

ALTERNATIVE IRELANDS: CO-OPERATION, SOCIALISM AND NATIONALISM IN *THE IRISH HOMESTEAD*

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Abstract

The Irish Homestead was one of the most vibrant and thoughtful newspapers of the early twentieth century. It was the official organ of the Irish Co-operative Movement, founded by Sir Horace Plunkett in 1895 under the auspices of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society. In its early years, the Jesuit priest, Fr. Thomas Finlay, edited the newspaper, followed by Harry F. Norman and Thomas Patrick Gill, the Irish Parliamentary Party Member of Parliament. The painter, poet and theosophist, George Russell (AE), took over editorship in 1905, with poet and writer, Susan Langstaff Mitchell, acting as assistant editor. This article considers the ideas of the Co-operative Movement in editorials of The Irish Homestead discussing capitalist and socialist economic principles and practices. I look at proposals for economic development in rural Ireland that the newspaper advocated in terms of capitalist financial improvement and tendencies towards socialist or part-socialist economics of co-operative endeavor. The article also addresses a persistent concern with idealism and pragmatism in The Irish Homestead, evident in the space it devoted to Standish O'Grady's idea of a rural Irish experimental utopian community. Finally, I discuss the case that The Irish Homestead made for a separation of economic from political nationalism in Ireland in its effort to promote and sustain the Co-operative Movement as one that drew its membership from both Irish nationalist and Irish unionist quarters.

KEYWORDS

Co-operation, Community, Capitalism, Socialism, Nationalism

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IRISH CO-OPERATION: IDLE DREAM OR LOST OPPORTUNITY?

During my years of PhD studies at Queen's University Belfast from 1994 to 1998, at the height of the Northern Ireland Peace Process, I had the good fortune to attend the John Hewitt Summer School at Garron Tower, County Antrim, in the summer of 1995. Professor Edna Longley ably directed the program that year; a remarkable poetry critic and wife of the wonderful Belfast poet, Michael Longley. One of the guest speakers that summer was Professor Joep Leerssen, the Dutch-based scholar of Irish literary history and European nationalism. Following a characteristically erudite and far-ranging talk, I asked the eminent Professor for his opinion on the Irish Co-operative Movement, as I was about to embark on a research visit to the British Newspaper Library in London to consult *The Irish Homestead* newspaper in its entirety. Leerssen summarily dismissed the affair as an eccentric late Victorian experiment that carried little long-term significance to understanding Irish social, political and cultural development from the early twentieth century. Feeling rather disheartened at this response, my enthusiasm revived somewhat at a later conference that we organized at Queen's University in 1997, "The Stories of Ireland", in conjunction with the extraordinary endeavors that the heroic Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, was then making to advance the Peace Process in Belfast and beyond. After a classic early-morning conference panel session of three papers presented to an audience of somewhere in the region of four to six delegates, a Danish gentleman approached me afterwards. He spoke of how saddened he was to learn of the damage that the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War had inflicted on the Co-operative Movement. He also told me that Denmark's success as an economy in the twentieth century grew entirely out of the Co-operative Movement in his native country. So, I was left with this puzzle. Was the Co-operative Movement indeed an eccentric social experiment with little real chance of advancing the quality of Irish life in the first decades of its existence? Or did it promise the kind of transformation and advancement that Denmark – a country of similar size and population to Ireland – had apparently experienced as a consequence of co-operative economic formations? Returning to these questions after thirty years under completely different circumstances, what follows is a reconsideration of the Irish Co-operative Movement in its early years.

In this paper, I explore the kind of economic ideas that the Movement expounded in the pages of *The Irish Homestead*, official publication of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society. A persistent thread in the newspaper editorials was the link between pragmatism and idealism. The newspaper kept aiming towards ideals beyond the provision of financial security, opportunity and technical instruction to Irish farming communities. At the same time, it often insisted on the practical economic effectiveness of the Co-operative

model, warning against utopian notions not feasible in reality. Enveloping these concerns was a keen sense of Ireland's welfare and what could be done to redress the continued dwindling of rural populations to levels that verged on the kind of extinction that Synge had imagined so vividly in *Riders to the Sea*. In the current times of economic, environmental and demographic calamity, the aspirations and strategies of Ireland's advocates of co-operative initiatives no longer seem so aloof or deluded as they once appeared in the eyes of some.

