

The Co-operative Movement in South Wales and Its History: 'A task worthy of the most sincere devotion and application'¹

The co-operative movement in South Wales has long been conscious of its historical importance. The first histories of local societies were published over a century ago for Aberdare and Cwmbach, and such histories are still being produced, with the most recent being that of Llanelli in 2000.² The movement has worked over decades to preserve its records, although not always successfully. Writing in the 1950s, William Hazell, who was President of the Ynysybwl Co-operative Society for over 20 years, and a dedicated local historian of the movement, said he 'tears his hair and weeps' at the records that had been discarded forty years earlier.³ In essays that showed an understanding of the historical method, of assessing and discounting evidence, the way that interpretations change over time, and of the value and limitations of oral history, he wrote of the need for 'a fully documented *History of Co-operation in South Wales and Monmouthshire*'. He described this as a 'task worthy of the most sincere devotion and application', and wondered whether the University of Wales or the National Library could be induced into funding 'Co-operative historical research in Wales'. Writing when the economic strength of the movement was at its zenith, and taking for granted the future position of the movement in history, Hazell could optimistically refer to 'all future students and historians of co-operation in the principality', and confidently write that '[w]hatever may be the future of Co-operative effort, no social historian can deny the notable part played by the Co-operative societies of Wales in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.'⁴

The movement's recognition of its role in South Wales society was matched only by its frustration at its absence from contemporary analyses. In November 1954, in an article entitled 'University men discuss Welsh Society – *but what about the Co-ops?*,' an un-named co-operator described a study *Social Change in South West Wales*, by Swansea University academics Brennan, Cooney and Pollins. The reviewer said it was 'social history and analysis at its best', but despaired at

¹ I am grateful to Helen Thomas and Chris Williams for their comments, and to Neil Evans who, as ever, has also been generous in suggesting ideas and sources.

² Most co-operative histories have been produced by societies themselves or written by people involved in the movement, from the histories of the Cwmbach Co-operative Society in 1900, and Abersychan in 1911, to Keith J. Evans' *Secret History of the Llanelli Co-operative Society: 1895-2000*. See also David Lazell, 'The Slogan was "Genuine Service": Pontycymmer Co-op Society in Its Great Days', *Llafur*, Vol. 4 No. 1. Peter Gurney writes on co-operative histories in 'Heads, Hands and the Co-operative Utopia: An essay in historiography' in *North West Labour History*, Issue 19, 1994/5, pp. 3-23.

³ 'Headaches of the Historian' *Co-operative Review*, August 1959, pp. 178-9. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Co-operative Heritage Wales worked to collect and preserve records and, popularising co-operative history, produced a series of pamphlets commemorating the centenaries of individual societies.

⁴ W. Hazell, 'The Pioneer Co-operators of South Wales', *South Wales Supplement*, May 1958, p. ii.

the 'inexplicable omission' of any consideration of the role of co-operatives within it.⁵

Little has changed since the 1950s. In spite of Hazell's confidence, hitherto, the role of the co-operative movement in South Wales has received scant attention from historians. It is remarkable that a movement of independent co-operative societies that lasted for over a century, which provided support 'from the cradle to the grave', and whose existence broadly mirrored the rise and decline of the coalfield, has escaped significant historical comment, including by labour historians. In the half-century since Hazell's observations, no history of the movement in South Wales has been written, nor little mention of it made in general or labour studies.⁶ An exception is Richard Lewis, who acknowledged its importance as 'large and influential' in the Edwardian period in South Wales. The sole published academic work is a comparison of co-operation in Liverpool and the Rhondda, by Julie Des Forges. Reading Welsh historiography overall, it is difficult to realise that a co-operative movement has ever existed in Wales, let alone appreciate its significance.⁷

Other parts of the labour movement have had their historical importance acknowledged. The history of the South Wales Miners' Federation has been well documented, and a history of the Labour Party, has been produced, albeit belatedly. However, for a movement which had three wings – political, trades union and co-operative, the last has not been well served.⁸

Chris Williams has mapped the historiography of the coalfield from the early work of Ness Edwards until the 1990s. Much of it has emphasised the economic

⁵ T. Brennan, E. W. Cooney and H. Pollins, *Social Change in South-West Wales*, Watts & Co, London, 1954, reviewed in *South Wales Supplement*, November 1954, p. iv.

