



## **The International Co-operative Alliance and the consumer movement in northern Europe, c.1860-1939. By Mary Hilson**

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## Book Review

# The International Co-operative Alliance and the consumer co-operative movement in Northern Europe, c.1860-1939

By Mary Hilson. 2018. Manchester University Press.  
ISBN (Hbk): 978-1-5261-0800-1. 194pp.

In his account of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, Webster (2019) makes mention of the development of the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA). While not stretching over the same length of time as Webster's historical analysis, Mary Hilson's book covers some of the same period and focuses specifically on the ICA, international relations and particularly the Nordic — Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish — experience. Like Webster's book it is based on a wealth of research with many hours spent in archives including in Finland, and in the National Co-operative Archive in Manchester. Arranged over five chapters with additional introductory and concluding chapters, the book also has an extensive bibliography. While Webster's focus is on a business history perspective Hilson deals with the movement more generally and more specifically with the trans-national history of co-operation.

In her introduction, Hilson highlights the tensions between the different approaches to co-operativism in the movement as well as to external commentators and observers. She points to the exploration of co-operation by, inter alia Gurney (1996; 2015) and Furlough (1991), but states that "these studies often expressed scepticism about the ability of the co-operative movement to sustain its opposition to capitalism consumerism" (p. 4). Hilson's interest is in links and connections that contribute to shaping a co-operative movement in different countries, particularly in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and through examination of the coming together of mainly British and French co-operatives in the early years of the ICA. As pointed to also in Webster's research, the ICA had aspirations to support co-operation between co-operatives through routes to international trade. Accounts of the ICA, Hilson states, are limited or largely celebratory in tone and may smooth over some of the fractures over political and economic allegiances, balance of power, and facilitation and obstacles to international collaboration. And, as Hilson suggests, this warrants a closer focus on the distinctiveness and importance of the Nordic contribution to shaping the ICA. As such, chapter 1 starts with examining co-operation in Nordic countries before 1914 before moving on the focus on the ICA before and after the first world war. Chapters 3 and 4 consider the politics of international co-operation and co-operative trade in the interwar period respectively, before a return to co-operation and the emergence of the Nordic 'middle way'.

While focused on the 'Nordic' experience, Hilson is quick to point out the different histories and trajectories of the co-operative movement in each country as well as the similarities and chapter 1 looks at each country in turn. In Denmark, for example, the agricultural co-operative movement alongside rural consumer co-operatives were central to co-operative development, followed later by co-operative bakeries and consumer societies in urban areas, including the urban workers' societies which generally meant joint stock companies owned and managed by trade unions. The division between urban and rural co-operatives was bridged by the establishment of the Fællesforeningen for Danmarks Brugsforeningerne (FDB), the co-operative wholesale society. In Norway, there were some clear distinctions between rural and urban co-operatives which were difficult to overcome despite the development of the Norwegian Co-operative Union (Norges Kooperativ Landsforening, NKL). NKL's growth was slow in comparison to other co-operative unions and had a relatively weak membership in its early

years as many local co-operative societies remained unaffiliated. Indeed, Hilson states NKL was the least visible of the Nordic organisations in the ICA at that time. The Finnish co-operative movement although split on similar lines was much more centralised; rural co-operation was, in part, influenced by Irish struggle and the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society founded by Horace Plunkett and there was also a healthy (urban) consumer movement, brought together by the national co-operative wholesale organisation — Suomen Osuuskauppojen Keskuskunta (SOK). Unlike in Denmark, divisions in SOK over maintaining unity and political neutrality led to a split between the “progressives” on the one hand, and the “neutral” or “bourgeois co-operatives” on the other leading to the former setting up a new organisation — the KK or Kulutusosuuskuntien Keskusliitto (p. 32). In Sweden, too, there were divisions between agricultural and consumer co-operation and a tendency towards centralisation. The British co-operative movement was also a key influencer in Sweden particularly in the set-up of the Swedish co-operative union (KF). This background and contextualisation is useful in then examining their relationship and continuing defining of relationships and identity in relation to the development of the ICA.

