

## Book Reviews

**Understanding the Role of the ICA in the History of the Twentieth Century.**

**Dr Rita Rhodes, *The International Co-operative Alliance During War and Peace 1910-1950*, ICA, Geneva, 1995.**

**Dr Rita Rhodes and Prof Dionysos Mavrogiannis, *Thematic Guide to ICA Congresses 1895-1995*, Studies and Reports No 13, ICA, Geneva, 1995.**

This latest history *The International Co-operative Alliance During War and Peace 1910-1950* by Rita Rhodes of a critical period of ICA development will not prove an easy book for the general reader. I would recommend them to persevere with it nonetheless. The reader coming to this subject for the first time will find the author's historical overview in the introduction very helpful indeed. I was particularly pleased to read an account of co-operative history that gave Edward Vansittart Neale and the Christian Socialists proper recognition. It was only a pity that Rita did not in her otherwise excellent references point readers interested by her analysis of this early period to Philip Backstrom's excellent biography of Neale.

Rita Rhodes asks how did the ICA survive as an international body when so many other international working class organisations failed over this period? Her necessary defence of the idea of the organisation as working class is important not least because I suspect that globally it is one that many people active in the movement would want to challenge. I am not one of them however, and recommend this book to the general reader precisely because Rita is clearly anxious to situate the co-operative movements *raison d'être* in the liberation of labour. The argument with Marxism-Leninism was always about methods rather than goals. I feel this may be a further reason why Communist participation in the ICA was acceptable whilst Fascist participation was not.

Rita Rhodes' discussion of ICA relations with the Italian

Co-operative Movement during the Fascist period shows how impotent the movement was internationally and how little real mobilisation of diplomatic or material resources it was able to muster despite what Rita describes as the robust stance of the ICA leadership. The evidence Rita presents could have been characterised as "necessarily cautious" when facing political/social forces to which the national co-operative movements appeared to be as impotent as other parts of the labour movement to resist. Why had the German and Italian Co-operative Movements not been able to do more to resist the rise of Fascism in their countries? This is not a question Rita Rhodes' history is concerned to address, but it is a question likely to occur to the reader as they consider the ICA role in working for the defence and post-war re-establishment of these two national movements.

I believe the answer in part presents an important qualification to the case Rita presents for seeing the ICA as a working class organisation. For which strata of the working class are we speaking of? Could it be that the movement failed to mobilise the poorest segments of society? Could it be that we left a critical opening for a mass base for Fascist mobilisation? I have concentrated in my review on this aspect because I believe this has relevance for world co-operation today. Are we addressing the needs of the very poor? Is there an underclass re-emerging in Europe and America and is the co-operative movement trying to reach out and support its social and economic development? The post-war defeat of Communism following on some forty years after the military defeat of Fascism has opened the door to greater international unity within the ICA than ever before. We must learn the lessons that histories such as this one suggest. The social injustice and polarisation that unregulated capitalist market forces produce led to both Communist and Fascist responses. The latter is already starting its comeback in parts of Europe and in parts of the third world has really never been defeated.

Today the door is open for the greater recognition of the practical and ideological relevance of co-operative principles to resolving the world's problems. Can we as a movement really live the internationalist ideals of our founders and those of later generations that fought so hard to keep the ICA in a position of influence in the councils of the world.

One of the number of explanations for the survival of the ICA that Rita offers relates to the moral basis of the movement's ideology. She writes towards the end of her book, "... the ICA tended to have a developing philosophy and shifting rhetoric throughout the period - but always one with a strong moral tone." (p377)

Co-operation's underlying morality kept the movement alive and flexible without it losing its way in the process. Today we have inherited an ICA constitutional framework that is trusted and tried as Rita Rhodes' history demonstrates. The negative consequences of the global market continue to impact on the working classes (in all strata). The question remains - can our ideals concerning the moral imperatives of social justice be turned into effective action. Can the international framework facilitate management strategies that can reach the world's poor at home and abroad? More than this can we achieve it in ways that benefit existing members, create sustainable economic development, solidarity and improvement for the poorest members of society? Should the ICA move from being an international co-operative alliance to a universal co-operative commonwealth? Rita's book makes us see the historical background and institutional processes out of which an eventual answer will emerge.