⁶ Surprisingly co-operation has received little attention in local academic studies such as Michael Lieven, *Senghenydd: The Universal Pit Village 1890-1930*, Gomer, 1994, or David Gilbert, *Class, Community and Collective Action: Social Change in Two British Coalfields, 1850-1926*, Oxford University Press, 1992, which compared Ynysybwl with Nottinghamshire. Local history has treated the co-operative movement somewhat better. See, for example, Rowland Davies, 'The Foundation of the Aberdare and District Co[-]operative Society Ltd 1910-1927', *Old Aberdare*, Volume Seven, Cynon Valley History Society, 1993; Ken L. James, 'The History of the Nantymoel Industrial Co[-]operative Society Ltd', *Journal*, Ogmere Valley Local History and Heritage Society, 2000, pp. 7-19. Katie Olwen Pritchard provides an account of the local co-operative movement in *The Story of Gilfach Goch*, Starling Press, Risca, 1973, pp. 225-8.

⁷ Richard Lewis, *Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenge of Labour in South Wales, 1906-1940*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1993, p. 9; Julie Des Forges, 'We Make Millions of Pairs of Boots, But Not One Pair of Millionaires: Co-operation and the Working Class in Liverpool and the Rhondda', *North West Labour History*, No. 19, 1994/5, pp. 48-64. Steven Thompson has referred to the contribution of the co-operative movement to the household economy in *Unemployment, Poverty and Health in Interwar South Wales*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2006, pp. 52 & 64-5. Martin Purvis provides a valuable oversight in 'The Development of Co-operative Retailing in England and Wales, 1851-1901: a geographical study', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 16, 3, 1990, pp. 314-31.

⁸ Ness Edwards, *The History of the South Wales Miners' Federation*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1938; Robin Page Arnot, *South Wales Miners*, vol. I: 1898-1914, Allen & Unwin, 1967; Robin Page Arnot, *South Wales Miners*, vol. II: 1914-1926, Cymric Federation Press, Cardiff, 1975, and Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed*. Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1980; Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin (eds.), *The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2000.

imperative, the centrality of class, and collective action and conflict as drivers in coalfield society. The rising generation of (mainly male) historians who emerged in the late 1960s coalesced around the discipline of labour history. Labour historians have preferred, on the whole, to write about institutions, such as trades unions or political parties, or expressions of collective action such as strikes or riots. Williams has pointed out that writing within a sub-discipline of labour history has 'attracted scholarship at least partly on the basis of political commitment and a belief that history could change the future'. It did not operate in an academic void, but was 'always connected to some vision of a new society, to some kind of opposition to capitalism'.⁹ However the visions of that new society to which labour historians were attracted have not included a co-operative model. The focus of their analysis has been towards the point of production, and has not included distribution and consumption, even when collectively organised. The absence of the co-operative movement from labour historiography also had implications for gender issues, as it was one area of the labour movement activity in which women were able to make a distinctive and important contribution.¹⁰

This absence of co-operation from labour histories is not just a Welsh phenomenon. As Stephen Yeo has pointed out, co-operation is often invisible in the histories of the labour movement in England.¹¹ A recent example is A. J. Davies who, in his history of the labour movement, *To Build A New Jerusalem*, hardly refers to co-operation. First published in 1992, and subtitled 'The Labour Movement from the 1880s to the 1990s', co-operatives were recognised as a part of 'the world of labour' along with trades unions, trades councils and friendly societies. However, apart from saying that co-operatives grew to have over three million members by 1914, Davies did not refer to the movement again until it was pointed to as a former pillar of the collectivist society, which by the 1970s had become 'a relic of the past'. Even when a revised version of the book was published with the new subtitle 'The British Labour Party from Keir Hardie to Tony Blair', and mapped organisations and parties associated with the British labour movement, including Clarion, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, the Socialist League and the Socialist Party of Great Britain, it failed to mention the existence of the Co-operative Party or movement. Whilst not wishing to minimise the contribution of the other organisations, the co-operative movement at least deserves to be there

⁹ Chris Williams, "'Going Underground'?: The Future of Coalfield History Revisited", *Morgannwg*, Vol. XLII, 1998, pp. 41-58, esp. p. 42; Neil Evans, 'Writing the social history of modern Wales: approaches, achievements and problems', *Social History*, Vol. 17 No. 3, October 1992, pp. 481-2; Chris Williams, 'The Odyssey of Frank Hodges', Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, *Transactions (1998)*, Vol. 5, 1999, p. 110.