CO-OPERATION AND CAPITALISM

Through *The Irish Homestead*, the Co-operative Movement advocated a form of banking based on co-operative credit, out of which the Credit Unions developed in Ireland.² These Unions offered a system of borrowing based on small amounts of savings that Credit Union members in towns and surrounding townlands placed in local Credit Unions, which in turn made small loans available to members at low interest rates. Support for this kind of banking appears in the lead article of *The Irish Homestead* of 18th July, 1896, a review of a new edition of Henry Wolff's *People's Banks*.³ The editor of the journal at the time, the Jesuit Priest Fr. Thomas A. Finlay, described the history of the type of finance that Wolff surveyed as "poor man's banking", adding that the Irish Co-operative Movement had as good an understanding of "the system of Co-operative banking" as "the most progressive social reformers beyond the Channel".⁴ Finlay saw how this system could be used "to promote industry amongst a population where otherwise needed capital would be unattainable, and to stamp out usury – one of the worst of the economic evils which prey upon the poor".⁵ He mentions Schulz-Delitzsch and Raiffeisen as advocates of the system in Germany, and Signor Luzzatti and Fr. Cerrutti in Italy, building up "a gigantic system of village banks, in which the poor men, the small farmer, the artisan, the petty trader, are directors, managers, lenders and borrowers, in which honesty is the rule and solvency a tradition".⁶

The Co-operative Banks operated as part of a capitalist economic system in the provision of financial services through which industrial production could develop. However, they pushed against this same system in making the

² For an account of the development of the Credit Union Movement in Europe and the USA, see J. Carroll Moody – Gilbert C. Fite: *The Credit Union Movement: Origins and Development 1850 to 1980*, 2nd ed., Dubuque IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1984.

³ Henry W. Wolff: *People's Banks: A Record of Social and Economic Success*, 2nd ed., London: P. S. King, 1896.

⁴ The People's Banks, *The Irish Homestead: The Organ of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society*, Vol. 2, No. 20, 18th July, 1896, 311–312.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁶ *Ibid.*

collective labor force the primary beneficiaries rather than individual financiers and industrialists. Finlay recognized that individual capitalists relied on the mass of populations to achieve their success. Not so far from the ideas of Marx in *Capital*, the Jesuit priest recognized in this state of affairs the opportunity for the lower middle class and laborers to make the system of capital work in the interest of the general population, rather than the wealthy upper middle class. Finlay observes:

Individuals can work out great schemes in the department of manufacture or trade only by turning to account the power and the resources of the multitude. In fact, it is only by using the crowd that the individual can amass wealth. If the crowd will use its resources for its own purposes – that is, for the benefit of its members – the creation of wealth is bound to follow, provided only the resources are intelligently employed.⁷

Given how profoundly the idea of individual entrepreneurialism informed the development of industrial capitalism in Britain and the USA from the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, Finlay's remarks seem tinged with a socialist affirmation of collective development as a value of greater importance to personal social and economic advancement. Some of the most intriguing aspects of *The Irish Homestead* in the twentieth century concern how far the Irish Co-operative Movement strayed into socialist economics, how much it resisted this tendency and how the matter affected its political identity as a national movement.

In July 1899, Finlay came out with a leader piece in *The Irish Homestead* that was stridently anti-capitalist. "The Capitalist Invasion of Ireland" is noteworthy not only for the opposition that it presents to full-scale capitalist economics, but also for the fact that Finlay uses nationalist rhetoric in criticizing capitalism. He complains that the Irish butter industry faced not only the transition from home industry to factory production, but also the prospect of English capitalist investors taking over the entire process. Bemoaning the prospect of the Irish butter industry "passing into the hands of strangers", Finlay touches on a theme upon which Irish dramatists dwell in the new Irish Literary Theatre of the early years of the twentieth century: the stranger in the house.⁸ The attitude takes ideas derived from Marx in the nineteenth century but develops them in a direction markedly at variance with Marx's concept of the working class as the universal class that would eventually break the constraints of nation-state formations. Finlay reverses the terms of this socioeconomic perspective.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ For a further discussion of this topic in Irish drama, see Nicholas Grene: "Strangers in the House", *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 51–76.

Instead of the nation as an ideological instrument through which the bourgeois class maintained its grip on the power of the laboring class, Finlay regarded the fighting Irish spirit as a defense against a form of capitalism that would destroy “a national industry”: Irish butter. The importance of maintaining this defense was that it prevented “the curse” of “the conflicting interest between capital and labour” overtaking economic practice in Ireland.⁹ The logic of Finlay’s position was not one of labor organized to defeat a national bourgeoisie in class war, but the evasion of class conflict by frustrating the development of a large-scale disjunction between bourgeois and labor interest in the agricultural sector. Through the Co-operative Movement, in other words, Finlay hoped that the Irish rural communities would prove resilient enough to keep English capitalism at bay and with it, the conditions for social strife between classes.

Finlay’s position as a Roman Catholic priest obviously influenced his attitudes, reflecting the support that Catholic clergy gave to the Irish Co-operative Movement at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.¹⁰ Many Catholic clergymen welcomed the arrival of local Co-operatives, both as a way of sustaining farm and village life in Ireland and as a means of building up national self-confidence through the development of Irish moral character. These aspirations not only reflected Catholic social doctrine but also the aims of cultural organizations like the Gaelic League and the Irish Literary Theatre, when they were formed in the 1890s. A series of short pieces by H. F. Norman that appeared in *The Irish Homestead* in 1899 underlined the extent to which the Co-operative Movement cut across the historical division between Catholic and Protestant in Ireland. These articles also advocated an alternative to the spirit of individualism and competition driving British capitalist acceleration in the nineteenth century, but within a strongly Christian understanding of life that materialists like Marx and Darwin considered either ideological distortion or unscientific belief.

