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AGRICULTURAL CO-OPERATION IN NORTH WALES.

A Study in Experience

BY

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PREFACE.

Conservative as farmers are often thought to be, there are interested persons, and even some farmers, who are always ready to suggest that new forms of organisation or drastic modifications of existing machinery are necessary when new farming problems call for solution. There is no doubt that improvements in systems and methods of marketing farm produce are urgently required, or that the attainment of any really satisfactory improvement must have its reactions on farming practices. Nor is there any doubt that in the harmonising of supply and demand; in securing economy and speed in distribution; and generally in the attainment of more satisfactory marketing, there is room for many forms of organisation. Yet in Wales it would be folly to assume that everywhere it would be better to begin anew and ignore the existing organisations which are now under farmers' control.

Agricultural co-operation in general, and, in certain times and places, individual societies are subjected to much criticism mainly, if not merely, because they are public or semi-public in character. If private businesses or financial concerns were subjected to the same inspection, the same criticism, it could hardly be suggested that they would stand the tests better than the co-operative societies. They are not subject to the same criticisms merely because they are personal or private and because their conditions are private and their results are more or less secret. It is sometimes a source of weakness to societies that their affairs are semi-public, but there should be compensating advantages in the understanding and confidence of members. These advantages are not fully realised because there is a lack of comparative information. Any interested persons in a locality may know some details of a co-operative concern while they have only vague ideas of conditions in the competing private businesses. But were it possible to compare prices, qualities, service, profits and future service or future production between co-operative and private businesses it is almost certain that the results would be favourable to the great majority of co-operative societies in Wales.

However this may be, it is quite certain that farmers have more regard for their societies, more confidence in them, than their public or semi-public utterances would lead the superficial observer to imagine. It is very certain that even farmers who criticise would dread the possible loss of their societies, and with good reason. The co-operative society, like the State, is expected to bring forward the millenium without too much pressure on the tenderest spots or too much restriction of the proclivities of the individual. The farmer will kick at both the co-operative society and the State, but when other people begin to kick he will give both his protection and support.

Nowhere is this more true than in Wales, and it was for this reason, amongst others, that it has been deemed advisable to examine the present position and past experiences of the co-operative societies as a preliminary to the consideration of the needs of further organisations and their forms. This study follows one of a somewhat similar character of societies in South Wales (*Agricultural Co-operation in South Wales: An Economic and Financial Analysis*, by J. Morgan Jones), but it differs from the former in that it covers the general experience during the last quarter of a century, while the South Wales study dealt more closely with the static conditions of 1926. No study of agricultural co-operation in North Wales at this date could gather together all the details of experience, for many of them have been lost. In particular, this study has left out the very important personal elements in the history of the movement. While this aspect of the study deserves treatment, and while those who have given of their service and wealth to the good of the movement should be honoured by record, it was felt that available resources should at the moment be used for the most practical aims.

The aim has been that of gathering together such of the experiences as could now be collected for the benefit of those who may wish to consider lines of future action. More information on some aspects, especially the finance and organisation of requisite societies, than is here presented has been collected and analysed, but this may be reserved for the more special uses of private and semi-private advisory services.

The collection and preparation of data in this report is ascribed as to Chapters 2, 3 and 5 to Mr. J. Morgan Jones, and as to Chapters 1 and 4 jointly to Mr. Jones and Mr. R. Harding Wynne. The Department has been fortunate in

having the assistance of Mr. Wynne in this specialised study of the dairy societies, and his interest in the data of the general report.

The Authors and the Department gratefully acknowledge the skilled and unremitting help rendered by Mr. Hugh James, of the Welsh Agricultural Organisation Society; and by Mr. R. Parry and Mr. Manod Owen, of Stapleton Cotton House, and the consideration shown by all members of these bodies. They also wish specially to recognise their indebtedness to many farmers and other interested persons, too numerous to mention by name, who have assisted them in their *post-mortem* examination of defunct societies. The comedies as well as the tragedies of agricultural co-operation have often been raised to life in their interviews with its Midwives and Undertakers. But even those who have suffered have still courage and sense enough to drag out experience for examination in daylight, and while this is so there is hope for the movement. The representatives of existing societies should also be thanked for their help and encouragement, but the Authors and the Department hope to meet them again and render service for service.

A. W. ASHBY.

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