

# Conclusion

When he collected the Nobel Prize for literature in 1922, the poet W.B. Yeats recalled a 'moment of supernatural insight' in the late nineteenth century when he became certain that 'Ireland was to be like soft wax for years to come'.<sup>1</sup> The arrival of many cultural, political and social movements at this time highlighted how different people and groups expended significant energy as they devised various projects to modernise Ireland. As a primary participant in the Irish cultural revival, Yeats saw that an opportunity to wield cultural and intellectual influence over an emerging Irish nation had presented itself. He approached this work from the perspective of one who believed the creation of a distinct national literature nurtured Irish character and culture. In doing so, he placed himself amid the social and cultural experimentation that took place in the decades that preceded independence, and which helped define the institutions that made up the Irish Free State. What Yeats attempted through his literary work, Plunkett and his supporters attempted through their promotion of a new form of economics. The Irish co-operative movement represented one of the most important movements in this national process as it aimed to revitalise Irish character with its economic interventions. In this way the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) exercised a crucial influence over the form taken by the Irish nation-state as its leaders, organisers and members came together to mould the 'soft wax' of Irish society.

Historians have long argued over how the political conflict between nationalists and unionists formed the dominant feature of the 'Irish Question'.<sup>2</sup> A focus upon the co-operative movement repositions social and economic anxieties at the heart of early twentieth century Irish political discourse, thus emphasising a central, yet overlooked, component of the 'Irish Question'. The Irish nation-state did not emerge fully formed out of the tense political negotiations that led to the acceptance, and collapse, of a Home Rule settlement for the country nor did it owe its character and institutions mainly to the violent experiences of war and revolution. Instead, critical ideas about the nation emanated from the sphere of economics and social organisation.

The mundane rhythms and experiences of everyday life also played a crucial part in this process. The practice of co-operation between citizens mattered as much as the effects of conflict. Through the gradual assimilation of its network of co-operative businesses built around creameries, credit societies and other forms of association, the IAOS helped to create a modern agrarian state. Many rivals contested the extension of co-operative businesses, but by the outbreak of the First World War, these societies played a central role in the organisation of rural work even if this occurred outside the official circuits of power. The ability of the movement to exert influence within the governmental structures of the Irish Free State reveals the significance attached to tracking the development of interstitial movements and ideologies in a larger process of nation-state building.

The co-operative movement's evolution in Ireland demonstrated long social and cultural continuities. The establishment of the IAOS in the late nineteenth century led to a considered response by social reformers to long-term and tumultuous social adjustments instigated by the Great Famine. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the rural economy was characterised by emigration, which complemented a move from subsistence farming to more commercialised agricultural practices.<sup>3</sup> As Irish farmers were integrated into a global capitalist economy, the rise of international competition left them vulnerable. Informed by economic developments in Britain and Denmark, figures like Horace Plunkett concluded that co-operative societies offered farmers one way of mediating the significant transitions experienced throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Co-operative leaders such as Plunkett, Æ, Robert Anderson, Fr Finlay and Ellice Pilkington conceived of Ireland as a primarily rural nation. Through the proliferation of a wealth of social and economic knowledge in the form of lectures, pamphlets, reports, articles, correspondence and books, these people helped to perpetuate the image of Ireland as a rural civilisation that became firmly embedded within a popular imagination inside the country and abroad.<sup>4</sup> This vision captured the imaginations of Irish policymakers, citizens and artists, and established the long-term blueprint for Irish economic development over the course of the early twentieth century. Co-operation shaped a state system that survived the political transition from British to Irish rule and even more, foreign observers paid attention to the rural economic experiment that took place in Ireland. What happened in Kerry, Limerick, Donegal and Sligo mattered to farmers in the United States, Finland and England and helped to chart a course for similar efforts to stimulate rural development elsewhere.

The work of state building in Ireland occurred gradually and in a variety of settings. The relationship between the population and the co-operative movement represented an important component in this process. Viewing economic development at the level of individual societies illustrates a complex sequence of interactions between managers, IAOS officials and organisers around the co-operative society.