Students of international co-operative history will find in Dr Rita Rhodes and Prof Dionysos Mavrogiannis, *Thematic Guide to ICA Congresses 1895-1995*, Studies and Reports No 13, ICA, Geneva, 1995 a useful summary and guide to source documents dealing with the proceedings of ICA Congresses during the organisation's first hundred years. The material on the congresses between 1910 and 1950 complement and add further illumination to the material Dr Rita Rhodes presents in her book covering this period of the ICA. For example, Rita Rhodes provides much detailed background to the 1933 Basle conference which was dominated by the worsening relationships between the German Co-operative Movement and the ICA in her book on the ICA between 1910 and 1950. The follow-up Congress in 1934 is treated more fully in the Thematic Guide and illustrates how the principle of political neutrality prevented a more positive response towards the rising threat of Fascism and war. It also suggests that the emphasis on peace in the resolutions and the majority of the delegates rejection of the Russian delegation's

calls for a stronger anti-Fascist response suggested that many delegations reflected the western European nations' strategies based on appeasement and much mainstream British and Scandinavian Labour Movement leanings at the time towards pacifism following the experience of the First World War.

The effects of the Cold War and how the ICA managed to retain unity in the face of an active communist block amongst its affiliates is another area where the two books complement each other rather than merely repeat themselves.

There is a most useful Thematic Index at the back of the book covering twenty two themes each with a large number of identified sub themes with the Congress date and page numbers in the report provided. These are restricted to the subjects of main papers. Covering as it does the first 100 years of the ICA the Thematic Guide enables us to see both the continuity and the change in emphasis in the issues addressed by the ICA Congress. For example the issues of Profit Sharing are very extensively represented in the early Congresses but then appear to cease to be an issue after the 1920s. Women's issues appeared regularly after the turn of the century but inexplicably the issues of interco-operative trade particularly at international level that have been discussed since the early Congresses appear not to have been raised since 1969 according the index. Each Congress is examined in summary as to the key themes of the main resolutions and reports presented to Congress. A valuable research tool which will I am sure generate many more enquires for the ICA archivist.

**Peter Davis**

**Godfrey Baldacchino, Saviour Rizzo and Edward L. Zammit, eds, *Co-operative Ways of Working*, Workers Participation Development Centre, University of Malta, 1994.**

*Co-operative Ways of Working* represents an excellent digest. Its contributors cover a wide range of international experience of the productive societies as they have applied co-operative principles to achieve a range of goals from increased accountability and participatory management styles to increasing the scope for direct worker involvement in management decision making. One of the editors Godfrey Baldacchino makes a powerful case for a renewed critical examination of the role of worker co-operatives and direct worker management styles as a means to respond to the changing agenda in the world labour market. Baldacchino notes both positive trends, concerned with improved participation and health and safety standards, and negative trends relating to the fragmentation of work, and the degradation in the contractual protection afforded to the worker. He argues that the failure to realise economic development in many regions of the world provides further motivation for the generation of worker owned co-operatives. The papers include contributions from three respected British co-operators, Chris Cornforth, Mary Mellor and Michael Jones. There are papers offering insights from the Italian and Basque experience as well as the German perspective by Hans Münkner. Münkner along with Cornforth explore the implications for the differences and similarities between types of co-operative and the barriers to efficiency and development that can result from the internal relationship of members (Münkner) to the co-operative as well as the external constraints (Cornforth). Gabriele Ullrich of the ILO identifies a wide range of topics requiring research including one that particularly deserves attention in my view concerning the competitive advantage that can be established because of the co-operative values and ownership structure. Those interested in the problems of managing large scale worker enterprises will find the materials on Mondragon and Scott Bader well worth reading. The development of trade unions and co-operatives in Cyprus and their impact on the economic recovery post 1974 is developed in a very informative paper by Andreas Theophanous

