AN IMPERFECT UNION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF WILLIAM WATKINS AND THE NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL AND PROVIDENT CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY TO CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN MID NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN

Martin Purvis

WORKING PAPER 93/11

SCHOOL OF GEOGRAPHY • UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

WORKING PAPER 93/11

AN IMPERFECT UNION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF WILLIAM WATKINS AND THE NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL AND PROVIDENT CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY TO CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN MID NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN.

MARTIN PURVIS

SCHOOL OF GEOGRAPHY
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

EXPLORING THE DIVERSITY OF CO-OPERATION

It is no easy task to define the nature of co-operation in nineteenth century Britain, not least because of the variety of collective initiatives to which the label "co-operative" has been applied. The range of consumer, producer and community groups was wide, each with their own perspectives on the aims and methods of co-operation. It is thus paradoxical that many of the standard accounts of the period reveal little of this diversity and debate, concentrating on a few dominant strands within co-operation rather than the rich complexity of the whole. Texts on nineteenth century co-operation outline a narrative of development in which such luminaries as the Rochdale Pioneers play a prominent part.[1] Yet in praising established heroes insufficient attention may be given to alternative strains within co-operation; thus we risk over-simplifying, perhaps even distorting, co-operative history. While the presentation of a comprehensive overview of co-operative development lies beyond the modest objectives of the present paper, the exploration of individual elements of co-operative diversity is argued to be a valuable contribution towards this larger end.

Several authors have considered initiatives early in the nineteenth century that predate, or were contemporary with, the Rochdale Pioneers.[2] Backstrom has examined the role of Christian Socialism in promoting co-operation around mid-century and its contribution to the institutional development of the movement.[3] But other elements within co-operation remain largely unexplored. Attention here focuses on the later 1850s and early 1860s and

more specifically on the role of the propagandist and promoter William Watkins in the co-operative expansion of these years. The part played by Watkins has some parallels with that of the Christian Socialists. Like them, his direct involvement was short-lived [4] and his aim of shaping co-operation to his own design was unfulfilled. However, Watkins was a formidable publicist who, even if he failed to win mass support for his own particular ideas, raised popular awareness of co-operative principles and promoted practical experimentation. Thus he had an important and lasting impact on co-operative development.

It is difficult to discover much about Watkins beyond his contribution to the cause of provident and friendly institutions. Yet even for this he receives no attention in most co-operative histories.[5] Only Holyoake makes a brief reference, whose disparaging tone doubtless reflects earlier disagreements between the two men.[6] Watkins was most prominent in the years around 1860 when co-operative expansion through the foundation of new societies reached a peak subsequently unequalled.[7] He claimed, moreover, to have contributed significantly to this upsurge; "we have been mainly instrumental in bringing the question of co-operation fully before the public."[8] Others concurred that Watkins inspired an interest which, temporarily, "raged ... with all the passion and fervour of a new religion."[9] This largely reflected his journalism, a role as a publicist which he supplemented with public speaking. From this developed a more active involvement in promoting provident institutions as Watkins offered to draft rules and oversee the legal registration of new

societies. Ultimately this led to the establishment of the National Industrial and Provident Co-operative Society as a vehicle for the implementation of Watkins' own distinctive ideas about the form and purpose of co-operation. Thus he was one of the most active workers for the cause of provident institutions during the late 1850s and early 1860s.

Yet Watkins' prominence was short-lived, by the autumn of 1861 his promotion of co-operation had effectively collapsed. This perhaps explains his virtual absence from the published record, but it does not constitute a denial of his importance. This paper examines Watkins' several related roles: as journalist, as an agent offering assistance in establishing co-operatives, and as leader of the National society. In so doing it not only explores the existence of alternative strands within nineteenth century co-operation but also engages with a larger theme which has been accorded some significance in studies of the development of the Victorian polity. This is the relationship between governmental and administrative structures at the local and national levels. Previous work has concentrated on exploring the tensions and interdependencies between the national and the local within the developing framework of the nineteenth century state.[10] However, such concerns are no less relevant in the study of the new popular institutions; here too there were tensions over the distribution of power and resources. Watkins' efforts to develop a national co-operative organisation provide an instance when those tensions were thrown into sharp relief.

