

HISTORY AND THE BRITISH COLUMBIA INSTITUTE FOR CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

During the last decade numerous new national histories have appeared, each reflecting the broadening interests of Canadian historians in the last forty years. Some curious lacunae exist, however, one of which is the almost complete ignoring of Canada's large co-operative movement. While Québec historians have been more inclusive of co-operative traditions in their national/provincial texts, the current crop of English-Canada historical synthesizers – brilliant as their work often is – have been no better than their predecessors. Not one recent English-Canadian survey has made more than passing reference to the existence since 1864 (arguably since 1789) of structured co-operative impulses and mutualist initiatives within the national political economy. Not one recognizes that the movement has grown to include some 14,000,000 members today (part of an international movement with more than 700,000,000 members). The essentially political narrative of another age has been broadened to include Aboriginal, feminist, labour and ethnic perspectives, but it does not include meaningful discussion of the co-operative movement – for many decades Canada's and the world's largest social movement.

More surprisingly, the mainstream regional/provincial histories at best provide only the most superficial analyses of co-operative. It is as if important institutions for millions of Canadians and a central movement in the lives of (conservatively) tens of thousands never existed.

This omission is unfortunate given contemporary circumstances. Today, we understand only two kinds of economic activity, one generated by the state and now everywhere in retreat, and the other individual and corporate private enterprise, everywhere honoured. We have inadequate understandings of mutualist economic and social development, once an option widely discussed and pursued in our national life.

Why? Leaving aside the inadequacies of those of us who have written about Canadian co-operative history, the most facile answer is that we are not unique. No national historiography does justice to its co-operative past. Even the British, Scandinavian and Indian movements, with their particularly powerful traditions, rarely rate even modest mention in their national histories.

Some answers lie in the fact that co-operative ideology was so ineffective in the great ideological wars that emerged amid nineteenth century industrialism. It helps to explain the weak sense of movement that characterizes many co-operative

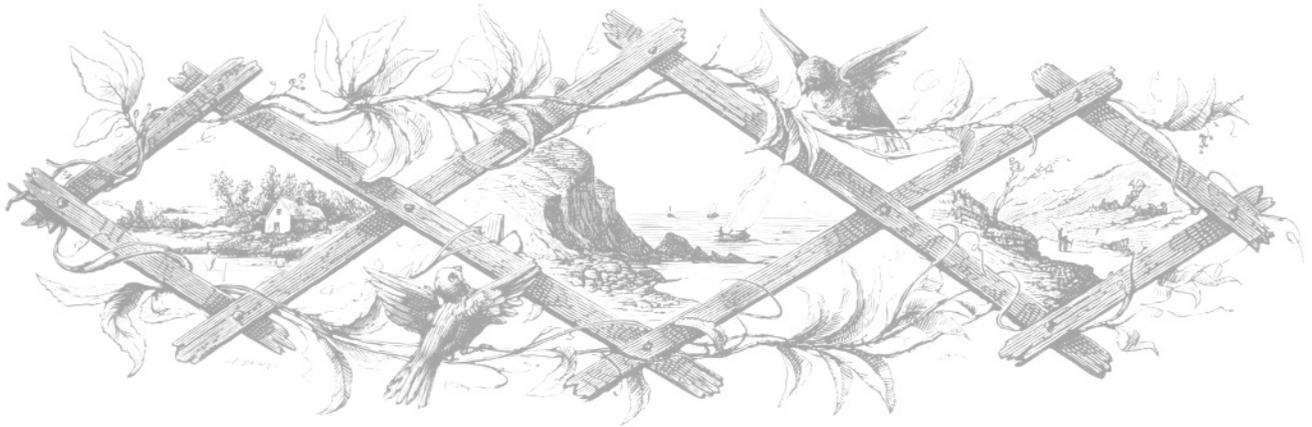
circles today. It helps to understand why co-operatives became a "play thing" of conservative, liberal, social democrat and Marxist leaders and theorists, most of whom typically patronized co-operatives at best and cynically exploited them at worst. Consciously and unconsciously steeped in those more powerful ideologies, historians have simply echoed what their intellectual influences have assumed.