and as with the paper on Greek co-operation by Lista Nicolauo-Smokoviti demonstrates that the literature on Co-operative Working can encompass other co-operative services as well as agricultural contexts. Many of those who read this book will want to reflect on the four fundamental values propounded in the Mongragon paper by Antonio Lucas namely, Equality, Solidarity, the Dignity of Work, and Participation. There is much to be encouraged by in this book but the authors frankness concerning the more difficult issues means that this is a serious rather than a promotional work. Its contributors fail, however, to really explore the concept of professional management in a worker owned business and tend (with the exception of Michael Jones) to assume without question the "reactionary" role of a professional management. This is a weakness in approach that does not so much reflect on the authors as on the received wisdom of so many co-operators in the worker co-operative sector. I believe it is this attitude that provides some substantial part of the explanation for the failure of worker co-operatives to make more progress both in Britain and elsewhere.

**Peter Davis**

**E.G. Nadeau and David J. Thompson, *Co-operation Works. How people are using co-operative action to rebuild communities and revitalize the economy*, Lone Oak Press, Minnesota, 1996, ISBN 1 883477 13 1.**

This book is an unashamed promotional work based on positive case studies by two partners in a North American co-operative management and organisational development consultancy. It bears some of the negative consequences of being written from a somewhat uncritical and untheoretical perspective. In some ways this book reminded me of those equally uncritical works on business ethics that came out in the early 1990s written by no doubt sincere management consultants whose perspective was I fear somewhat coloured by the marketing exercise that to some extent all such books are really about.

Despite the difficulties and set backs that have been a real feature of the American, as of the world wide, co-operative movement I could not find one example of co-operative failure in the book's 185 pages covering case studies of co-operatives in agriculture, small business support, worker co-operatives, housing co-operatives, consumer co-operatives and community co-operatives. Nowhere does the book address the real challenges in terms of management, membership, governance, technology innovation and transfer, capital structures and legal frameworks that beset the modern co-operative movement. I found this uncritical promotion disappointing and even a bit dishonest.

So much for the reservations. The examples given are encouraging and provide useful evidence of the breadth of application that co-operative principles has found in the United States. The authors' enthusiasm is infectious and some of the case studies have, I suspect a wide application outside the US and should be studied and probably reproduced. The idea that small farmers may be able to survive by using co-operatives to increase the value added potential of the product is not new but some of the applications discussed in this book might lead to some new product developments for small arable and livestock farmers. I have long felt that co-operative associations for small business would not only greatly improve the longevity of such enterprises, but also the quality of the lifestyle enjoyed by their proprietors and employees. Politically they should be forming

the basis of the British Labour Party's policy developments for the small firm sector.

*Co-operation Works* contains many interesting case studies of American co-operative enterprise and an excellent index. The book also includes an appendix giving details of America's top 100 co-operatives and some of them are clearly very big businesses. A book to dip into rather than read from cover to cover. It deserves to be included in co-operative libraries but read with a sceptical frame of mind. Co-operation does work but the last 150 years suggest that getting the best results from co-operatives is not always as easy as this book seems to imply.

**Peter Davis**

**Wendy Hurr and David Thirkell, editors, *The World of Co-operative Enterprise 1997*, The Plunkett Foundation, Oxford, 1997, ISBN 0 85042 106 3.**

There can be few active co-operators who are not familiar with what must be the longest running series of quality readings on co-operation anywhere in the world. This year's issue of *The World of Co-operative Enterprise* maintains its traditional high standards both in terms of the range of the topics covered and the quality of the authors. The review of the British Movement's statistics and insider insights (see this year papers by David Evans and David Rogers) or research based commentary (see papers by Prof Leigh Sparks, Roger Spear, Raymond Donnelly and Adrian Haggett) on the agricultural, retail, housing, worker and credit union sectors brings us up to date with the growth, threats and opportunities facing the various areas of co-operative activity. The paper on agriculture is perhaps the one where the threats are most severe and the future most uncertain. The de-mutualising trend has had some echoes amongst formerly leading farmer co-operatives. Now with conservative government proposals appearing to threaten the legality itself of farmer co-operatives plus the industry wide crisis for beef and dairy producers, there is doubting the severe strain on this sector at present. It remains to be seen if a new government will seek to support co-operation in agriculture.

