

Co-operation in Ireland

Article II.—The development of the I.A.O.S.—"Irish Homestead"—United Irishwomen

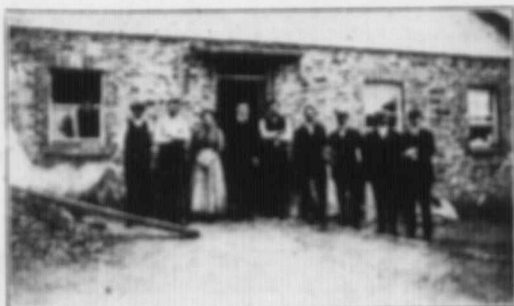
By L. Smith-Gordon and Cruise O'Brien

The work of Sir Horace Plunkett, briefly outlined in our previous article, began in the year 1889, when Sir Horace, returned from ten years ranching in America, determined to devote himself to the economic betterment of his own country. He was then associated with the Co-operative Union of England, which was occupied in organizing stores amongst the artisans of large towns and cities. An Irish section was created with Sir Horace Plunkett as chairman and R. A. Anderson as secretary, and with a few voluntary helpers the work of organizing in Ireland was carried on, with the help of funds provided by the Co-operative Union and by Sir Horace himself. The preliminary stages were beset by every kind of difficulty, the incredulity of the farmers and their miserable condition, which made it difficult to arouse them to the idea of self-help, being backed up by political opposition and by the attacks, both open and concealed, by all kinds of interested persons. Sir Horace was described in the public press as a monster of human iniquity and Mr. Anderson as "his man Friday." In one community where a creamery was nearly started the whole scheme was destroyed by the announcement of a leader of public opinion that "every pound of butter must be made on Nationalist principles, or not at all." Meetings were very poorly attended, and usually ineffective. After fifty attempts, however, the first co-operative creamery was started in 1890, on the basis of one share of the value of £1 for each cow, one man one vote, not more than 5 per cent. to capital, and division of profits in proportion to trade. These principles have been preserved ever since.

From the time of this first experiment progress was comparatively rapid. Seventeen societies were in existence in 1891, and in the next year the movement had gone far enough to justify the establishment of a central society (the Irish Co-operative Agency Society Ltd.) for the marketing of the butter of the co-operative creameries and also for the collective purchase of agricultural requirements. By 1894 over 60 societies were in existence; the majority of these were creameries with a turnover of butter to the value of £185,000. There were also a certain number of agricultural societies, whose members combined for the purchase of manure, feeding stuffs and seeds. In the matter of fertilizers alone these societies, bulking their orders through the agency, were able to effect a saving of 40 per cent. in the price, while assuring themselves of guaranteed and tested quality.

Central Organization Started

Meanwhile it had become apparent that the Irish co-operators were not able or willing to proceed on the same lines as their English friends. The interests of the Irish producers seemed to be almost antagonistic to those of the English consumers, and Sir Horace himself was opposed to the idea of organizing stores in Ireland and preferred to confine his efforts to societies of an agricultural type. A certain amount of friction early arose at the Co-operative Congress and it was evident that the financial support of the Co-operative Union could not be long continued. At the same time the demands of the organized societies in Ireland had reached a point at which they could not be met



The American visiting the farm of Edward Mangan. The place was about three miles out of Limerick. The new land laws of Ireland enabled him to buy his farm. He is paying 14 pounds per year as partial payments toward purchase price for a farm for which he originally paid 15 pounds per year in rent alone.

by the efforts of one or two voluntary workers. A permanent staff, with a considerable command of money had become essential. In these circumstances an appeal was made to the public in 1894 and in view of the favorable response the Irish Agricultural Organization Society Limited was inaugurated. This body was to carry on the necessary propagandist and supervisory work for a period of five years, at the end of which time it was to be re-organized as a central federation, controlled and supported by the local societies.

Meanwhile the necessary funds were provided mainly by a large number of philanthropic and public-spirited individuals who took shares to the value of £10,000 in the new society. Some help was still given by the Co-operative Union, which continued to pay Mr. Anderson's expenses as its organizing agent in Ireland.

"Irish Homestead" and First Rural Bank Begun

No less than 315 meetings were held in this year, during which 34 new societies were organized and 15 others started upon. The "Irish Homestead," the well known organ of the movement, was issued for the first time on March 9. In addition to the creameries, which were now thoroughly established, great attention was paid to the organization of agricultural societies for collective purchase. At the same time Messrs. Wolff and Yerburgh, of the English Agricultural Banks Association—both well known as authorities on co-operative credit—were invited to attend a meeting in Ireland and as a



Sir Horace Plunkett and a group of Americans interested in Irish co-operation. From left to right they are: John Warden, President, R.I.; Dr. Thomas W. Carver, Harvard University; Dr. Charles McCarthy, Madison, Wis.; Sir Horace Plunkett; Messrs. Bradford Knapp, a government official engaged in agricultural demonstration work in the South.

result of their advice the first rural bank on the Raiffeisen model (to be described hereafter) was started at Doneraile in Co. Cork, with the object of rescuing the poorer farmers from the clutches of that combination of publican, shopkeeper and money lender who, under the name of "gombeen-man," had been so familiar a figure in Irish rural life. In the next year also a deputation was sent to Denmark to enquire into the methods of co-operative bacon-curing in vogue among the farmers there, but the question was considered too large to be dealt with at once.