Norman drew the attention of readers of the newspaper to the thought of the prolific English intellectual, John Ruskin, as a source of inspiration for the development of the Co-operative Movement in Ireland. The articles addressed the four lectures that Ruskin published in 1867 under the title, *Unto this Last: Four Lectures on the First Principles of Political Economy*. Norman acknowledged that, by placing human wellbeing at the center of political economy, Ruskin left himself open to the objection that, from the

⁹ “The Capitalist Invasion of Ireland”, *The Irish Homestead*, 17th June, 1899, 423.

¹⁰ For a detailed consideration of the involvement of the Catholic Church in the Irish Co-operative Movement, see Liam Kennedy: *Colonialism, Religion and Nationalism in Ireland*, Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University, 1996, 117-34. Diarmaid Ferriter is right in observing how the founder of the Co-operative Movement, Horace Plunkett, came in for criticism of the Catholic Church. However, he ignores the active leadership role Finlay took as a Catholic priest in the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, editing *The Irish Homestead* for several years. Ferriter: *The Transformation of Ireland*, London: Profile Books, 69.

point of view of economic calculation, his argument was entirely deficient. Norman defends Ruskin in supporting his view that *laissez-faire* economics, the guiding principle of capitalist development in 19th-century Britain, relied upon a form of selfishness “whose shibboleth is every man for himself”.¹¹ In a damning indictment of the belief that competitive struggle among individuals brings forth general social advancement, Norman also highlights Ruskin’s declarations that “Government and co-operation” were “the laws of life”, while “anarchy and competition” were “the laws of death”.¹² Ruskin obviously had in mind the prevailing view of general economic progress in his lifetime as the outcome of a relatively unregulated struggle between individuals and groups to increase their prosperity by defeating their rivals. He saw this economic Darwinism produce not a dynamic social energy reflected in the transformation of England in the nineteenth century, but widespread pollution and disease in urban conglomerations accompanied by the death of English rural communities. Norman observes Ruskin’s concern with the spiritual effect of an industrialized and financialized society, but also his conclusion that their impact may be as much to the material as to the moral detriment of England as a nation. He draws attention to Ruskin’s contention of an exact equivalence between individual enrichment and individual impoverishment in practices of overcharging and underpaying, such that the national wealth of a society remains stationary, if not actually reduced, in consequence.¹³

STANDISH O’GRADY’S COMMUNES

Norman concludes his reflections on Ruskin with the stated conviction that science was ultimately justified by the amount of social happiness and social health it produced. Central to this notion was the idea that “national character reflected the true wealth of a nation, in the prevalence of vitality, self-reliance, symmetry, sympathy, and grace”.¹⁴ Norman presents this reflection as the aspect of Ruskin’s thought that carried greatest relevance for Ireland. And the figure who best expressed this attitude was Standish James O’Grady, in his pamphlet, *All Ireland*, published the previous year 1898 (O’Grady, *All Ireland*). Norman acknowledged that the case O’Grady made for the Anglo-Irish gentry to unite and assume leadership in Irish political life was one that divided opinion, at a time in which the influence of the predominantly Protestant gentry was declining. Yet he saw in O’Grady’s work the best expression of Ruskin’s idea

¹¹ H. F. Norman, Co-operation in Literature – 1. – John Ruskin’s “Unto this Last”, *The Irish Homestead*, 23rd Sept., 1899, 658.

¹² Norman, Co-operation in Literature, 23rd Sept., 1899, 658.

¹³ Norman, Co-operation in Literature, 30th Sept., 1899, 672.

¹⁴ Norman, Co-operation in Literature, 7th Oct., 1899, 689.

that “the end of all politics is manhood, and the most central fact of the life of man is brotherhood”, declaring that “this teaching has in no country found a readier acceptance than in Ireland”.¹⁵

