

Gary Lewis – A personal View

I have the privilege today of delivering two papers to honour the memory and contribution of Dr Gary Lewis.

In the first of these, Professor Greg Patmore has asked me to personally reflect on my time working with Gary. My second presentation this afternoon, explores more the themes and lessons I have taken from Gary's work and how they are helping inform my current doctoral research. These include the issues of co-operative capital, democracy, and co-operatives general fight for competitive survival and wider legitimacy. A thread connects both these personal and professional reflections. At its heart, Gary's work was characterised by integrity and passion. This is seen most obviously in how he approached the task he set himself of writing, almost single handedly, the history of co-operatives in this country. These values also informed the way he lived his life. I will return to this latter, more personal aspect later in the presentation.

I want to begin, however, by sharing some thoughts about co-operative historians to provide a little context. While there are many researchers from different disciplinary perspectives drawn to the study of co-operatives, there is something about co-operative historians which is, I believe, singly appealing. They are generally not distant academics working on abstract concepts or just crunching numbers, but engaged researchers seeking out and participating in the respective co-operative movements of their countries and globally. Whether it is the late Professor Ian MacPherson, or Professors Brett Fairbairn and Lou Hammon-Ketilison all three from Canada, Professor Johnson Birchall and Dr Rita Rhodes both from the UK or Professor Hans Munkner from Germany or indeed Professor Greg Patmore back here in Australia, all have been actively involved with the wider co-operative movement, getting their hands dirty in the search for meaning and understanding among members of these democratic member-based organisations. As a group, these historians are genuinely interested in people and their organisations. They care for and about the subject of their research. They do the critical job of chronicling, cradling and shepherding the history of the movement which would otherwise be lost and forgotten. They tell us who and what we are and of our journey here. The trials and tribulations of that journey can best be told through pragmatic research; through activist, engaged research. Dr Gary Lewis belongs in and has a special place within this tradition. Not only that, his historical research has been of the highest order and has deservedly earned an international reputation.

Gary's professional path crossed with mine over the course of roughly three decades as we both, in our own ways, worked to advance the co-operative cause. There were periods when we were working very closely together on several specific projects. Other times, as when I was working at the ICA, in Geneva, and in more recent years, our contact was more infrequent. But like old mates we were able to resume our conversations as if no time had passed. Shared passions can often easily bridge time and distance.

Our most active period of collaboration coincided with my period working with the NSW Registry of Co-operatives – roughly the decade 1989 – 1999 and the following years up to the end of 2003, when I was jointly managing, along with the late Prof Mark Lyons, the

Australian Centre for Co-operative Research and Development (ACCORD) which was based at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and Charles Sturt University (CSU) at Bathurst. This roughly fourteen-year period overlapped with the approximately twenty years from 1985 to 2006, during which Gary researched and published almost all his major co-operative books and papers. During this period, he was working against the wider canvas of fundamental, neoliberal inspired, change in Australia and worldwide. The co-operative and mutual sector looked very different at the end of this period when compared to the beginning. As Brett Fairbairn has suggested we construct the past, our history if you like, based on our present-day concerns. One can see that for Gary, particularly towards the end of this period, these concerns were of a most existential kind. Would, or should, the co-operative model survive in Australia.

Gary's research ranged across all the major areas of co-operative and mutual activity in this country, apart from mutual insurance. This included the agricultural, banking, retail and wholesale industry sectors. Several common themes linked these various parts of the movement together. These included, disunity and organisational and institutional weakness, the general lack of overall strategic leadership contrasted with on occasion outstanding individual co-operative leadership, the shallowness of the commitment to co-operative principles by many, and the key role of the state. Unlike several of his overseas colleagues, who took a comparative historical approach, contrasting various countries' co-operative development, Gary's focus was mainly confined to his own country, often, specifically NSW. His was a uniquely Australian voice telling the story of this nation's co-operative history.

Three of his books are especially relevant from my perspective. Firstly, his doctoral thesis which was completed at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1989 and published as *A Middle Way: Rochdale Co-operatives in New South Wales, 1859 – 1986* in 1992. Secondly, his history of the largely successful credit union movement, *People Before Profit: The Credit Union Movement in Australia* (1996). And finally, his last co-operative book, *The Democracy Principle: Farmer Co-operatives in the Twentieth Century* (2006). These are foundational pieces of historical research and rightly sit at the centre of any serious study of co-operatives and mutuals in this country. This body of work not only provides insights into the evolution, growth and decline of co-operatives in Australia, but also places that narrative within the broader context of Australian history, drawing linkages with wider economical and societal trends. Helping to sustain Gary in the writing of these histories, was, as he noted in the last of these books, the fact that his historical research had acknowledged and practical value in informing the present and future practice of co-operation in this country.