¹⁰See Paul O'Leary, 'Masculine Histories? Gender and the Social History of Modern Wales', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 22 No. 2, December 2004, for an exploration of gender relationships in relation to labour historiography.

¹¹ Stephen Yeo, 'Membership and Belonging: The Co-op in Context, 1945-present' at Taking Stock: The Co-operative Movement in British History conference, 13 May 2005.

alongside them.¹² Fortunately, studies by co-operative historians such as Yeo and Gurney have begun to reclaim the role of the movement in England.¹³

While the co-operative movement has made little mark in Welsh historiography, equally, historians of the co-operative movement have given scant attention to the experience in South Wales. Where they have commented, co-operative historians have been harsh on South Wales, with slight, and sometimes partial, judgements. Beatrice Potter (later Webb), in her 1891 study *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain* referred to the 'incapacity or indifference of the South Wales miners' and identified their 'racial characteristics' as Celts as the cause of their lack of interest in co-operation. She contrasted this with the co-operative development that had taken place in English and Scottish coalfields.¹⁴ South Wales hardly registered in George Holyoake's 1906, two volume, *History of Co-operation*, or in Sidney & Beatrice Webb's *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement*, written in 1921. Carr-Saunders et al. observed in 1938 that 'Wales as a whole is weak co-operatively, both in its industrial and its agricultural areas'. In his centenary study, G.D.H. Cole described the South Wales of 1944 as 'the greatest Co-operative "desert" in Great Britain'.¹⁵

Cole gave the most detailed analysis of the weakness of co-operation. He said that South Wales was late in coming to co-operation as, in its infancy in the 1860s, the valleys were 'too much dominated at first by the truck shops and later by the grocers (who granted credit and even leant money)'. He also suggested that chapel rivalries may have played a part in preventing common action, as may have the isolation of the mining valleys. Cole did, however, provide interesting background information on the structure of the co-operative movement in South Wales and the 'lack of any united Welsh demand for autonomy' for the movement in Wales. More recently Johnston Birchall described the situation in South Wales as 'enigmatic' in fulfilling all the criteria, without taking off. He wondered why co-operation did not catch on, particularly in comparison with Durham which had experienced 'such spectacular growth'. As well as repeating some of Cole's explanations, Birchall ventured that there may

¹² A. J. Davies, *To Build A New Jerusalem*, Michael Joseph, 1992, p. 22, pp. 81-2 & p. 250; plus Abacus, 1996 edition, pp. 470-1.

¹³ Stephen Yeo, (ed.), *New Views of Co-operation*, Routledge, London, 1988; Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870-1930*, Manchester University Press, 1996. See also Bill Lancaster and Paddy Maguire (eds.), *Towards the Co-operative Commonwealth: 150 Years of Co-operation*, Co-operative College and History Workshop Trust, Manchester, 1996.

¹⁴ Beatrice Potter, *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*, Swan Sonnenschein, London, 1904 impression, p. 187. (However, in a footnote she acknowledged that a fresh start had recently occurred in South Wales.)

¹⁵ George Holyoake, *History of Co-operation*, Vols. I & II, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1906; Sidney & Beatrice Webb, *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement*, Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1930 impression; A. M. Carr-Saunders, P. Sargant Florence & Robert Peers, *Consumers' Co-operation in Great Britain*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1938, P. 66; G.D.H. Cole, *A Century of Co-operation*, Co-operative Union, Manchester, 1944, pp. 157 & 199-200.

also have been a lack of outstanding promoters such as those who existed in the north of England and Scotland.¹⁶

Such views do little to indicate that co-operation became a central part of the culture of the South Wales coalfield, where identification with, and loyalty to, the co-operative society became ingrained in valleys life. Nor does it recognise the outstanding contribution made by co-operators from South Wales, such as (Sir) Thomas Allen, who built the Blaina Society into a powerful institution, before becoming a Director of the Co-operative Wholesale Society or (Sir) Jack Bailey from Miskin, Mountain Ash, who, after studying at both Ruskin College and the Central Labour College, went on to become National Secretary of the Co-operative Party. They are but two examples of the numerous co-operators who helped build the movement locally and nationally.¹⁷

In a narrow numerical sense, though, Cole had a point. He said that in 1942, of 2,000,000 people in South Wales, 205,000 - just over 10% of the population - were members of co-operatives. This percentage was the lowest in Britain. Mid and North Wales had 11%; Scotland 21%; the South West of England 18%; West Midlands 21%; East Midlands, Lancashire and Cheshire and Yorkshire each 25%, and the Northern counties of Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland and Westmorland had a membership of 29% of the population. Thus South Wales was the lowest for any part of Britain.¹⁸ However, it is open to interpretation whether a membership that exceeded 200,000, of a population of two million, was low.

