitioners and scholars over the years, and no doubt will continue to do so. It is probably fair to say that it is rare to find a paper submission to the *Journal* that does not make reference to at least one of Birchall's many publications. While *Co-op: The people's business* (1995) might feature in the top ten, there is a wealth of knowledgeable, analytical and clear works on which to draw.

In this special issue we bring together just some of the many articles published in his long commitment to co-operative studies, first in the *Society for Co-operative Studies Bulletin* and later in the (renamed) *Journal of Co-operative Studies* over a period of nearly 30 years (1984-2011). This is complemented by a bibliography of his work, which will also be made available on the *Journal* website.

Birchall's articles are presented chronologically, with the exception of two articles on poverty reduction, written with long-standing colleague and co-author Richard Simmons. The first (pp. 118-128), setting out a research agenda, was first published in 2007 and the findings (pp. 129-133) followed in 2010. The only changes we have made to the original publications are to: correct any typographical errors; amend references to correspond to the current journal style; and to add in additional explanatory notes as appropriate.

Presenting articles chronologically also provides detail of his growing and sustained interest in specific topics and also traces his academic and research journey. At the time of his first article, published in the *Bulletin* in 1984 (under R. Johnston Birchall), and prompted by the closure of a number of co-operative shops, he was completing his doctoral studies on housing co-operatives at York University following a return to academic studies with a master's degree in social policy also at York. While in York, he served on the York Co-operative Society Education Committee and during 1984-85 was the vice chair of the Society for Co-operative Studies (later renamed the UK Society for Co-operative Studies). Prior to this, and after graduating from Oxford University with a degree in theology, Birchall worked initially as a community worker and housing association manager.

This golden thread of interest in and focus on public policy was sustained throughout his work. In 1987, he worked for the Institute of Community Studies — a research institute “with people and communities at its heart” and a focus on participatory methods (<https://icstudies.org.uk/>). The originator of the Institute, Michael Young (later Lord Young of Dartington, who also established the School for Social Entrepreneurs) contributed the foreword to Birchall's 1988 book, *Building communities the co-operative way* (republished in 2014), describing Birchall as “a devoted and far-sighted scholar”.

The work was described as one that was “likely to stimulate a much better informed debate and to structure future research work” (Morris, 1989, p. 285). It is this work, along with other others of Birchall's on co-operative housing, that has influenced Andrew Bibby's article (see pp. 162-173). As a forerunner to a planned book of housing co-operatives, Bibby provides updated research on England's early co-operative and co-partnership tenant societies; its

'hidden history'. Although there has been an ebb and flow of interest in co-operative housing since the 1980s and 1990s, Bibby points to renewed interest through vehicles such as community land trusts, community-led and co-housing schemes, student co-operative housing, and self-build schemes (echoed in the announcement on March 2022 — following an independent review (Bacon Review, 2021) — of a Community Housing Fund that will provide funding contributions for 52 projects across England). Co-operative housing and mutuality were topics that Birchall returned to throughout the 1980s to 2000s, not only in relation to collective ownership, but also user participation, combatting social exclusion, community building, and management and participation (see Johnston Birchall — A bibliography, pp. 175-180; also this issue pp. 26-31; 49-53; 54-57; and 58-62), and underpinned a number of articles and book chapters and others' publications (see for example Rowlands, 2010; Scott, 2000; Spence, 2020).

By 1988, Birchall had also moved from the Institute of Community Studies to join South Bank Polytechnic, in the Faculty of Built Environment and from 1988-1990 was secretary of the Society for Co-operative Studies. As well as *Building Communities*, he had published two more books: *What Makes People Co-operate* — on member participation in housing co-operatives, and *Save our Shop*, about the survival of the small store, which Birchall updated in a 1987 article for the renamed *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

By 1992, Birchall had left South Bank to take up a lecturer post in social and public policy at Brunel University and while no longer secretary of the Society was still closely involved and contributing regularly to the *Journal*. He had written several working papers on aspects of co-operative housing while at Brunel plus an edited book, *Housing Policy in the 1990s*. A review pointed to "Birchall's excellent account of the rights and opportunities arising for council tenants after the reforms of 1988 and 1989" (Goodlad 1989, p. 150). At this time, too, he was working on a pictorial history of the consumer co-operative movement. It was published as part of the 150th anniversary of the co-operative movement in 1994 — *Co-op: The people's business*:

a remarkable story of a popular movement which has survived the changes in the structure of Britain's economy and which has taken root in a wide range of different countries and different cultures [...] it sets out to tell the story of the movement and celebrate its achievements in a manner that is informative and will no doubt be attractive to a wide audience of potential readers (Jackson, 1995, pp. 120-121).

Indeed nearly 30 years on from its release and described by Mayo (this issue, p. 7) as "Johnston's most loved publication", it forms part of the basis for the Professor Johnston Birchall Memorial Lecture (30 June 2022) presented by David Rodgers (former Chief Executive of CDS Co-operatives, past president of Co-operative Housing International, and Editor of the International Co-operative Alliance guidance notes on Co-operative Principles).

At the 1994 annual general meeting of the Society for Co-operative Studies it was announced that Birchall would be editor-designate for the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*. As editor from 1995-2000, Birchall re-shaped the *Journal* by introducing the refereed papers section, organising the publications by volume and issue numbers, and increasing representation of articles in the *Journal* not only across sectors but also internationally. When he stepped down in 2000, the *Journal* was a different animal and Birchall continued to support its development both as an editorial advisory board member but also through his increasing research and international networks.