Standish O’Grady featured extensively in *The Irish Homestead* during the first two decades of the twentieth century, not only for his literary importance, but also as one of the most significant voices conveying the ideals towards which the proponents of the Co-operative Movement aspired. Commenting in April 1904 on a piece published in *Co-operative News*, publication of the Co-operative Wholesale Society in England, the editor reflected on its proposal that land should be owned by communities rather than individuals, “cultivated by associated labour, using the best machines [...] and that by a co-ordination of work between the town and the country the factory hands should be released at times for labour in the country”.¹⁶ *The Irish Homestead* concludes that this sounded more like socialism than co-operation, adding that Standish O’Grady had recently been advocating similar ideas. In one of the more colorful asides in *The Irish Homestead*, the newspaper described O’Grady in November 1904 as “the poet of profitable tillage”.¹⁷ On 30th December 1905, the year in which George Russell (AE) took over editorship of *The Irish Homestead* from Fr. Finlay, the newspaper dedicated its main article to O’Grady’s recent ideas on utopian society. The editor expressed sadness at how he “had fallen under the dream of the brotherhood of man on earth, and especially in Ireland”.¹⁸ The source of this disappointment is the editor’s observation that in O’Grady’s hope to attract men in Ireland to fashion a form of society “close to the Christian ideal”, he made no mention of the Co-operative Movement.¹⁹ Richard Noble, a Co-operative Society member from Letterkenny in County Donegal, issued a strident defense of O’Grady in *The Irish Homestead* two weeks later, claiming that, “as an apostle of tillage”, O’Grady stood on firm economic soil, judging by the experience of farmers in Ulster.²⁰

Debate over O’Grady’s ideas reached a peak in 1910 during the course of extended references to him between February and April. The dispute centered upon O’Grady’s complaint that the Irish Co-operative Movement was too materialistic in character and George Russell’s counter-charge that O’Grady’s thought on ideal life was not practical enough. On 12th February, the newspaper noted O’Grady’s complaint that there was too much information about money and prices in *The Irish Homestead*, creating the impression that advocates of the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Co-operative Towns and Colonies, *The Irish Homestead*, 9th April, 1904, 283.

¹⁷ The Romance of Growing Potatoes, *The Irish Homestead*, 30th Sept., 1905, 720.

¹⁸ Agricultural Communities, *The Irish Homestead*, 30th December, 1905, 949.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Richard Noble: Two Men, *The Irish Homestead*, 13th Jan., 1906, 26.

Co-operative Movement regard money as “the symbol of health and liberty”.²¹ The editor, either George Russell himself, or his assistant editor, Susan Mitchel, refuted the charge, asserting that most of the people who O’Grady derided as “grubbing for money” were actually “working for family as best they know how, for love, and for some other of the idealisms for which Mr. O’Grady has a respect for”.²²

The debate between O’Grady and Russell gained momentum two weeks later. On the 26th February, *The Irish Homestead* published a letter from O’Grady that was, in his own words, “an explosion”, emphasizing the centrality of mysticism and idealism to human life, criticizing what he considered the mediocre economic objectives of the Co-operative Movement and declaring that no economist could find fault with the economic basis for the type of rural commune that he was advocating.²³ The same issue of the newspaper also includes a letter signed “E. M. C.”, advocating a socialist-style collective ownership of land in Ireland, adding that O’Grady’s scheme for agricultural communes would give a great boost to the Co-operative Movement.²⁴ A letter signed “An Irishwoman of 1910” wished success to O’Grady’s Irish Commune idea, hoping that he would explain it more concretely.²⁵ However, *The Irish Homestead* cast doubt on the practical efficacy of O’Grady’s proposals for a utopian community of laborers founded on Christian principles of communal ownership. Hoping that O’Grady’s experiment might succeed in finding enough people to join it, the newspaper nonetheless defended the need for the Irish Co-operative Movement to maintain its focus on practical matters in rural Irish life.²⁶

The prominence of O’Grady in *The Irish Homestead* in 1910 was indicative of a growing awareness of socialism as a character-trait of political development in Ireland and beyond at the time. Already in 1907 and 1909, *The Irish Homestead* was debating the extent to which the Co-operative Movement was socialist in nature. In October 1907, the newspaper gave over its leading article to a consideration of socialism, commenting that while “the co-operatives the world over were semi-Socialistic”, Irish farmers would resist fiercely a State takeover of their land and Irish towns were incapable of working up any strong movement in support of a movement like socialism.²⁷ *The Irish Homestead*

²¹ Are we Journeying to the City of Mammon? *The Irish Homestead*, 12th February, 1910, 123.

²² Ibid.

²³ Standish O’Grady, The First Irish Commune of the New Order, *The Irish Homestead*, 12th Feb., 1910, 130.

²⁴ “E. M. C.”: Rural Communes, *The Irish Homestead*, 19th Feb., 1910, 152.

²⁵ “An Irishwoman of 1910”, Social Reform, *The Irish Homestead*, 19th Feb., 1910, 148–49.

²⁶ Communism of Effort versus Communism of Property, *The Irish Homestead*, 19th February, 1910, 145.