Fortunately it is not all gloom with confident reports from co-operative financial services particularly on the positive co-operative image in banking by Chris Smith, Group Public Affairs Manager at The Co-operative Bank. There are also some fascinating papers looking at the public perception amongst young people on the Co-operative Movement in Japan and a more general study on co-operative image from Malaysia. In India the great strides and positive attitudes towards the dairy co-operatives is rather in contrast to a sombre analysis of British farmers perceptions of their co-operatives. We are no strangers to negative treatment by a hostile media but the case recorded in the paper concerning the Indian dairy co-operatives must be one of the worst and most undeserved attacks by the media on the movement in recent years. The victory of the Indian Co-operators is all the more to be applauded. Between 1970 and

1996 the National Dairy Development Board have established 70,000 dairy co-operatives covering 20 states and owned by 9 million members, of whom, the paper's authors S.N. Singh and M.K. Niyogi tell us, 74% are landless labourers. Together these members are now receiving 40 billion rupees per year in income from their milk. I suspect there must be some very disappointed middlemen out there.

There are also six very important papers on co-operative housing and nine more on Co-operation's work to improve the environment. Along with some excellent British contributions are examples and analysis that come from a wide range of international experience from North America, Norway, Sweden, Poland, France, Malaysia, and the Asia Pacific Region of the ICA. What I have always appreciated in these Plunkett volumes has been the combination of breadth of topics, depth of UK analysis and a wide ranging international perspective and experience. The 1997 volume does not disappoint on any of these counts.

**Peter Davis**

**Jean Turnbull and Jayne Southern, *More than Just a Shop: a history of the co-op in Lancashire*, Lancashire County Books, 1995, ISBN 1 871236 36 3.**

Co-operative history, in the past, had a wide press. All those Annual Reports and, at the turn of the century, the Jubilee Histories. On the one hand the vital statistics and on the other local societies celebrating fifty years of co-operative endeavour. All this supported by the *Co-operative News* and splendid pieces highlighting special aspects of the movement often written by academics.

Of recent times all this has changed so it has come as a pleasant surprise to receive '*More than Just a Shop*' by Jean Turnbull and Jayne Southern. Not that this is a great piece of Co-operative writing but it might herald greater things. This small book suffers from being just that - small. It has the making of great things but cost has played its part in restricting its size. Having said that it really does have many virtues. In the first place it tackles the history and aspirations of the Co-operative Movement in Lancashire. This is a big subject. The authors began at the beginning in Rochdale and go on to outline the way the idea of retailing grew in many small societies. Retailing was not the only interest and the wholesale movement was needed to support and supply these small societies. The movement climbed to great heights and then came the amalgamation and rationalisation to fewer and bigger societies. so in outline this book shows the amalgamation of Lancashire societies into United Norwest.

That is only half the story. As the title suggests, co-operation is more than the retail shops. Education and social activities were important from the beginning; education for members and employees, the provision of libraries and education centres to spread learning and practical skills and make them available easily to as many as possible. The Co-operative Women's Guild takes up a fair sized section. Rightly so; if any part of the Movement deserves recognition this is it. These women were involved in many activities especially concerning children and families. They helped in the fight for women's suffrage.

So why the opening criticism? The history of Co-operation

in Lancashire is a huge subject and this is all condensed into 56 pages. There is so much outlined that needs further development. There are excellent photographs and charts. There could be a bigger book with little more in it than photographs. The amalgamation of smaller societies has a worthy mention. These societies deserve books of their own. There is a list for further reading which suggests greater things and points to the lack of such writing. In short this book hints at more and bigger things. The Movement lacks published material and if this book spurs others to follow its signposts, it will have done a splendid job. One final remark. Anybody who has done research work on Co-operation will have observed the debt Societies have owed to individuals. That is one area neglected in this book. But buy it and judge for yourself. It is worth the £4.50.

**Roy Stuttard**

**Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption In England, 1870-1930*, Manchester University Press, 1996, ISBN 0-7190-4950-4.**

Dr Gurney's thoughtful, detailed and stimulating investigation into the nature, ramifications and meaning of "co-operative culture" is a major addition to co-operative literature, and one of only a handful of original scholarly studies published since the war. With its innovative focus, provocative thesis and impressive scope, it is undoubtedly the most important, and destined surely, to impact forcibly on Labour and Co-operative Movement studies. The central argument of the book is concerned with the dominant conceptualisations of historiography, culture and consumption, from which it constructs its historical revisionism.