When *The new mutualism in public policy* was first published in 2001, Birchall was a senior lecturer in social policy at Stirling University. It was here that he began a fruitful partnership with Richard Simmons, then a research fellow, and several of the papers featured in this special issue are jointly authored by Birchall with Simmons. Alone and together they were recipients of several research grants, each producing a range of publications, resources, and reports. Funded research included work on: a theoretical model of what motivates public service users to participate; participation of members in the governance of mutual businesses (see pp. 21-25); creating and supporting stakeholder members in social enterprises in the West Midlands (see

pp.101-117); the role and potential of co-operatives in the poverty reduction process; and risk, regulation and the banking crisis: the potential of customer-owned banks (Birchall). In addition, Birchall carried out evaluation, research, and advisory roles for, inter alia, Co-operatives UK, the International Co-operative Alliance, the International Labour Organisation, and several UN agencies, including around governance, member-owned business, and co-operative values and principles (see also articles reprinted — pp. 69-83; 134-147; and 148-161).

In her appreciation (pp. 13-14), Sonja Novkovic remarks on the “indelible mark on the advancement of theory of co-operative governance, built from practice” that Birchall has left. She mentions two key publications *The design of effective democratic governance structures for large co-operatives* (2015) and *The governance of large co-operative businesses* (2014). While she quotes Birchall as stating “There is no simple blueprint for good [co-operative] governance” (2015, p. 31), it is Birchall’s insight that provides an elegant simplicity to some of the ingredients of good governance design. This ability to simplify, to describe, and explain is commented upon by Nick Matthews (pp. 10-12), calling Birchall a ‘realist’ with a “clear picture of what he thought ... open to discussion ... very generous with his time [and] sharing his ideas”. A review of Birchall’s *People-centred businesses: Co-operatives, mutuals and the idea of membership* additionally comments on Birchall’s strength:

... his ability to synthesize a daunting amount of historical and current information in a readable form, telling a compelling history of various forms of MOB’s along the way. Reading this book is like being jettisoned back to pre-PowerPoint days, when good professors commanded the attention of their listeners with their knowledge and experience woven into coherent narratives. One marvels at just how much ground one has covered by the end of the book ... I read this during my summer vacation. By chance, I ended up speaking with someone visiting Spain from New York City and who asked after the title. “Yes, well, the idea is commendable”, was the response to my explanation of the book, “but do you really think that it can be scaled up and have any kind of real impact?” I had my answer in the valley in front of us where agricultural co-operative small producers generate more than two billion Euros annually in an area previously plagued by poverty and fascism. I had a more complete answer in the book I was holding (Giagnocavo, 2011, pp. 96-97).

Indeed, Birchall described this book as a ‘culmination’ of his previous work, bringing together an analysis of consumer and producer owned business.

Johnston Birchall’s expertise and reputation as a ‘co-operative scholar’ also resulted in many keynote and conferences presentations. Not one from shying away from complexity, he described, in a speech at the University of Bologna in 2008, how in writing on co-operatives and co-operation, it was helpful to be mindful of “the words of Billie Holiday’s song: The difficult I’ll do right now. The impossible will take a while” (p. 9).

He visited Japan over a number of years, often at the invitation of the Robert Owen Association of Japan, and had a longstanding friendship with Professor Akira Kurimoto who comments on Birchall’s “tremendous contribution to the international co-operative movement” (p. 15). Perhaps one of the more poignant pieces in this collection is the Co-operatives in the 21st Century article (pp. 94-100) which is an adaptation of a speech given in 2000 at the International Co-operators’ Day in Japan. In it, he states: “Why not make a few predictions? It will be interesting to look back in twenty years ... and see how wrong I was” (p. 96). We leave it open to you, as readers, to reflect on the wisdom of Birchall’s predictions. Indeed, we invite contributions to the *Journal* that interrogate, reflect on, and extend or otherwise those predictions; to build on his legacy.

In addition to our open call for papers on reflections on Birchall’s future-look, twenty years on, there will also be a special issue of the *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Diversity* — Essays in honour of Johnston Birchall — due to be published in June 2023 (see p. 174).

We are grateful to our contributors for also giving us a sense of Johnston as a person — his enthusiasm, generosity, his love of his family, jazz, playing guitar, and his skills as a narrator and observer of the world. We celebrate the contribution of Johnston Birchall to both the UK Society of Co-operative Studies and the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* and this issue is a special

thank you to him. In starting this editorial with the words of Johnston Birchall, we end with those of his colleague and friend, Richard Simmons:

The span of articles in this special edition shows how Johnston carried co-operation with him as a constant companion throughout his life, offering astute perspectives on whatever context he found himself in. From a family connection with small shops, to his role as manager in a housing association, to his career as an academic researcher of co-operatives and co-operation, Johnston was always able to offer fresh insights and, where appropriate, challenge existing orthodoxies. He had an uncanny knack of seemingly knowing what was coming next before it arrived, so that he always had something to say when it did. And he often said it first here, in the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, a journal that he contributed to and edited with great pride.

Dr Jan Myers **Editor**

This is my final editorial of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*. From the next issue I will be joined by Dr Anita Mangan as co-editor, who I am pleased to welcome as 'editor-designate' of the *Journal*, taking on the editorial role from 2022/23. Dr Francesca Gagliardi becomes deputy editor. Many thanks to Dr Paul A. Jones for his contribution as deputy editor. Paul joins the editorial advisory board and we are pleased to welcome a number of new members to the Board.

References

All references to Birchall's publications are listed in the bibliography (pp. 175-180).

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