The final severance from the Co-operative Union took place in the year 1895 and arose out of the purchase by the Co-operative Wholesale Society of England, of various creameries in Ireland, to be worked in the interests of the consumer. This the I.A.O.S. regarded as a most unco-operative action and an unfortunate civil war was waged on the subject for six or seven years, terminating only in the re-sale by the wholesale of these creameries to co-operative societies.

Meanwhile the societies were increasing sufficiently in numbers and importance to be able to attract public attention, and during the next few years we find the beginnings of a severe struggle between the co-operative movement on the one hand and the vested interests of trade on the other.

A General Trade Federation Organized

A great step forward was taken in the year 1897-8 by the foundation of the Irish Agricultural Wholesale Society Ltd., to act as a trade federation for the whole movement. This body, which will be dealt with in a future article, has been of the utmost service to the organized farmers in breaking thru various rings and combinations of manufacturers, and it now has a trade approaching half a million pounds a year. It has been handicapped like all other parts of the movement by a considerable lack of capital, and in studying the history of these earlier years we may feel that it was an unfortunate thing that more stress was not laid on the necessity of societies supporting their central bodies with their own contributions. Thus in 1897 we find the I.A.O.S. nearly bankrupt and being supported by the voluntary efforts of Sir Horace Plunkett and other philanthropic persons, altho the societies organized by it had at the time a turnover of £400,000 a year. A contribution of 4 per cent. on turnover at this time would have made the movement absolutely self-supporting—but nothing approaching this amount was forthcoming.

In addition to the purely co-operative work of the I.A.O.S. it had from the beginning made itself responsible for a very large amount of technical instruction, which was not provided by any public body but was urgently needed in Ireland before

the farmers could even avail themselves of the advantages of co-operation. It was apparent, however, that such work ought to be done by the State and in 1895 Sir Horace Plunkett succeeded in getting together a most representative body of Irishmen (known as the Recess Committee) to consider the whole question of future policy in this matter. The report of this committee, which has become a standard work on the subject, advocated the appointment of a separate Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction in Ireland, which should work in harmony with the I.A.O.S. for the building of a better rural civilization in Ireland. State aid under this scheme was "to evoke and supplement, but not to provide a substitute for organized self-help." After a considerable delay, during which the I.A.O.S. had gradually converted itself into a central federation controlled (but not, unfortunately, supported) by the societies, struggled bravely with the burden of technical education under grave financial difficulties, the Department was established in 1900, and Sir Horace Plunkett was appointed its first executive head.

Government Connection Weakened Society

During the seven years that he held this office the Department gradually assumed the functions of a technical nature hitherto borne by the voluntary body, and, with the approval of the democratically constituted Council of Agriculture and Agricultural Board, gave liberal assistance to the I.A.O.S., in order that the new educational facilities provided might have the immense advantage of dealing with organized instead of isolated farmers. During this period considerable progress was made and the number of societies in Ireland with their turnover reached imposing proportions; but the necessity of placing officers of the Department on the committee of the society not only hampered its work to a considerable extent but also tended to weaken the spirit of self-reliance among the societies. Farmers tended to confuse the voluntary and the State agency, and on the one hand they held that it was no longer necessary to support the I.A.O.S., while on the other hand the influence of that body was considerably weakened in some quarters, where the Department was regarded with suspicion.

A change came in 1907 when the political pressure of small shopkeepers, who believed their interests to be injured by the interworking of the Department and the I.A.O.S., was sufficient to cause the government, thru the Nationalist party, to procure the resignation of Sir Horace from his position. His successor, T. W. Russell, a nominee of the Nationalists, at once made it plain that he intended to reverse the whole policy of the Department. Upon an allegation—subsequently proved to be quite unfounded—of political action on the part of the president of the I.A.O.S. the Department's grants were withdrawn. The essential harmony between the two bodies was rapidly and thoroughly destroyed and gave place to a highly unprofitable controversy, which has raged ever since.

British Government Aid

Even at this crisis the sinews of war were provided by philanthropic persons and the I.A.O.S.



Mangan has used co-operative credit to buy some very fine stock. The use of the co-operative marketing and credit has enabled him to take advantage of the land tenure laws and he is becoming a very prosperous farmer.

continued its work undaunted, with increasing success. It was soon apparent, however, that if the work were to go on it would be necessary to supplement the income of the society from some outside source. In the year 1909 the British government passed an act appointing commissioners for the purpose of aiding the development of agriculture and also the improvement of roads. One of the ways in which these commissioners were to fulfill their object was stated as the encouragement of

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