²⁷ Organise! *The Irish Homestead*, 19th Oct., 1907, 825–26.

returned to the topic two years later in October 1909, asserting that everyone had become socialist or half-socialist, even those who opposed socialism.²⁸

The issue arises again at the end of February 1910, with O'Grady's idea of Irish rural communes once more the subject of discussion. Russell foresaw a flight from urban living as cities became overcrowded, expensive and unhealthy environments. He expected a rebellion against city life to take a socialist form, with "many wild chimeras and Utopias" pursued.²⁹ The editor sees O'Grady in this light, a man too impatient for the evolutionary social development of the Co-operative, a man "with all the fiery power and insistent spirit which his young men will require".³⁰ He sees O'Grady's thought directed towards exceptional men, rather than the general mass of the people, O'Grady having a poetic temperament that prefers the exceptional to the norm: "He is more enraptured by a hero like Cuchulain than by the patient progress of large masses of people. To our mind, humanity is the hero, and to help to guide large numbers of men wisely in their evolution to a higher social order is the best work to which we can put our hands".³¹ *The Irish Homestead* followed up this line at the beginning of March, expressing the newspaper's admiration for O'Grady's nobility and character, yet feeling that his voice had become "too high-sounding for his message to reach the multitude".³² At the start of April 1910, the newspaper re-iterated the objection that O'Grady's ideas for a commune were too vague to demonstrate how they would work in practice, adding that O'Grady seemed to have taken passages from the Gospels literally in support of the view that even idlers would be accepted in the communes that he envisaged.³³ Further criticism followed in July 1911, when *The Irish Homestead* objected that O'Grady's ideal of a rural commune run without money would deny its members access to any goods in the wider world available to purchase.³⁴ A letter of September that same year declared that O'Grady's rural commune had not the slightest chance of coming about.³⁵

CO-OPERATION AND SOCIALISM

As the 1910s progressed, the perspectives that *The Irish Homestead* offered on developments in Ireland and beyond recognized that socialist politics was

²⁸ We are All Socialists Now, *The Irish Homestead*, 9th Oct., 1909, 819. A considerable number of letters to the Editor in October and November 1909 concerned the question of socialism.

²⁹ The Rebels against the City, *The Irish Homestead*, 26th Feb., 1910, 163.

³⁰ Ibid., 164.

³¹ Evolution or Revolution, *The Irish Homestead*, 26th Feb., 1910, 164.

³² Co-operative Agricultural Colonies, *The Irish Homestead*, 5th Mar., 1910, 185.

³³ The Ethics of Communes; Wanted a Bridge, *The Irish Homestead*, 2nd April, 1910, 271–72.

³⁴ Are we Money Grubbers? *The Irish Homestead*, 22nd July, 1911, 567.

³⁵ Fair Play, *The Irish Homestead*, 16th Sept., 1911, 734.

gaining in strength with the organization of the labor force through trade union organizations. One sign of this state of affairs was the increasing interest in utopian experiments, leading to the newspaper devoting a full article to the topic in December 1911. At the same time, the newspaper pulled back on some of the reservations it had directed against O'Grady's rural commune when proposing that the best chance a utopian experiment had of succeeding was through a community that worked close to nature, rather than in urban conglomerations, where international finance capitalism had weakened the autonomy of nations.³⁶ In June 1913, *The Irish Homestead* called for an alliance of the Trade Union and the Co-operative Movements in common opposition to the capitalist. As editor, Russell proposed that all Trade Union members should become members of the Co-operative Wholesale Society in England and that the Co-operative Movement should supply laborers with food and money at a time of strike action.³⁷ In September 1913, *The Irish Homestead* speculated how the labor movement might develop, with an eye to the impact of the socialist agitator and new leader of the workers' movement in Ireland, Jim Larkin: "Labour, long voiceless, has found a voice, and the stormy petrel of labour, who has just set Dublin in a blaze, has told us that he feels a divine mission to awaken discontent".³⁸ The newspaper warns that the labor movement, in its present state of "passionate discontent", can become a revolutionary force:

[...] may easily become syndicalist, socialistic, revolutionary, or anarchical, if the guiders of public opinion in Ireland will not take the trouble to investigate the real causes of the discontent and find no better policy to advocate other than suppression [...]. The ostrich in Ireland is reported to hide its head in the sand when pursued. There are hundreds of thousands of human ostriches in Ireland.³⁹

Attitudes to the growth of class politics fluctuated between support and apprehension in *The Irish Homestead*, evidence of how the Co-operative Movement was trying to adapt to new circumstances created by the First World War and the 1916 Rising in Ireland. In March 1917, the newspaper welcomed the development of class consciousness in Ireland: "The most interesting thing about Ireland to the close observer of a civilisation is the emergence of a class consciousness, class ambitions, and a clear theory of its own future development among the agriculturalists, who half a century ago were the most unorganised class in Ireland".⁴⁰ However, in September of that same year, *The Irish Homestead* feared the prospect of imminent social revolution, seeing

³⁶ Troubles before the Utopians, *The Irish Homestead*, 21st Dec., 1912, 1041–42.

³⁷ Co-operation and Trade Unionism, *The Irish Homestead*, 21st June, 1913, 510.

