



Building Co-operation: A Business History of The Co-operative Group, 1863-2013

John F. Wilson, Anthony Webster, Rachael Vorberg-Rugh

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Building Co-operation traces the development of The Co-operative Group and its predecessor, the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), over the course of 150 years.

Born from the efforts of the Rochdale Pioneers and others who established successful consumer co-operatives across Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, by the 1860s the proponents of the CWS were ready to pioneer a new effort: a federation, democratically run and collectively owned, that would enable co-operatives to become their own suppliers. From humble origins, the CWS grew into one of Britain's largest businesses within a generation, pioneering modern retailing and distribution on a national scale, expanding into factory production and financial services, and establishing an international supply network that stretched across Europe, and beyond. Throughout the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, co-operative societies provided essential services to millions of members across Britain, ranging from food and clothing to banking, insurance, travel agency, pharmacy and even funeral services.

However, in the second half of the twentieth century co-operatives experienced a protracted period of decline, facing a series of internal structural challenges, fierce competition amongst food retailers, and a rapidly-changing marketplace. By the turn of the twenty-first century, when many commentators were ready to consign co-operatives to the past, The Co-operative Group emerged with a revitalised business model that has helped to re-invigorate the British co-operative sector and bring new attention to the important role of co-operative and mutual enterprises worldwide.

Based on extensive archival research, including many records available to historians for the first time, Building Co-operation is the story of a distinctive business model as it evolved over time. While since the inauguration of the CWS in 1863 the commercial landscape has changed nearly beyond recognition, the values at the heart of The Co-operative Group have remained relevant to succeeding generations, focusing on member benefits and a commitment to ethical trading.

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