Moreover, in many societies in England and Wales, membership figures could be considered to have been lowered because it was confined to one member per family, with the male head of household usually holding formal membership. In such circumstances, even where the wife and other family members were also active, they were not allowed to become formal members. As membership rules differed from society to society, it is difficult to ascertain precise levels of engagement.¹⁹ However, the figure for those engaged in the co-operative economy in South Wales is certainly higher than that of the membership alone. One snapshot from Abersychan, British, and Talywain Industrial Co-operative Society, in November 1921, said that it had '4,000 members or probably 10,000 men and women, which includes the families'. However, this would imply a typical family size that might be considered small, particularly among miners'

¹⁶ Cole, p. 157; Johnston Birchall, *Co-op: the people's business*, Manchester University Press, 1994, pp. 76-7.

¹⁷ An article on the 'New Welsh Biographical Dictionary', in *South Wales Supplement* of May 1949, called for Sir Thomas Allen and the founder members of the Cwmbach Co-operative Society to be included as a recognition of their contribution.

¹⁸ Cole, p. 391. Within the Co-operative Movement, South Wales comprised Breconshire; Carmarthenshire; Glamorgan; Monmouthshire and Pembrokeshire

¹⁹ F. Hall, *Handbook for members of co-operative committees*, 2nd edition, The Co-operative Union, Manchester, 1924. I am grateful to Gillian Lonigan for this reference. Abersychan, British, and Talywain Industrial Co-operative Society, local pages, *Wheat sheaf*, November 1921, p. iii.

families, so may refer only to adult family members. It is likely that a membership in excess of 200,000 represented over 500,000 people engaged with the co-operative economy, and at its peak in the 1950s would probably have reached considerably more.²⁰

Co-operative development falls into several phases. A number of early ventures of the 1840s and 1850s were followed by the opening of the Cwmbach Society in 1860, which, because it was the first co-operative society that endured, is considered to be the 'beginning' of co-operation in South Wales. The three decades to 1887, saw around 90 new societies established, of which many failed, especially in the early years, before co-operation 'took off' between 1888 and 1909, when approximately 100 societies were established. A decade of growth followed from 1910 to 1920, before the 1921 miners' lockout marked the beginning of a period of prolonged difficulty until the Second World War. After the war, co-operative societies recovered and grew, before the 1960s saw a decline in the movement.²¹

The names of some early societies say a lot – the Tonyrefail Pioneer of 1864, which lasted a year and, after the failure of a co-operative society in Brynmawr in 1864, the Brynmawr Perseverance Society was established a year later, which itself had failed by 1877, as well as the self-explanatory Phoenix Society founded in Nantyglo in 1902. Considering the large number of societies that failed, particularly during the period of 1860-1900, people's commitment in being prepared to continue risking investing in them as the main means of saving was an act of determination, as well as an act of faith. A major contributor to people's confidence in co-operation was in the way that they were locally governed, democratically organised and transparent. The reports and statements of account, which were presented to the quarterly meetings of a society's membership, recorded on their front page the attendance of committee members. In a village, the quality and character of the individuals associated with a venture would be well known in a way that was not possible in a large, anonymous, society.

A particular characteristic was that many of the outstanding societies, such as Blaina, Troed y rhiw, New Tredegar and Caerau, were based in small communities. The strength of the movement was rooted in valleys villages, which

²⁰ Dot Jones demonstrates that at least half of the adult male population of Glamorgan were members of friendly societies from 1860-1910. She argues that this was the most popular form of voluntary association, ahead of chapel, church and trades union membership. (See Dot Jones, 'Did Friendly Societies Matter? A Study of Friendly Society Membership in Glamorgan, 1794-1910', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 12, 1984. For a gender perspective see Dot Jones, 'Self Help in Nineteenth Century Wales: the rise and fall of the Female Friendly Society', *Llafur*, Vol. 4 No. 1.)