While not retelling the entire early history of the ICA, Hilson notes significant events and characteristics. She points to, for example, the reliance on personal (mostly male and middle- or upper-class) networks; the early influence of consumer co-operation; the official communications in French, English, and German; the establishment of a permanent bureau in London with a salaried general secretary. All of which brought their own tensions. While the German consumer co-operatives were dominant before 1914 and tried to break what they saw as the dominance of the British movement, the outbreak of war put paid to this. Post-war, with an increase in membership, the leadership of the ICA became less dominated by the British and more internationally representative although with the rejection of a move to become a union of national federations, British co-operative societies (some 400 of them and able to appoint one delegate for every 25,000 members) still dominated the total number of subscriptions and this could wield significant influence (pp. 60-61).

Tracking the locations of the ICA meetings also helps to demonstrate the growing geographical diversity within the association as well as the political and pragmatic choices on hosting. Hilson also mentions the opportunities for networking, outdoing each other on social activities and spotlighting co-operative achievements. Interestingly, Hilson includes the social programme for the 1929 meeting held in London, as well as delegates’ dinners, there are visits to the English and Scottish CWS chocolate works in Luton and the cabinet works in Enfield, London, but also theatre and the option to attend an English football league match (unfortunately, no indication of who was playing ...) as guest of the CWS in the first instance and, in the second, of the Co-operative Union (p. 69).

As Hilson and others have pointed out (e.g., Rhodes, 1995; Wilson et al., 2013) the experiences of the first world war and the interwar years fuelled debates on autonomy, neutrality and political affiliations of the co-operative movement. Additionally, Finland’s co-operative movement was also heavily affected by civil war of 1918 between the “industrial and agrarian Reds in the southern cities” and the “peasants and middle- and upper-class Whites in rural areas and the north” (Yle, 2018, para 2). Around 36,000 people lost their lives in and the aftermath of the war, and a further 80,000 people were imprisoned by the Whites (Seitsonen et al., 2019, p. 473) and, according to the Finnish Broadcasting Company who commissioned a survey on the 100th anniversary of the events, some of the repercussions are still felt 100 years later (Yle, 2018). The question of neutrality came to the fore to reflect the continuing divisions within the ICA in the 1930s and the debates surrounding the adoption of the co-operative principles. The Nordic countries, en bloc, favoured neutrality and pointed to the existence of a Nordic caucus within the ICA (pp. 97 and 98). During the same period, the three Scandinavian wholesales (FDB, KF, and NKL) had set up Nordisk Andelsforbund (NAF) which “by the late 1930s had become a very significant commercial actor, especially in the markets for coffee and dried fruit ... [and] a successful example of practical Nordic co-operation during the interwar period” (p. 110) and in chapter 4, Hilson explores debates about international trade within and without the ICA and

examines the success of NAF. Here part of the discussion and debates highlighted focus on the questions of free trade and regulation. While Webster (2019) acknowledges the strength of feeling for free trade by the CWS, Sweden's contribution to the debate also supported free trade as "encouraging the spread of political freedom" — here Hilson cites the speech to the 1921 Congress by Anders Örne (p.112).

Whereas Webster (2019) highlights the trade deals that allowed CWS to supply societies with goods, in chapter 4, Hilson also highlights the ICA's attempts to balance supply and demand through the International Co-operative Wholesale Society's (ICWS) list of goods that could not be supplied— examples include wines and spirits from France and Estonian wholesales which could not be sold in English co-operative stores, nor was Norwegian goats' cheese deemed suitable for the English market (p. 115). While the rationale for the establishment of NAF had been disruption of supplies during the war years, it was in this context, and in comparison to the progress of the ICWS, that NAF continued to grow its international trading strength.

Additionally, Hilson notes the symbolism of NAF as an expression of Nordic solidarity (despite the imbalance between nation-based co-operatives within NAF), and its role in creating a regional identity and common market (p. 120). Hilson suggests this self-image was also mirrored in the region's wider reputation in regard to social harmony and co-operation as being regarded as "an essential feature of the Nordic democracies (p. 153, viz. the US Inquiry on Co-operative Enterprise in Europe — see also Notes, p. 167). Yet, Hilson also points to the paradox of success and invisibility which she also applies to the ICA, due to its absence from "accounts in interwar internationalism" (p. 165). Hilson's book goes some way to addressing this gap.

## The Reviewer

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