These interactions manifested a type of modernised rural district desired by the co-operative movement's leaders, a goal which led to a continuous self-disciplining of farmers. At a local level, the impetus behind state formation in Ireland can be located in the interactions between expert and farmer that took place in farms and creameries. On the level of national politics, the co-operative movement was relevant to the state-building process through the IAOS. This body contributed to parliamentary inquiries and commissions, and helped to frame debates between agricultural policymakers and experts. Co-operative ideas were located in a range of important texts. IAOS annual reports and Sinn Féin-penned treatises shaped a discourse of Irish identity and development. In these ways, the co-operative movement shaped the *mentalités* of Irish administrators and helped to embed the idea that economic progress came from the pursuit of agrarian economic strategy, and one in which co-operative societies were utilised in pursuit of that objective.

By pursuing its own conception of modernisation, the co-operative movement attempted to bring about a new type of Irish population, economy and society. Led by the IAOS, activists sought to embed a co-operative form of organisation in the countryside that shaped economic arrangements and gave farmers mutualised and democratic control over their own industry. Indeed, co-operative organisers and engineers played a critical role as literally transformed the landscape of rural Ireland as they worked to convert the IAOS's vision of an ideal countryside into reality. Ultimately, the Co-operative Commonwealth remained an unrealised utopian ideal. The co-operative movement in Ireland remained confined to the countryside and failed to make significant advances into urban centres. In the IAOS's rhetoric, the interests of Irish consumers remained subordinated to that of producers. The refusal of co-operative societies to co-ordinate their activities with other local co-operatives was a great limitation to the co-operative project. Instead, inter-co-operative rivalry remained an entrenched feature of economic activity in Ireland.

This picture suggests that the attempts by the IAOS to embed its blueprint for the organisation of Irish society proved ineffective, or at best, highly limited. Despite its limitations, and perhaps even because of them, the co-operative movement's interventions proved significant for the long-term development of Ireland, a finding that contradicts prevailing analyses of the movement in this period.<sup>5</sup> The rural community provided the crucible within which co-operative reformers tried to engineer their project of improvement. Co-operative societies helped spread new technologies throughout the rural economy. The spread of creamery separators transformed Irish dairy production and provided the means for dairy farmers to remain competitive with their international counterparts. The technology reorganised the pattern of work with milk delivered to the creamery on a daily basis. Dairying moved outside of the home with an attendant consequence in terms of the gendered nature of work as butter making shifted from

a feminine occupation to a masculine one. The creamery represented a new social and economic hub around which modern rural communities coalesced and relied for their sustainability. It was no accident that Crown forces targeted co-operative creameries when they attempted to punish a local community for their support of for Republican activity.

Much of the co-operative movement's work occurred at a grass-roots level. Co-operative societies redrew local fields of relations wherever their influence extended. This allowed the IAOS to occupy a unique position, whereby the cumulative experience of local organisation informed its role on the national level. This material of local politics informed the terms of national debate. Consequently, the IAOS succeeded in converting its support in the countryside into substantial influence on the national stage. While the political landscape in Ireland underwent a considerable change across the period reviewed, the co-operative movement managed to retain a position of strategic importance between the state and communities. Although this position remained fragile, the vision of a rural civilisation propagated by the co-operative movement contributed to a 'rural fundamentalism' that persisted within the political culture throughout the twentieth century. This Irish rural fundamentalism emphasised the necessity of agriculture to provide the basis of national prosperity.<sup>6</sup> The established foundations of rural communities and the prioritisation of agricultural development allowed the co-operative movement to attain a prominent platform to impact upon the direction of socio-economic policy beyond 1922.

The outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent War of Independence that culminated in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, cemented political change in Ireland. The events of these years represented a significant rupture in terms of the demands made upon farmers. These events also marked a definite change in the role played by co-operative societies in the countryside. These societies and their organisers helped to manage the new burdens placed upon agriculturalists during the First World War as they equipped farmers with the tools needed to adapt to new production methods and mitigate the rising cost of living. Violent events prevented many creameries from functioning during the revolutionary situation that prevailed during 1919–21. However, the network of societies proved resilient enough to endure such challenges and remained a significant fixture in the rural economy.