²¹ Martin Purvis, *Nineteenth Century Co-operative Retailing in England and Wales: A Geographical Approach*, St. John's College, Oxford, D. Phil. 1987; Noel and Alan Cox, *Two Hundred Years of Welsh Paranumismatic History: The Tokens, Checks, Metallic Tickets, Passes and Tallies of Wales 1800-1993*, 1994, Cardiff; information provided by Gillian Lonigan, Co-operative Library.

reflected the nature of industrialisation, and the pattern of urbanisation.²² Valleys towns, such as Pontypridd and Merthyr, were often unsuccessful in sustaining their own co-operative societies and were colonised by small village societies, such as Ynysybwl or Troed y rhiw, which used their strong home base as a platform for expansion. Indeed, Ynysybwl extended its reach through Nantgarw and Taffs Well and as far as Whitchurch, a suburb of Cardiff.²³

The coastal towns of Cardiff and Newport did not succeed in developing a strong co-operative base (unlike in Pembroke Dock). In 1900, there were only 690 co-operators in Cardiff, which had a population of over 160,000. Martin Daunton identifies the lack of a stable population as contributing to the failure of co-operation in Cardiff, while the movement itself highlighted the mixed and migratory character of employment in Cardiff, with many wage earners at sea for weeks or months at a time, with other work, such as in the docks, also being irregular. Only in the Cathays area of the city were workers able to sustain a co-operative, based on their more secure employment on the railways. This was contrasted with mining and manufacturing areas 'where vast numbers work together, live in the same localities, and meet at the same clubs and trade unions...'²⁴ The enduring weakness of co-operation in Cardiff was such that the Cardiff Society was taken over in 1936, becoming the first branch of C.W.S. Retail, so helping change the face of co-operation in Britain.²⁵

However, overall, the first half of the twentieth century saw a remarkable growth in co-operation in South Wales. By the early 1950s, the retail movement, had a combined membership of around 250,000 people consolidated into 40 independent societies, plus 10 societies that had joined the national Co-operative Retail Society. They had more than 300 branches; a turnover of £17 million, and employed 8,000 staff. Seven valleys societies, including Ynysybwl, Taff Bargoed and Pontycymmer, each had a turnover of £1 million plus. Through a collectivist approach to entrepreneurship, this 'enthusiastic, self governing local democracy of working men and women' built businesses which provided primarily retail services, as well as chemist, optician, hairdressing, car hire, building, painting and decorating, laundry, travel agency, abattoir, restaurant and funeral services. Societies also combined in federations to operate collaborative ventures, such as boot repairs or bakeries.²⁶

²² See Neil Evans, 'Rethinking Urban Wales', *Urban History*, 32, 1 (2005).

²³ Information provided by Hywel Francis who, as a boy in the 1960s, was puzzled at the presence of a branch of the Ynysybwl Society in Whitchurch. (Information provided to author in June 2006.)

²⁴ *Co-operative Congress, 1900, Cardiff*, Co-operative Union, Manchester, 1900, p. 275; M. J. Daunton, *Coal Metropolis: Cardiff 1870-1914*, Leicester University Press, 1977, pp. 10 & 139; 'Co-operation in Cardiff', *Souvenir of Co-operative Congress, Cardiff, 1900*, Manchester, 1900, p. 23.

²⁵ Percy Redfern, *The New History of the C.W.S.*, J. M. Dent & Sons, London/ Co-operative Wholesale Society, Manchester, p. 477.

²⁶ *The Co-operative Directory*, Co-operative Union, Manchester, 1951; *Co-operative Statistics, 1953*, The Co-operative Union, Manchester, 1954; *The Gleaming Vision being the History of the Ynysybwl Co-operative Society Ltd. 1889-1954*, Pontypridd, 1954. Nor was co-operation confined to retailing. Other forms of production and service co-operatives operated in parallel with retail co-operatives. For example, a 'Working Men's Bus Company' was established by Cardiff Trades Council, during a dispute with the

This remarkable phenomenon of locally determined collective entrepreneurship is worthy of note. As Lewis Lewis, the President of the Tredegar Industrial and Provident [Co-operative] Society, looked back over 50 years of its existence, he concluded that co-operation was 'the most successful application of the principle of collectivism in human affairs in the annals of history.' He went on 'there was nothing which the people could not do for themselves and receive, themselves, the benefits accruing.'²⁷

Co-operation was about much more than trading. The business functions of co-operatives were complemented by cultural and social roles. Peter Gurney argues that the co-operative movement constructed a rich and complex culture, or 'way of life'. He has described the co-operative movement in England as a 'most powerful engine of social and economic change', and compared it to the German S.P.D. before the Great War in the extent of its social and cultural reach and provision.²⁸