PROMOTING CO-OPERATION AND ASSURANCE

Watkins' most obvious legacy is his journalism. Writing as "Unitas" he contributed to Reynolds's Newspaper for around ten years after mid-century. He also published a weekly paper The National Co-operative Leader between November 1860 and May 1861. In this way Watkins reached his largest audience. Particularly important was Reynolds's Newspaper, a popular Sunday paper with nationwide sales in the years around 1860 of around 150,000 per issue.[11] This circulation was amongst the highest of any Victorian newspaper and clearly outstripped the modest sales of specifically co-operative journals. The Co-operator was the most substantial amongst the latter, but even its claims in June 1861 of monthly sales of nearly 10,000 per issue were probably an exaggeration.[12] Thus it is hardly surprising that Reynolds's inspired and informed co-operatives formed during the expansion of the late 1850s and early 1860s. An early example comes from Batley Carr where the society formed in 1856 owed its existence to a report by the radical lawyer Samuel Kydd of his visit to Rochdale and the Pioneers' store.[13] The paper carried coverage of co-operation from several correspondents, but Watkins made the greatest contribution through his regular columns. Indeed his attention was not confined to co-operation; the pieces which he contributed at roughly fortnightly intervals between April 1858 and October 1860 being originally entitled "The Friendly Societies' Advocate". Initially attention was devoted to friendly, benefit, sick and loan societies. Considerable effect being claimed for his journalism and advice to individual

correspondents: "Numerous are the societies that have been established through our means; while others, from adopting the principles laid down in these columns, have been saved from insolvency...."[14] Some confirmation of Watkins' role as an information source comes from the correspondence reproduced in Reynolds's. But it is perhaps the substantial size of his readership that provides the strongest support for Watkins' claims.

The slight attention to co-operation in Watkins' early writings reflects the limited general interest in the idea in the mid 1850s. However, later in the decade Watkins responded to the changing image of co-operation and himself contributed significantly to increasing popular awareness of the issue. Early notice included a favourable review of Holyoake's history of the Rochdale Pioneers, Self-Help by the People.[15] Such publicity would have helped its rapid sales, fostering its prominence as a source of co-operative inspiration.[16] Further endorsement of co-operation came in reply to correspondents seeking information on the topic and Watkins indicated a willingness actively to assist societies: "Judiciously managed they cannot fail; and we know of few better investments suited to a body of energetic working men. When fairly started, we shall at all times be ready with assistance, whether as regards advice or publicity."[17] Shortly afterwards his journalism became more specifically focused on co-operation. He wrote that his devotion of several columns to the issue reflected the suggestions of "numerous correspondents" and the suitability of co-operative retailing as

a response to prevailing high prices and expectations of increased adulteration arising from Continental wars and the threat of British involvement.[18]

The manner of his introduction of co-operation reflects Watkins' practical approach to the issue. Stores were an "investment for the working classes" and he stressed parallels between co-operatives and joint-stock companies.[19] Writing slightly later Watkins noted that "The fundamental principle of co-operation is essentially mercantile"; any association with Owenism, Chartism, "secularism, radicalism, or any other 'ism'" was rejected.[20] For Watkins such ideological links were extraneous, only serving to alienate popular sympathies; they were thus identified as the cause of previous co-operative failures.[21]

Watkins' initial discussion of the advantages of co-operative trading stressed the financial return of the dividend, and the superiority of stores which offered fair prices, full weight and freedom from adulteration.[22] He complemented this with guidance on procedures for founding societies and framing their rules. Again he emphasised practicalities: raising capital, financial management, limiting credit and sensible stocking of basic items in daily demand. In discussing dividends, however, he modified the convention of returning a monetary bonus to consumers in proportion to their purchases. Instead, reflecting his interest in friendly societies, he suggested that surpluses be partly devoted to establishing a fund making weekly payments to society members in sickness or other hardships. Thus he claimed assurance

benefits could be obtained without expenditure beyond the necessary purchase of provisions.[23]

Watkins developed this idea in a series of articles entitled "Co-operation and Mutual Insurance", declaring that "assurance was the lever of the age, and co-operation the fulcrum."[24] Independently the two were valuable but their combination yielded still greater reward. Co-operation by enabling assurance for all would reduce the need for statutory poor relief, benefitting both those receiving and those funding relief. Moreover, Watkins argued that his system would increase co-operation's appeal. Stores' custom and profits would grow rapidly for "when ... we bring the two powers into operation together, what has taken years to accomplish by the Rochdale and other stores will be done in one-fourth the time."[25]