It has been argued that by coming through challenging circumstances, the co-operative movement became 'nationalised' in the sense that supporters of Irish political autonomy accepted the presence of co-operative societies in the Irish economy. This study has examined Ireland at a specific point where ideas with international antecedents became 'greened' and part of a distinctive Irish critique of British rule. These revolutionary years represent the moment wherein the leaders of the co-operative movement became political insiders after 1922. The character of rural society that prevailed in the Irish Free State during the 1920s

and 1930s owed a great deal to the distinct features promoted by the IAOS ever since 1894.

Similarly, the co-operative movement demonstrated the limiting influence of governmental factors upon its own development. Although the movement shaped the generation of nationalists that ascended to office in the 1920s, this process proved to be a dialectical one. In order to curry favour, co-operative experts and activists acquiesced to the shifting demands and expectations made by those who wielded political influence. The IAOS's desire to retain funding meant that a loss of autonomy was necessary. Sinn Féin's increased power after December 1918 saw members of Dáil Éireann become involved in the workings of the IAOS committee. However, a willingness to mould its developmental template in the 1920s, to wield influence with the Department of Agriculture, was best illustrated by its abandoning a commitment to promote the interests of small farmers. Instead, a tacit agreement between the IAOS and the government to ensure that larger farmers remained productive and competitive was the most urgent priority of an economic policy constructed in the midst of an economic slump and civil war. In return, the IAOS received preferential treatment and the network of co-operative creameries and credit societies formed an important, though not a formal statutory element of the fabric of Irish government.

Co-operative ideas were versatile. The intellectual legacy of co-operation is discernible in its influence over Irish nationalist thought. Just as adherents argued that co-operative solutions might be applied to a wide array of economic problems, co-operative ideas also proved rather promiscuous. As a movement led by an Anglo-Irish landlord whose initial political credentials were impeccably unionist, the adoption of co-operative ideas by separatist nationalists appears initially surprising. Yet these ideas held a great deal of intellectual purchase with Sinn Féin ideologues. That influence carried through to those who had attained official administrative power in Ireland by the 1920s. By exploring the intellectual development of the co-operative movement, it has been shown that the political economy of co-operation affected the development of Irish nationalism in the early twentieth century.

One way in which Sinn Féin nationalists differentiated themselves from their constitutionalist rivals who dominated Irish politics was in the attitude towards co-operative societies. Sinn Féin's appropriation of a pro-co-operative position positioned the party as sympathetic to the socio-economic concerns of the farming population. Before the First World War, Sinn Féin had been the preserve of an urban bourgeois intelligentsia. By the end of the war, Sinn Féin was reflecting the interests of the rural population. By displaying a more sympathetic attitude to co-operative organisation, and later implementing policies that relied upon a vibrant co-operative sector, the Irish nationalists who ascended to administrative power after 1922 reserved a special status for co-operative societies within their economic planning. A pragmatic approach to government in the 1920s encouraged

reliance by the Cumann na nGaedheal administration upon co-operative societies. However, a growing consensus among Sinn Féin intellectuals who viewed co-operatives as *national* economic instruments suggests a degree of sincerity in their support among some nationalists. Nevertheless, whether ideological or pragmatic, co-operative societies were utilised as important governmental instruments.