³⁸ The Parable of Labour, *The Irish Homestead*, 20th September, 1913, 777.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The Evolution of Society in Ireland, *The Irish Homestead*, 17th March, 1917, 185.

those who neither owned land nor manufactured goods as the class of people most likely to take control of the State, if they united together.⁴¹

Earlier in August 1914, as war in Europe seemed imminent, *The Irish Homestead* commented on the disaster that lay ahead if the warring parties entered the fray with no clear idea of the type of civilization that should be formed in its aftermath. It denounced a circumstance by which 99% of the people hated the idea of going to war “yet the nations have committed the power to let this horror loose upon society to a few very fallible and mediocre people”.⁴² The chronic incompetence and stupidity of statesmen, diplomats and military generals was, tragically, to prove fatal for the young men of Europe, their partners and families. *The Irish Homestead* included Ireland in the picture, when observing that the three armies now in the country had their own legitimate aspirations and principles, but each lacked a vision of what kind of society would come to be in the aftermath of conflict between them. The armies in question were the Imperial British Army, the Ulster Volunteer Force which was founded in 1912 to resist the imposition of a Home Rule Parliament for Ireland, and the Irish Volunteers, founded in 1913 to ensure that Home Rule was implemented.⁴³ AE drew on his familiarity with Irish mythology to imagine the *zeitgeist* immediately preceding war in Europe as akin to the war phantom of the Red Swineherd Bove Derg who “moved invisibly among the fighting men and whipped them into madness”.⁴⁴

The Irish Homestead was sharply alert to the social and economic crisis that was unfolding during the years immediately after the First World War. In February 1919, the editor complains that “we are told by financial lunatics the people were never so rich before. Yet production is less and less. Exports show a decline every year since the war started. There is less real wealth and a vast increase in paper wealth”.⁴⁵ The complaint shows that O’Grady may not have been entirely off the mark in his idea of a moneyless commune, dismissed by *The Irish Homestead* as impractical in 1910. By 1919, the newspaper conceded that artificial wealth was replacing real wealth in the form of the volume of goods produced and consumed in the open market. In 1920, the newspaper observed how wealth and industry was being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, leading to the large swell of lower-middle class and working class laborers organizing themselves politically by way of reaction, creating the possibility of a Labour Party forming the Government in Britain.⁴⁶ The editor claims that in Ireland – engulfed in a guerrilla war of independence at the time – the

⁴¹ The Danger of Social Revolution, *The Irish Homestead*, 1st Sept., 1917, 657.

⁴² Creators and Destroyers, *The Irish Homestead*, 1st Aug. 1914, 613.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ireland in Time of War, *The Irish Homestead*, 8 Aug., 1914, 633.

⁴⁵ The Better Way, *The Irish Homestead*, 8th Feb., 1919, 81.

⁴⁶ A New Co-operative Society, *The Irish Homestead*, 31st Jan. 1920, 69.

co-operative society “is rapidly becoming the national form of organisation, and in the country towns the prevalent idea is making headway”.⁴⁷ The newspaper supports a policy “which would bring farmers and labourers into the same co-operative societies, unite their interests and implicate them both in the management of the societies”.⁴⁸ Later in July, 1920, *The Irish Homestead* observed that “political forces have become more powerful than economic forces”, reference to the war that was ongoing between the Irish Republican Army and the British military.⁴⁹ In these circumstances, representatives of the labor unions, the farmers’ unions and the co-operative societies agreed that no Irish produce could be exported from the country if export threatened food shortages within Ireland itself.⁵⁰ Thus the conditions brought about by the Irish military campaign for political independence had produced an alliance of farmer and laborer interests that *The Irish Homestead* had advocated at the beginning of the year. The editor considered the potential impact of a railway blockade in the south and south-west of Ireland against British military forces. He predicted that this could lead to a significant proportion of the Irish population adopting communism, similar to the shift witnessed in Russia, Germany and Hungary.⁵¹

CO-OPERATION AND NATIONALISM

Around all questions of economic systems, practices and policies that *The Irish Homestead* addressed in the early twentieth century lay the question of nationality. A desire to organize and energize rural Irish communities, in a state of stagnation due mainly to emigration, was fundamental to the activities of the Co-operative Movement in the country. This goal linked the organization to others dedicated to revitalizing Irish culture, most notably the Gaelic League and the Irish Literary Theatre, later the Irish National Theatre Society. In 1902, *The Irish Homestead* proclaimed the aim of the Co-operative Movement not merely as one of improving the economic circumstances of the Irish countryside and village population, but of uniting the spirit of Irish imagination with practical knowledge in pursuit of a grand national awakening:

We are convinced that when the imagination of the Irish people has practical knowledge and facts to work on that it will not recoil from contact with the practical. But their imagination must be fired by some great end to be accomplished. We have

⁴⁷ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Facing Facts, *The Irish Homestead*, 10th July, 1920, 513.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 514.