In addition to the three more general histories, Gary also produced a history of the rice industry, *An Illustrated History of the Riverina Rice Industry, Ricegrowers' Co-operative Limited* (1994) and of one credit union, *A Mutual Way: Fifty Years at Gateway Credit Union Ltd* (2005). Three shorter papers under the ACCORD banner were also completed:

- *Successful Co-operatives – the Valencia Experience*, (2000)
- *Co-operatives in rural renewal: the case of Arranmore, Ireland* (2000)
- *Laughing all the way to the Credit Union: the CreditCare experience in 'No Bank' towns, 1995-2000*, (2000)

This is a serious body of work. It was no easy task to complete, because, despite its critical importance, co-operative history is generally a niche area of research. You do not undertake it to become rich and famous. Most co-operative historians are located within academia. It is an especially tough road for independent researchers like Gary. They lack an institutional and supportive base and work is only occasionally available. The main source of commissioned work is either from government, including in the past the NSW Registry of Co-operatives, individual co-operatives, or from representatives of parts of the wider movement. On occasion, research centres, like ACCORD, were able to also support individual research projects. This is in part how Gary was able to undertake his research. He was also strongly supported by his wife along with undertaking some other part- and full-time work. It goes without saying, you need a passion for the cause to follow this chosen career path.

As I have already mentioned Gary was an active engaged researcher. He willingly provided his expertise as a member of one of the working parties for the wide-ranging NSW Government's *Co-operatives 2000* strategic planning exercise which I initiated and coordinated in the early 1990's. He was also a regular and popular speaker across a range of forums and events, presenting papers on co-operative history at two of the *Key Issues Conferences* I organised in the mid 1990's. In fact, he gives detailed accounts of the 1994 and, in particular, the 1995 conferences, in *The Democracy Principle*.

Co-operative history is however, most useful when it is widely known and appreciated. Gary, like many other co-operative historians believed passionately in the value of co-operative education. It has often been said, including by Gary, that co-operatives will only last a generation and a half without supporting co-operative education. To this end, Gary lectured widely including at co-operative seminars run at Monash University with Dr Race Mathews, and at the then *Asia Pacific Co-operative Training Centre* which ran courses for co-operative and credit union members and directors. Additionally, he regularly addressed various co-operative boards of directors, members and co-operative groups like the Queensland Community Co-operative Council, throughout Australia. He was also involved in a range of activities with the Australia Association of Co-operatives (AAC), the forerunner in some senses of the Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals (BCCM).

There is however one experience at ACCORD which I think is illustrative of the plight of those of us concerned with advancing and preserving co-operative history in this country. In fact, it started with one of the last pieces of work, I was able to offer Gary, while I was still at ACCORD. It involved the cataloguing of the research centre's archive housed in a building at CSU's campus in Bathurst. Gary set about this task with his familiar good humour. He sorted, boxed and catalogued this somewhat eclectic, large and variable collection of material gathered over the years by my colleagues and myself. The collection itself, was not acquired in any systematic way. It consisted in part of old Registry of Co-operatives documents such as Registrar's reports and writings of which Gary was an admirer, especially ones such as by Alf Sheldon. Sheldon along with some of the other earlier Registrars of Co-operatives in NSW, had earned Gary's respect for their dedication, energy and expertise in understanding, administering and developing various parts of the co-operative sector. Several of these old

Registry documents had been rescued in the comparatively recent past by concerned and long-time Registry staff from big bins where they had been thrown, after yet another Registry and departmental restructure. It's worth noting Gary drew on many documents in the ACCORD archive for *The Democracy Principle* which he was writing at the same time as his cataloguing task.