Throughout the twentieth century, the IAOS continued to direct the dairying industry in Ireland. Henry Kennedy remained at the IAOS from 1926 until he retired in 1963. An organisational conservatism characterised Kennedy's tenure as he prioritised IAOS support for creameries, but he also received criticism for his preference to support stronger societies over smaller, less established ones.<sup>7</sup> A lack of dynamism led the Minister of Agriculture to appoint Joseph Knapp, the Administrator of the American Farmer Co-operative Service based at the US Department of Agriculture, to conduct an independent review of the IAOS to find out what 'might be done to strengthen it [the co-operative movement] and to increase its influence in the agricultural sphere generally'.<sup>8</sup> The main problem that faced the movement was one of education. For Knapp the 'lack of emphasis on cooperative business education since World War I partially explains why the movement has not achieved greater success'.<sup>9</sup>

The shift away from the IAOS's educational mission came from the change in leadership after independence, but also reflected that from the First World War onwards, co-operators moved from one crisis to another as violence, economic depression and global warfare hamstrung efforts to explore new avenues of potential. Knapp believed that great work was needed to 'reinvigorate the IAOS' and restore it to the dynamic leadership role it displayed in its first three decades in order to ensure the movement remained in a position to meet the challenges offered by technological change and international competition. His main recommendations included more state funding for the IAOS, more responsibility granted to the IAOS in order to reorganise creameries once more, a replacement of the Dairy Disposal Company (DDC) with a co-operative body, and the need for the movement diversify its agricultural business beyond dairying into crops and livestock farming.<sup>10</sup>

While the IAOS voted to accept the Knapp recommendations, no major reorganisation of the movement took place until Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. The effect on Irish agriculture was transformative as membership opened up a new European marketplace, but also meant greater competition for the UK market. Furthermore, the continued existence of the DDC as a player in the Irish dairy industry stood in contravention of European regulations that prohibited state participation in agriculture. In County Kerry, some of the co-operative creameries and the DDC-operated creameries made the decision to amalgamate into a larger regional organisation called Kerry Co-operative Limited. However, this process of amalgamation led to the public flotation of the organisation on the stock market and the ejection

of the co-operative ownership of the business. The establishment of Kerry Group Plc in 1986 saw the emergence of a global food brand, but also saw an erosion of the co-operative structures in a region that once underpinned the dairying industry. After Kerry, other reorganised creamery businesses also diluted the co-operative principles. Today, the Irish Co-operative Organisation Society (following the decision to re-name the IAOS in 1979) oversees the activities of the different types of co-operatives at work in Ireland. The majority of these still revolve around dairying and other agricultural businesses, but also include co-operative water schemes, cattle breeding societies and other societies organised for farm-oriented purposes.<sup>11</sup>

If traditional agricultural co-operation have appeared to decline in more recent years, other forms of co-operation started to grow. The second half of the twentieth century also witnessed a renaissance in the co-operative credit movement as the end of the 1950s saw the establishment, followed by a rapid growth, of the credit union movement. Nora Herlihy, a teacher from Ballydesmond; Séamus MacEoin, a civil servant from Kilkenny; and Sean Forde, an employee of Peter Kennedy Bakers, sought to counter the effects of poverty, unemployment and moneylending on families which they witnessed in the city. They opened a small credit union and from there societies soon spread. The Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU) was formed in 1960 to co-ordinate the growth of these societies across the island of Ireland. As of 2017, 389 active branches serve their membership that totals about 2.9 million members.<sup>12</sup> In recent years, the regulation of the credit union sector has become a contested issue between the ILCU and the Central Bank of Ireland, with the latter attempting to reform the movement into few much larger branches.<sup>13</sup> However, the success of the credit union movement in some small way represents a vindication of the aims of an earlier generation of co-operators who attempted to institutionalise a form of credit supply that sat outside the ordinary banking sector.

By tracing the influence of the co-operative movement upon the nationalist project in Ireland, this book has argued that the political economy of nationalism contained important co-operative ideas that carried a long-term influence upon Irish development. The type of institutions that emerged in Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came out of acute political crises and conflict; but equally, other long-term factors also informed this process of state development. The co-operative movement maintained a complex and shifting relationship with Ireland's state institutions and exerted significant influence over the character of the rural population. By tracking the development of organisations, regions and practices that receive less attention than the overtly political conflicts and personalities, a more nuanced understanding about the nature of the Irish state can be uncovered. As Ireland moved into the twenty-first century, the effects of economic liberalisation from the late 1950s saw the co-operative presence in the agrarian economy roll back. However, the popularity of the credit union

movement, the rise of consumer co-operatives such as the Dublin Food Co-operative and Quay Co-op in Cork, and brewing co-operatives such as Boundary Brewing in Belfast and the Dublin Brewing Co-operative suggest that the model still has an important part to play in imagining how the Irish economy might develop once again, following an extended period of economic austerity.