⁵¹ Crisis and Character, *The Irish Homestead*, 20th Nov., 1920, 835.

found in the co-operative movement that the best societies and the best workers have derived their incitement to work from the idea that they were promoting a great national movement, and the extra profit, while welcome, was a secondary consideration. We are on the whole rather proud to belong to a people who are in this sense unpractical, that the desire for personal progress is not an obsession with us, and the desire for united and national progress is the only one which will stir to a real activity the intellect and the immense capacity for work and sacrifice in the best Irishman.⁵²

An article published the following year on Irish Arts Industry spelt out this call for a combination of the imaginative and the practical in concrete terms. *The Irish Homestead* insisted “that Irish Art industries must work on tradition, and where they cannot find one they must make it”.⁵³ The newspaper proposed that Irish producers of brasswork, lace, pottery and other ornamental goods should take inspiration from “the old Celtic arts”, multiple examples of which were available for study and copy in the Dublin Museum. *The Irish Homestead* saw these objects as lying neglected for far too long and urged that the resources of the country and the capacities of the Irish people needed to be developed if Ireland was to “survive as a people of our own, to entitle us to claim a place in the world of the future”.⁵⁴ In this case, the thrust of *The Irish Homestead* is towards market capitalism, but with an emphasis on the imaginative character of Irish culture. Irish artistic style could gain international recognition in the future but at the risk of Irish artworks becoming mass-produced commodity objects.

Tensions between practical commercial benefit and national ideals resurfaced in *The Irish Homestead* under different guises. Relations between the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) and the English Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) were a case in point. Obviously, the Irish Co-operative Movement welcomed the development of a Co-operative Movement in England also. In “A Dual Alliance” of November 1904, the newspaper pointed to the cordial nature of relations between the English Co-operative Movement and that in Ireland, pointing to how the English Co-operative Union helped the founders of the IAOS draft their rules and organize the Movement before withdrawing from the Irish Society.⁵⁵ In the same year that Arthur Griffith advocated his famous Dual Monarchy solution to Ireland’s relation to Britain, modelled on the example of Hungary’s relation to Habsburg Austria, *The Irish Homestead* announced an alliance between the Irish and the English Co-operative Movements with the aim of benefiting co-operative agricultural

⁵² The Department and the Cork Exhibition, *The Irish Homestead*, 28th June, 1902, 498.

⁵³ Nationality in Industry, *The Irish Homestead*, 19th Dec., 1903, 1022.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ A Dual Alliance, *The Irish Homestead*, 19th Nov., 1904, 962.

practices in both countries.⁵⁶ The newspaper was careful to emphasize that this would not entail any loosening of its commitment to “Irish Ireland” ideals which Sir Horace Plunkett, speaking at a gathering of Irish Co-operative members in Dromore, County Tyrone, a few weeks earlier, “declared to be the rightful aspiration of his audience”.⁵⁷ Along with Fr. Finlay, Plunkett had inaugurated a domestic science experiment at Dromore, presented in *The Irish Homestead* the following year in terms that placed the Co-operative Movement in an intimate relation to the Irish cultural revival of the early twentieth century. The Dromore experiment released “three of the living forces out of which the Ireland of the future is being made – domestic instruction, or, we should rather say, more modestly, the home-making influence of household science, the energising influence of the Gaelic revival, and - to us and to our readers an all-important force - the unifying influence of co-operation”.⁵⁸

Conflicts arose, however, between the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society and the Co-operative Wholesale Society in England. In April 1905 the IAOS requested the CWS hand control of the creameries that they operated in Munster over to IAOS members. The argument was advanced that the Irish creameries were a loss-making venture for the CWS but the real issue was the claim that Munster farmers were not benefiting from a wholesale method of business through which the CWS managed the creameries: “for though the traditions of Wholesale are co-operative in England, in Ireland they are not”.⁵⁹ *The Irish Homestead*, in other words, proposed that trade worked differently in Ireland than in England, meaning that the factor of national distinctiveness entered the sphere of capitalist business models, making English economic encroachment into Irish terrain non-co-operative, even in the name of co-operative economics. Tensions between the Irish and English organizations erupted in March 1907 following a CWS meeting at Manchester. The tone of reporting CWS attitudes to the IAOS, over the situation of creameries in Munster, was bitter and resentful:

It [the Co-operative Wholesale Society in England] never did anything to be ashamed of. It only refused to let its creameries be co-operative, in spite of the fact that it calls itself the Co-operative Wholesale Society, and why should Irishmen object? Is it not absurd that an inferior race like the Irish should want a system of business which is only fit for advanced races like the English. The friction arises solely from the claim of these absurd Irish that dairying must be conducted on

⁵⁶ Arthur Griffith, *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland*, Dublin: James Duffy & Co., M. H. Gill & Son, Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 1904; A Dual Alliance, 962.