The story of the ACCORD archive does not end there, however. With the demise of ACCORD in 2005, the library now lacked a permanent institutional home. Despite some measures being taken to try and secure its future in other CSU campus-based centres, its fate was ultimately sealed when the temporary building at CSU in which it was housed was demolished because of asbestos concerns. I understand that only a small part of the collection survives, today. This sad saga offers, I think, a real lesson for those of us who, like Gary, value the sources and original documents of history. The fact that an independent co-operative researcher without an institutional home, should be the person who catalogued a co-operative collection, which ultimately found itself, also without an institutional home is perhaps a little too ironic. There is a need for an ongoing and secure home for such co-operative resources in Australia. The experience of the credit union history project shows the real value of such an enduring and well managed resource. There should also be, I would suggest, an institutional base for someone like Gary who devoted this life and energies to this movement.

Turning now to another aspect of Gary's writings. The American conservative satirist H.L. Mencken is quoted as once saying that a 'historian: (is) an unsuccessful novelist'. Perhaps, for some, but Gary was evidence you could be both. If you allow me to borrow another, this time movie quote, he could do both 'country and western'. His last book was published in 2013. It was a novel about the Great War. It was a tribute to his father and drew on his father's experiences as an AIF infantryman serving in Gallipoli, France and Belgium between 1915 and 1918. The novel is a reminder of the futility of war. He had worked on it for over 6 years from around 2007 to 2013. It is possible to see this novel as offering Gary a creative and necessary outlet after his more focused non-fiction co-operative works which had consumed him over the previous twenty years. It's writing coincided with what could possibly be viewed as a period of weariness and quiet despair with the travails of the Australian co-operative movement.

Like any serious true believer, Gary had periods of doubt about the area he had chosen to make the focus of this life's work. He always believed that there had never been what you could call a co-operative movement, as such, in this country, not in any real sense, say compared to those of many other countries. Yes, there were co-operatives and mutuals, although even these were seemingly in comparative decline at the wider economic level. And while seeing the past as perhaps rosier or having had more possibilities than the present could be viewed as an occupational hazard of the historian, he nevertheless was expressing his frustration at the lack of effective co-operative leadership in this country. The missed opportunities, the lack of unity as seen, for example, in the tussle between pragmatists and idealists within the consumer co-operatives, the antagonism dividing co-operatives of producers and co-operatives of sellers, and the subsequent disappearance of

the rural co-operative movement's 'backbone' subsumed within capital. All this along with the failure by many to understand their own history fuelled Gary's (doubts) about the ability of co-operatives to ever realise their potential in this country.

This is not to say that at the end he did not return to his true professional home. He gave stirring evidence before the Senate Inquiry into co-operatives and mutuals, and remained, as ever, encouraging and generous in giving his time and advice, to those whose current job it was to advance the movement in this country. And although expressing the view that while it might only be wishful thinking, Gary said that maybe this time, now today, even he thought the zeitgeist has nuanced and people en masse are ready to consider the co-operative and mutual alternative seriously. Let's hope so.

I mentioned at the beginning Gary's passion for both this work and life, generally. It is interesting to reflect on how one organises their professional and personal life, the life work balance if you like. I gained a little more insight into this after hearing several family and friends speak at Gary's memorial service earlier this year. There were aspects of his life I had not been fully unaware of. I saw a different, additional face to the person I had professionally known and worked with. Such revelations are sometimes tinged with regret. Regret that one did not fully appreciate this earlier. I knew, for example, of Gary's deep interest in music and literature. I remember late one night receiving a tap on my shoulder as I sat in the hazy atmosphere of the blues tent at the Woodford Folk Festival. It was Gary. But there was a more active, developed artist side to his musical interest. He was by temperament a creative, artistic person. Graham Bond (of Aunty Jack fame) a lifelong childhood friend mentioned Gary's deep love of music at his memorial service. A video was played of Gary playing guitar and singing a particularly moving song, I think composed by him. These and other creative and intellectual passions mentioned by various friends, along with his deep love of his wife and family speak of someone who gave fully and creatively of himself in his personal and social life. I am particularly touched therefore, when creative, bright, caring people chose the rocky road of co-operative historian as their profession.

Gary has left us a lasting legacy. His books spell out the success and the all too many disappointments that have accompanied the history of the movement in Australia. There are lessons for all of us, if we only take the time to read and understand them. But even more than this written legacy, the image I have of Gary is of a free, courageous and passionate spirit who dedicated the greater part of his professional life to trying to realise what he once called the best idea ever invented – co-operation.

Garry Cronan