



Patrick Doyle. *Civilising Rural Ireland: The Co-operative Movement, Development and the Nation-State, 1889-1939.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019. 248 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5261-2456-2.

Reviewed by Aidan Beatty (University of Pittsburgh)

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Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

The Cooperative Movement in Rural Ireland

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a range of important organizations were founded in Ireland devoted to the project of “renewal,” from the Gaelic Athletic Association (established in 1884 and dedicated to the codification and promotion of homegrown sports) to the Gaelic League (founded in 1893, aimed at the revival of the Irish language). The “Celtic Revival” of William Butler Yeats and Augusta Gregory resulted in an unparalleled Anglo-Irish literary scene at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin (1904). Sinn Féin (We Ourselves), founded in 1905, was essentially an attempt to turn this revivalist cultural politics into a formal political movement. And alongside these, the Irish Agricultural Organization Society (IAOS) sought, as its name suggests, to organize, rationalize, and revitalize the agricultural and economic life of rural Ireland through cooperative farming. Yet the IAOS has received far less scholarly attention than other contemporary groups, despite having a deeper reach into the everyday lives of Irish people than early Sinn Féin and a greater geographic spread across the entire island than Yeats’ Theatre. Patrick Doyle’s well-researched book addresses this major gap in modern Irish historiography.

With one eye on contemporary developments on the eastern side of the Irish Sea, Doyle compares the IAOS with its counterparts in Britain; though seemingly similar, British co-op groups aimed to defend the interests of consumers—and thus sought lower prices—while the Irish co-op movement laid its emphasis on production (and thus sought the highest prices for members’ goods). This tension—with its obvious nationalist undercurrents—recurs throughout Doyle’s text. While Doyle’s book covers the entire geographic spread of the IAOS, he focuses in particular on Kerry, where dairy farming was strong and emigration, political violence, and land-ownership reform were major issues in local politics. And though the main thrust of the narrative is the internal history of the IAOS, Doyle remains alert to the broader contexts in which the IAOS existed.

The IAOS was founded in April 1894 under the leadership of the agrarian reformer and aristocratic Protestant Horace Plunkett. Thomas Finlay, a Jesuit priest and professor of economics at what would become University College Dublin, held the vice presidency. Plunkett saw the IAOS as a way to stem post-Famine tides of emigration as well as “instilling characteristics of dignity and self-reli-

ance in the rural population” (p. 2). Plunkett’s desire to remake Ireland always had a harsh core to it, a sense that the rural Irish needed to be reformed by an altruistic modernizer. Yet there was also an excitement about what Ireland could be; Plunkett’s programmatic manifesto, *Ireland in the New Century* (1904-5), was a work filled with hope even as it stoked controversy by claiming that Catholic clergy retarded the economic development of the country. Plunkett said that to halt emigration, a society must be built with “character,” “dignity,” and “an outlook of its own,” traits that the Irish were presumably lacking (p. 14). That Ireland apparently needed revival in these areas is a point only tacitly alluded to by Doyle, though he does direct explicit attention to Plunkett’s own understanding of himself: “Ever the patrician,” Plunkett felt the landlord class had a key leadership role to play in “the regeneration of Irish soil and society” (p. 43). And landlords “dominated the IAOS leadership” in its early years (p. 44). With a certain Burkean tone, Plunkett believed that the end of landlordism in Ireland, rather than ending the gentry as a class, would now allow them to take their rightful position as the natural landed rulers of the country.

Initially, the IAOS found favor in government circles and in its early years had a close relationship with the also newly formed Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI); Plunkett was the nominal head of the latter, both entities had shared goals of mass rural pedagogy, and “some of the most effective authors of a national political economy in Ireland” emerged from this shared sphere of IAOS-DATI (p. 8). But there was also tension: many IAOS members felt that their organization’s self-help ethos was contradicted by getting in bed with a government agency. George Russell—more famous as the writer and mystic *Æ*—edited the IAOS’s in-house journal *Irish Homestead*, to which he recruited a young James Joyce as a short-lived contributor. Russell’s politics dipped into Kropotkin-style anarchism, and he was especially suspicious of the

British state. (The *Homestead* also gave valuable space to nascent Irish feminism and commented on how the IAOS, by taking such a strong role in promoting modern technology for butter production, was depriving women of the income they had previously earned from home production).