⁵⁷ A Dual Alliance, 962.

⁵⁸ The Economic Problem and Domestic Life, *The Irish Homestead*, 3rd June, 1905, 438.

⁵⁹ The Munster Farmers and English Wholesale, *The Irish Homestead*, 22nd April, 1905, 307.

co-operative lines, and that they should control their own business, and that the C.W.S. should act up to the spirit of their principles and promises.⁶⁰

This line of criticism is far removed from that spirit of cordiality upon which *The Irish Homestead* remarked earlier in November 1904. It is further evidence of capitalist economics as a system subject to the force of national differences as much as a process of international trade. The oppositional stance taken by the IAOS in the case of the Munster creameries supplies an example of co-operative economics in Ireland at the start of the twentieth century reinforcing rather than loosening nationalist sentiments of attachment to locality.

If the Irish Co-operative Movement opposed the incursion of the English Co-operative Movement into the sphere of Irish agriculture, it equally stood against pressure from within Ireland to cut itself off from its counterpart in England. In August 1908, *The Irish Homestead* criticized calls from Irish County Councils for the IAOS to separate completely from the CWS. Whereas previously the newspaper had introduced national difference as a prominent factor in economic activity within Britain and Ireland, in this later instance *The Irish Homestead* separated nationalist politics off from economic concerns. Quite correctly, the newspaper observed that England and Germany were actively trading with one another and seeking to increase the volume of trade, even though public opinion was widespread that both countries were on the verge of going to war with one another. More domestically, *The Irish Homestead* speculated that trade with England would continue even if Ireland succeeded in winning Home Rule, and England “would probably be our best customer even if Ireland was absolutely independent”.⁶¹ This state of affairs most certainly came to pass after 26 of Ireland’s 32 counties formed an independent nation-state in 1922. As the Home Rule crisis in Ireland was entering a critical phase in the months prior to the outbreak of the First World War, *The Irish Homestead* restated its position that politics and economics were separate spheres, it being possible to conduct business with one’s political opponents. In an article that acquires retrospective poignancy in light of the subsequent partition of Ireland, *The Irish Homestead* described Belfast as the great distribution center for all of Ireland. The city’s business activity was so dynamic that it became more intertwined and interdependent with all of the provinces of Ireland.⁶² This was happening at a time, as the newspaper observed, when political division between Unionists and Nationalists threatened an outbreak of civil war on the island.

The 1916 Rising threatened to destroy the years of work that the Irish Co-operative Movement had dedicated to economic and social development

⁶⁰ The C.W.S. on its Defence, *The Irish Homestead*, 30th March, 1907, 243.

⁶¹ Commerce and Politics, *The Irish Homestead*, 8th Aug., 1908, 625–26.

⁶² Civil War and its Consequences, *The Irish Homestead*, 18th April, 1914, 302.

in rural Ireland. Immediately following the defeat of the uprising, *The Irish Homestead* described it as “one of the most tragic episodes in Irish history”. The great fear was that the Rising would split the Co-operative Movement, which the newspaper regarded as the one great movement to endure and develop over the previous twenty-five years that had brought people of opposing traditions together, including “extremists on both sides”, uniting them under the umbrella of economic co-operation.⁶³ This foreboding came to pass when, during the Irish War of Independence in September 1920, *The Irish Homestead* was forced to condemn attacks on Irish co-operatives throughout the countryside:

The integrity of the movement is threatened from many quarters. We have spoken, we believe with great restraint, about the wreckings and burnings of co-operative societies. But the political excitement by which Irishmen of opposing parties are wrought up to the last degree of antagonism against each other makes it also possible for attacks to be directed against the movement by cool, wicked and calculating men who see their profit in the destruction of co-operative unity.⁶⁴

In the end, the Irish Co-operative Movement survived the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. Far from being some eccentric impractical endeavor, the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society proved tough and resilient. It was the launching pad for the Irish dairy and livestock industries as they developed during the twentieth century. The sector was a cornerstone of Ireland’s economy during the bleak decades from the 1920s to the 1950s. It was during this period that Kerrygold butter, one of Ireland’s most successful products on the international market, emerged. The pursuit of community-based economics was also evident in the success of the Credit Union movement across Ireland, particularly in city suburbs, towns and villages. The acceleration of corporate global capitalist companies and practices – of which *The Irish Homestead* was aware at the start of the twentieth century – ensured that socialist or neo-socialist tendencies disappeared from the organizations and companies that emerged from the Irish Co-operative Movement. *The Irish Homestead* leaves an impressive legacy of opinion from the early twentieth century on how Ireland, especially rural Ireland, might have developed socially and economically in the decades preceding and during the First World War.

⁶³ The Hope that Remains, *The Irish Homestead*, 29th April, 6th–13th May, 285–86.

⁶⁴ Keeping the Ark Afloat, *The Irish Homestead*, 11th Sept., 1920, 673.

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