Chapter 1, "Co-operation and the Historians", offers a useful summary of the Movement's treatment by social and labour historians. Gurney's challenge to the conventional view of co-operation as "just another facet of an enclosed, conservative world, a way of making ends meet rather than a way of changing society", is a timely and useful corrective, though it stands uneasily with the historical orthodoxy consolidated within Left scholarship over the past four decades. In place of the deradicalising role traditionally accorded co-operation, Dr Gurney proposes a "working class transformative ideology and practice" whereby economic and social forms of associational activity replace narrow, direct, political solutions to inequality and oppression. Drawing on a variety of sources and through the examination of numerous confrontations, the author demonstrates the fundamental opposition the Movement encountered; both from traditional formations of petty-bourgeois capitalism, such as the numerically impressive but weakening small shopkeeper strata; through to the markedly aggressive monopolists such as W H Lever, who invoked their considerable standing to challenge the Movement both in the high street and the Courts.

In a chapter on "The Politics of Working Class Consumption" the author usefully reveals the actual and discursive confrontation between the "moral economy" of co-operation and the selfish

ideals of "trustification" - "the international restructuring of the mode of production/consumption along monopoly capitalist lines" - which was characteristic of the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Furthermore, he extends this analysis to an examination of hostility and restriction posed by local and national government throughout the same period and which became more marked during World War 1 when the politics of consumption, crucially linked to the controversial issue of rationing, beckoned a near revolutionary moment.

The real innovation of Gurney's thesis is to locate the radical potential of co-operation in the realm of culture and consumption. As he argues: "the key to social transformation in the present and the future lay in the sphere of education. The goal, pursued and articulated throughout the period under consideration, was an educated and active membership organised around, and empowered by, consumption". In a fascinating examination of the culture of co-operation, the book significantly expands our understanding of working class culture, one previously dominated by considerations of workplace and political activity. The "culture of the store" is revealed to have been "neither drab nor dreary" and through an assessment of educational practice, celebratory literature, associational recreation, and cultural activity which embraced music, exhibitions, galas, pageants and films, it is alternatively presented as vital, progressive and expansive.

The author rightly contests that the centrality of co-operation was the act of consumption which should not be simplistically equated as an index of embourgeoisment. On the contrary he asserts:

to put the matter more straightforwardly: shopping at, and then becoming a member of, the store was the most important point of entry to the Movement's culture. For a great many perhaps, co-operation meant shopping and then "divi" first and foremost, but these consumption practices were highly specific, - co-op stores were not private shops run for profit - and the practice, ritual and symbolism of co-operative trading constituted co-operative culture in a fundamental sense.

Consumption has recently become a central field of critical enquiry. Historians have contributed little to a debate dominated by post-structuralists and the concerns of cultural studies. Correspondingly, and here we have significant illustration of an inadequacy of modern critical theorists, the greatest consumers' movement the world has ever seen has been singularly absent from the discussion.

This study attempts a partial recovery of historical consumption from perspectives suggested by cultural theorists. In particular, Gurney is concerned with the Co-operative Movement's place in the emergent "consumer society" and the contrast/contest between the "capitalist production of the mode of consumption" and the "moral economy" of co-operation. In an evocative analysis, Gurney's work unravels a significant area of enquiry which awaits further detailed examination.

As with all rewarding studies, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England 1870 - 1930* suggests further avenues of research: a more successful integration of consumption within social and economic history; a more probing consideration of the discourses of advertising and publicity within the development of consumer society; a more expansive framework for dealing with notions of working class culture, and one which places consumption firmly within its theoretical address.

Gurney's richly detailed and provocative text **should** be read by all scholars concerned with labour, consumption and culture. Moreover, it is an essential addition to co-operative literature which has been stagnant for such a long time. It can only be hoped that the challenge to historical orthodoxy presented here stimulates further original study into the Movement and begins to rescue co-operation from its shameful marginalisation within Labour Movement studies.

**Alan Burton**