Others emerge because co-ops are invariably ambivalent, invariably caught between theory and practice, rhetoric and reality. Easily critiqued because they reflect of so much diversity of intent, culture and structure, they were particularly easy targets for the powerful intellectual traditions of the twentieth century that rewarded negative criticisms and sustained debunking rather than more balanced and complicated understandings.

Some explanation may also stem the educational backgrounds and urban preoccupations of most Canadian historians. It is virtually impossible to study co-operatives seriously at Canadian educational institutions, almost as difficult as finding places to systematically study rural Canada where, historically, the co-operative and mutualist traditions have been most easily observed and most obviously significant.

Finally, it is important to remember the limitations of history: ultimately any really meaningful understanding of co-operative traditions must involve other disciplines as well, just as feminist or environmental history, for example, must seriously engage other disciplines to comprehend its subject matter adequately. It is too much for history alone to appreciate fully the roles co-operatives and co-operative movements have played.

That is a main assumption upon which the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies was created in January 2000 at the University of Victoria. Sustained by contributions from the co-operative sector and the University, initially utilizing research funds from the British Columbia government, the Institute has employed more than forty students in over twenty projects. The projects include "The Galleria", a collaborative, on-line introduction to the past and present of some fifty co-operatives in the province; the preparation of more than sixty case studies of B.C. co-operatives; an extensive study situating the more than 600 B.C. co-ops into the province's political economy; and a dozen papers on a wide range of topics such as health and other social co-ops, co-ops among Aboriginal peoples, agricultural/rural co-ops and co-operatives for the marketing of non-timber



forest products. Students involved in this work have been from diverse disciplines, including Aboriginal Studies, Anthropology, Biology, Computer Science, Economics, English, Geography, History, Law, Nursing, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, Public Administration, Social Work, Sociology, and Writing. Along with a few faculty members, they have been exploring the possibilities of the developing field of Co-operative Studies.

This is not an entirely lonely quest since hundreds of researchers and more than forty similar institutes within and without the academy are pursuing like enquiries around the world. In other ways, though, it is: the field's essential questions, methodologies and agenda are not as clearly defined, particularly for people outside the field, as they should and will be. It involves questions of cultural identities, organisational behaviour, state relations, economic transitions, technological adaptations and communal change requiring diverse and complicated research methodologies. It invites discussions of the unique dynamics of co-operative organisations. It must design appropriate research methods when the subjects of the study are often involved in the creation and interpretation of the record. Cumulatively, it considers issues associated with the functioning of market forces in our societies, the nature and value of human and social capital, the efficacy of contemporary ideological perspectives, and the possibilities of community-based activism.

History will play a central role in the further development of Co-operative Studies. For example, the most exciting work will consider how a growing understanding of the roles and contributions of co-operatives in the past can help us understand their contemporary counterparts – and vice versa. In dealing with a movement over time – whether as a participant or a bystander – the present can never be isolated from the past.

The historical record, moreover, is far from adequately researched; much of it has to be reconstructed by people who have shaped it. The genre of people's history is curiously dormant these days but it cannot be if Co-operative Studies is to flourish. The records are not generally found in the usual repositories; the media, since the age of the pamphlet, have not featured co-operatives, the powerful have seldom reflected upon them. The sources lie in the community, in the back offices of co-ops, in basements and in individual and community memory. In fact, Co-operative Studies is one way historians can reach out to communities and show people the value of their craft.

History will not wither within Co-operative Studies, but it will take some new dynamic forms amid a series of new dialogues. In more sustained collaboration with other disciplines, it will do a better job of coming to terms with the co-operative past than it has done previously. Who knows, maybe someday — when the next round of synthesizers emerge — the co-operative movement may even rate more than a passing reference in a Canadian history textbook.

A former chair of History and Dean of Humanities at the University of Victoria, Ian MacPherson has written extensively on the Canadian and international co-operative movement. An activist within the co-operative movement for more than twenty years, he is the author of a "co-operative identity statement" for the International Co-operative Alliance; it defines the values and principles upon which co-operatives around the world are based. Currently he is director of the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies at the University of Victoria (). Thanks to Professor Brett Fairbairn, the University of Saskatchewan, and to Kathleen Gabelmann of the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies for several valuable suggestions for improving this note.