In South Wales, the co-operative movement had extensive social provision, and a vibrant social life with its own halls, education programmes, publications, libraries, and children's choirs. Co-operative libraries operated from at least the Edwardian era to the 1960s, and there was structured education provision over the same period. The Ynysybwl Society's Education Committee, in 1920, for example, organised ten junior classes, six intermediate classes, four adult classes, and two classes for women studying co-operation, involving hundreds of adults and children.²⁹

Co-operative societies also organised public lectures. For example, in Tredegar, the Society organised a winter series of talks each year. Speakers included Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate, who, in November 1917, gave an address on 'The Necessity of Poetry'; Professor Alfred Zimmern, Professor of International Politics at University College, Aberystwyth, speaking on the Basis of International Reconstruction; H. J. Fleure, Professor of Anthropology and Geography of the University in Aberystwyth on 'The Trilogy of the Humanities in Education', as well as novelist and poet Walter de la Mere, and J. C. Squire the editor of the *New Statesman*. When Ramsay Macdonald spoke in Blackwood, it was not through the I.L.P. or the Labour Party, but under the auspices of the Tredegar Co-operative Society. In nearby Ebbw Vale, that Society organised a session on 'The Democratic Control of Industry'. Also, in March 1919, the Ebbw Vale Society put forward William Morris for the Bedwellty Board of Guardians as the nominee of the Co-operative Society, with the full approval of the Trades and Labour Council, which in itself shows a revealing hierarchy of relationships in

Cardiff Tramway Company, and ran for around a year in the late nineteenth century. Cardiff and Swansea Printers between them employed over 160 co-operative printers in the early 1950s.

²⁷ *Tredegar Industrial & Provident Society Limited 1901-1951*, Tredegar, 1951, pp. 4 & 9;

²⁸ Gurney, 'Heads...', pp. 15-16; Gurney, *Co-operative Culture...* p. 23.

²⁹ *The Co-operative Educator*, Vol. II No. I, January 1918, p. 15; Vol. IV No. 4, October 1920, p. 37.

determining issues of local representation. While the movement was usually seen to be non-party political, in Llanelli in 1918, the local Society was considering affiliating to the Labour Party.³⁰

Local co-operative societies were active participants and, sometimes, significant players in the social, cultural, political as well as the economic landscape of the valleys. In Co-operative Street, Ton Pentre, members lived in fifty houses built, in 1905, by the Ton Society. There was a co-operative cinema in Cymmer, society eisteddfodau and numerous co-operative children's choirs. The young Harold Finch entered athletics events organised by the Varteg Co-operative Society, where his Uncle Will was secretary. Work currently underway will determine the extent of such activities, and what role they played in relation to other institutions of the coalfield such as the miners' institutes.³¹

The movement in South Wales also produced an extensive network of local publications. The national *Wheatsheaf* magazine, which was printed from 1896, had 'wrap around' local pages of individual societies which were published as supplements, which discussed their work. While the full scale of their reach cannot now be assessed, those copies that exist suggest that a large number of societies produced them over many decades. As well as local pages produced for individual societies, a *South Wales Supplement* was also produced from 1923 at least until December 1958. In the first fifteen years of its publication, 3,500,000 copies of *Wheatsheaf* with the *South Wales Supplement* had been distributed across South Wales. This would indicate a print run averaging 20,000 per month over 15 years.³² Although the tone changed, and the content became diluted by the 1950s, with its monthly social commentary, analysis, news and descriptions of local situations, and the promotion of its values and culture, it was one of the most extensive and consistent voices of the labour movement in South Wales in communicating with its people. While it is now not possible to assess the impact of 60 years of publication of these local and regional monthly supplements across South Wales, it is at least possible that the cumulative impact would have

³⁰ *The Co-operative Educator*, Vol. IV No. 4, October 1920, p.39; Harold Finch, *Memoirs of a Bedwellty M.P.*, Starling Press, Risca, 1972, p. 55. *The Co-operative Educator*, Vol. IV No. 2, April 1920, p. 39; copies of documents held by Co-operative Group, Pontllanfraith.