At the start of the twentieth century, the existence of a robust co-operative movement in Ireland that articulated a distinct vision for national development mattered. The IAOS saw its primary role 'to render self-help effective through organisation, in the working lives of the agricultural population'.<sup>14</sup> The co-operative model became embedded in Ireland despite a wide range of challenges and shaped the conduct of agricultural business. A political economy of co-operation formed an important strand of a wider political culture by the time Ireland achieved independence. However, this political economy emerged as a product of its particular historical experiences. The experience of the Irish co-operative movement shows how social and economic debates, which looked beyond the moment when some form of political independence might be achieved, proved to be an important dynamic within the wider 'Irish Question'. This study has shown the importance of an integrated local and national analysis, highlighting how the modernisation project that the co-operative movement drove could articulate a version of an ideal national identity alongside a programme of long-term socio-economic development. By attempting to make Irish farmers into the co-operative subject, the IAOS left a long-lasting legacy inscribed into the institutions of the modern Irish state.

### Notes

- 1 W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 169.
- 2 Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism, 1912–1916* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party, 1916–1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 3 Timothy W. Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration, and the Rural Economy in Ireland, 1850–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- 4 Tara Stubbs, *American Literature and Irish Culture, 1910–55* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
- 5 Giovanni Federico, *Feeding the World: An Economic History of Agriculture, 1800–2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 136; Timothy W. Guinnane, 'A Failed Institutional Transplant: Raiffeisen's Credit Cooperatives in Ireland, 1894–1914', *Explorations in Economic History*, 31 (1994), 38–61; Cormac Ó Gráda, 'The Beginnings of the Irish Creamery System, 1880–1914', *Economic Review of History*, 30.2 (1977), 284–305.
- 6 Damian F. Hannan and Patrick Commins, 'The Significance of Small-Scale Landholders in Ireland's Socio-Economic Transformation', in *The Development of Industrial Society*



- in Ireland*, ed. by J.H. Goldthorpe and C.T. Whelan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 79–104 (pp. 101–102).
- 7 Patrick Bolger, *The Irish Co-operative Movement: Its History and Development* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1877), 131–132.
  - 8 Joseph Knapp, *An Appraisal of Agricultural Co-operation in Ireland* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1964), 7.
  - 9 Knapp, *Agricultural Co-operation in Ireland*, 49–50.
  - 10 Knapp, *Agricultural Co-operation in Ireland*, 108–109.
  - 11 James J. Kennelly, *The Kerry Way: The History of Kerry Group, 1972–2000* (Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 2001); Maurice Henry, Pat Bolger and Trevor West (eds), *Irish Co-operative Organisation Society: Fruits of a Century: An Illustrated Centenary History, 1894–1999* (Dublin: Irish Co-operative Organisation Society, 1994); Irish Co-operative Organisation Society, *122nd Annual Report and Accounts 2016* (Dublin: Irish Co-operative Organisation Society, 2016).
  - 12 [www.creditunion.ie/whoware/aboutus/abouttheirshleagueofcreditunions/](http://www.creditunion.ie/whoware/aboutus/abouttheirshleagueofcreditunions/) [accessed 23 March 2018].
  - 13 Conor Pope, ‘Credit Unions Call for Credit Bank Showdown to be Held in Public’, *Irish Times*, 14 October 2013, [www.irishtimes.com/business/credit-unions-call-for-central-bank-showdown-to-be-held-in-public-1.1558098](http://www.irishtimes.com/business/credit-unions-call-for-central-bank-showdown-to-be-held-in-public-1.1558098) [accessed 23 March 2013].
  - 14 IAOS, *Annual Report, 1915*, 25.