In any case, when a new head of the DATI was appointed in 1907, relations soured. The new vice president, Thomas Wallace Russell, was an avowed unionist and suspicious of the cultural nationalism that increasingly defined the IAOS. Russell was also acceding to the wishes of the wealthier rural classes, who hoped to choke the IAOS by the denial of government funds. By boosting the economic well-being of some of the poorer sections of the countryside, the IAOS had put itself at odds with the bourgeoisie of rural Ireland; this tension is another recurrent theme in Doyle’s analysis.

Away from these social dynamics, conflicts, and polemics, *Civilising Rural Ireland* also recounts the more quotidian aspects of the IAOS. With chapters focusing on the defining junctures in early twentieth-century Irish history—the turn of the century, the Great War, the Anglo-Irish War, the first decades of independence—Doyle recounts the internal history of the organization, its inner tensions, its relationship to the broader community, and the (apparently rambunctious) social scene of the IAOS. The early years of the First World War seemed to benefit the IAOS; agricultural prices rose threefold, and with food production a major concern of the UK government, the DATI made efforts to repair its connections to the IAOS. The rise in prices tended to benefit wealthier farmers, though, rather than the smaller farmers who were the main base of the IAOS. And the rise in prices flooded Ireland with capital and thus undercut the need for the IAOS’s credit societies.

With an intensifying nationalist sentiment in Ireland after 1916, the IAOS found itself in a new position; their cooperative economics were treated deferentially by Sinn Féin intellectuals, as

was Æ's 1916 work, *The National Being*. The Irish War of Independence and Civil War were likewise ambiguous for the IAOS. The Democratic Programme of the First Dáil echoed key tenets of the IAOS's ideology, suggesting the nascent Irish Republic would be a receptive place. And where the previously dominant Home Rule Party, dominated by the interests of wealthy farmers, kept its distance from the IAOS, the ascendant Sinn Féin continued to embrace cooperativism. British military forces, though, regularly targeted IAOS creameries, greatly damaging the movement's infrastructure and finances.

The IAOS partitioned itself on August 31, 1922; about a third of its creameries were in what became Northern Ireland and now came under the auspices of the Ulster Agricultural Organization Society (UAOS). In the Free State, the IAOS began to work ever more closely with the new government. A state-funded Dairy Disposal Company (DDC) was founded in 1927 to effectively nationalize privately owned creameries. Thus by the end of the 1930s, "private-sector involvement in Irish butter production" was effectively ended (and Irish farmers were in a position to survive—though not thrive—during the global depression of the 1930s) (p. 174). The nationalization program recounted here is at serious odds with the conventional view of Cumann na nGaedheal as being avowedly rightist in their economics. And yet Doyle also confirms much of what Irish historians conventionally perceive about the Treatyites: a Free State-backed credit scheme operated through the IAOS placed a major emphasis on social respectability, with only farmers who had a good "character" receiving loans. The paternalism latent in the IAOS made for a suitable partnership with an equally paternalist Cumann na nGaedheal.

Doyle ends by tracing the later history of cooperation in Ireland. When Ireland joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, the government-owned DDC cooperative creameries

were ruled to be in violation of European law, which forbids state control of agriculture. Co-op creameries in Kerry reformed as the Kerry Co-Operative, a limited company, and then later became the Kerry Group, now a major multinational. This was a major change from the IAOS's origins, though rather than conclude on such a sour note, Doyle instead ends by discussing how the existence of the Irish League of Credit Unions, founded in 1960, and various cooperative shops and breweries in Cork, Dublin, and Belfast, all show that mutualist economics still live on.

Doyle regularly comments on the irony of the cooperative movement emerging out of English socialism, but the Irish variant, favoring production over consumption, is far more the standard version of cooperation in the modern world. Thus *Civilising Rural Ireland* makes the bold claim that the IAOS "anticipated the idea of development as a means to secure freedom from poverty, as articulated by Amartya Sen" (p. 6). The IAOS certainly had an internationalist bent, emulating German cooperative groups and simultaneously influencing Finnish and American ones. The history of the IAOS clearly has resonance beyond Ireland, though Doyle sometimes gives a level of granular detail about the inner workings of the organization of interest only to a narrow range of specialists. Yet the end product is still a welcome intervention into the history of the Irish revival, a work that aptly demonstrates how social and economic anxieties were at the heart of early twentieth-century Irish nationalist political discourse.

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