³¹ B. A. Francis *Stages in the Development of the Co-operative Movement in Wales up to 1914*, unpublished manuscript, 1938, pp. 54/54R; Finch, p. 11. Building clubs were another form of co-operative self-help. Martin Daunton dates the strongest period of building clubs in South Wales from 1889 to the Great War (M. J. Daunton, 'Miners' Houses: South Wales and the Great Northern Coalfield, 1880-1914', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 25 (2), 1980, p. 149). See also Malcolm J. Fisk, *Housing in the Rhondda 1800-1940*, Merton Priory Press, Cardiff, 1996. This coincided with the sharp growth of co-operative societies. It would also be important to consider these developments with the parallel one of new unionism from 1889.

³² W. S. Collins, 'We Travel The Road', *South Wales Supplement*, October 1938, pp. i-iii. The CWS, which published the *Wheatsheaf*, apparently had a complete set of supplements. However, they were accidentally destroyed during the 1960s or 1970s. (Information provided by Gillian Lonagan, Co-operative College Librarian). Those few that have survived indicate that they could have provided the richest source for building a comprehensive view of the movement in South Wales. They can be much more useful than the minutes of the local society. See for example, the Carmarthen Society, where some local pages are fastened inside the Society's minute books, allowing a direct comparison.

contributed to helping shape, as well as reflect, the nature of the society from which they came.

Perhaps, the spiritual centre of co-operation in Wales was in the Aberdare Valley. As well as the Cwmbach Society, which was established in 1859/60, and came to be seen as the pioneer of co-operation in Wales, there were at least 14 other societies established in the Cynon Valley in the 19th Century. These were often based on individual villages, such as the Abercwmboi society which was set up in 1865 or Penrhiwceiber in 1867. The Aberdare society was established in 1869. Through amalgamation with its neighbours it grew to be the largest in South Wales, with over 16,000 members by 1951. It was probably the first in South Wales to join the CWS, in 1873, and was instrumental in trying to get CWS to set up a base in South Wales. The Society was distributing the *Co-operative News* in early 1870s and was distributing *Wheatsheaf*, with its own local supplement, in December 1898. Also, significantly, two women from Aberdare were amongst the seven founder members who, in 1883, were involved in setting up of Women's Co-operative Guild in Britain.³³

The involvement of women was an area in which the co-operative movement was markedly different from other sections of the labour movement, and in society in general in South Wales. Sue Bruley quotes Mrs Davies in the film *Women of the Rhondda* as saying that the Guild was the 'outstanding' organisation for women in the valleys. The Guild was a remarkable organisation that has, until recently, not received due recognition for its work.³⁴ The Guild provided a platform for the involvement of working class women to engage in the movement, which was legitimised by their responsibility for the organisation of consumption in the home.

Co-operation, in its manifold aspects, with collective entrepreneurship at its heart, was large, complex and multifaceted. In its values and actions, co-operative self-help was at the core of valleys society. Co-operative history will provide an interesting complement to the past thirty years of historiography of the South Wales labour movement, and also a counterpoint to it. In 1922, at a series of meetings involving 3,000 Blaina women co-operators, it was reported that "The Blaina [Co-operative] Society was undoubtedly the biggest thing in the valley outside of the coal industry itself."³⁵ Where and how does 'the biggest thing...outside the coal industry' fit into the history of South Wales, and of its labour movement?

³³ Percy Redfern, *The Story of the C.W.S. 1863-1913*, Co-operative Wholesale Society, Manchester, 1913, p. 143; see pp. 143-50 for setting up of C.W.S. in South Wales. A copy of the Aberdare *Wheatsheaf* exists for December 1898; it was still being produced sixty years later. Catherine Webb, *The Woman with the Basket*, Co-operative Wholesale Society, Manchester, 1927, p. 20.

³⁴ Sue Bruley, 'Women', in John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Keith Gildart, *Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2004, p. 234; Helen Thomas, *A Democracy of Working Women': the Women's Co-operative Guild in South Wales, 1891-1939*, MA dissertation, University of Glamorgan, August 2006.

³⁵ *Co-operative News*, 5 August 1922. I am grateful to Helen Thomas for this reference.

As the co-operative movement prepares to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Robert Owen, in 2008, and the 150th Anniversary of the founding of Cwmbach co-operative, in 2010, it is timely to pose such questions. The South Wales Co-operative History Project, which has been established out of Swansea University, with the endorsement of the Co-operative Group and the Wales Co-operative Centre, is working to address them. In so doing, it is responding to the need identified by William Hazell a half century ago, and has started a process of historical recovery.