PLANNING A NATIONAL SOCIETY

Watkins noted in December 1859 that "Communications for further information flow into us from all parts."[26] Consequently "we have ... been instrumental in the formation of a number of co-operative societies, and in inducing hundreds to join those already established."[27] Indeed the promotion of provident institutions apparently became Watkins' occupation with the claim that he had abandoned "other engagements to devote himself exclusively to these important branches of our social system."[28] Watkins advertised himself as an agent specialising in the analysis of the financial and actuarial affairs of friendly

societies and the preparation and registration of rules for provident institutions. He also arranged the printing of rule books and the supply of other stationary to societies. His activities may thus be compared with the more widely acknowledged efforts of William Cooper of Rochdale and indeed some infant co-operatives sought help from both sources.[29] Services were offered on a commercial basis with Watkins being paid a "moderate" commission. Co-operators in Maidstone, for example, paid 10s 6d to arrange their registration.[30]

In February 1860 Watkins named some of the groups whose rules he was preparing for registration as co-operatives; most were claimed to be adopting the principle of profit division in the form of assurance. Their locations included several districts of London - Pimlico, Stepney, Bethnal Green, Clerkenwell, Deptford, Paddington and Whitechapel - elsewhere he had links with groups in Croyden, Crockenhill, Brighton, Bristol, Devonport, Birmingham, Tipton, Grimsby, Harrogate, Hartlepool and Newcastle. The geographical range of this list supports Watkins' claims of impact; the concentration in London perhaps reflected a greater involvement in affairs in his own locality, including speaking at public meetings.[31] Virtually all the places listed were in areas with little existing co-operative presence. Without the possibility of advice from an established store in their own vicinity would-be co-operatives perhaps turned to correspondence with a source such as Watkins. Conversely, the availability of local information may explain the limited contacts Watkins had in Lancashire and the West Riding, areas of established co-

operative strength.

Watkins claimed knowledge of fifty societies sympathetic to his idea of combining co-operation and assurance; although these cannot all be individually identified.[32] Moreover, their number was growing: "During the past eight days alone, upwards of thirty fresh towns have written for instructions to open stores under the new principle."[33] By May 1860 Watkins claimed to have fostered stores in Dublin, the major urban centres of Scotland, south Wales, and that he had adherents in every English county.[34] Doubtless in some localities interest in these ideas did not crystallise into practical experimentation. However, registration documents and rule books deposited with the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies (also responsible for co-operatives) confirm Watkins' involvement in forming societies in many of the places specified. Indeed the list he published can be supplemented with a further seven societies in and around London, and seven others in towns including Luton, Crewe, Liverpool, Hull and Darlington; all registered during 1860.[35]

Yet Watkins looked for faster growth, suggesting that thousands of stores could be opened within months if existing friendly and benefit societies invested their resources in retailing co-operatives, whose profits would fund assurance benefits.[36] He also argued for greater co-ordination between co-operatives, raising the idea of a central wholesale supplier for stores.[37] Soon Watkins was writing of a projected national body with a wider role in organising co-operatives throughout the country,

overseeing their financial management and the assurance system. Thus in January 1860 he announced that "The National Industrial and Provident Co-operative Society is actively at work, and will soon be in readiness to undertake the wholesale supply of small co-operative stores, as well as assurance."[38] The rules of this society were registered in March 1860. Control was vested in a London-based board of six directors, including Watkins who acted as secretary. Central premises in Euston Road, London were opened for wholesale and retail operations in October.[39]

Initially Watkins promoted the National society through Reynolds's Newspaper stressing the advantages accruing to affiliated stores, especially the small and young, of sympathetic attention from an efficient wholesaler with immediate access to important metropolitan markets for imported groceries. The society would also supply experienced shopkeepers for local co-operatives.[40] A still greater departure from traditions of local autonomy was the announcement that the National society would itself establish stores in localities where support was forthcoming yet independent initiative was problematic.[41] It was later suggested that some such branches might be both retailers and centres for bulk purchase of agricultural produce supplying the National society's wholesaling operation.[42]

The institution of a branch network may also have reflected a sense of pique at the course of co-operative development. Despite the role of Watkins and Reynolds's Newspaper in promoting the issue only a minority adhered to his distinctive version of co-

operation. Watkins later wrote that "upwards of one hundred societies were shortly established, under our instructions; but not one of them aided to build up or throw in funds to stock a central [organisation]", each society was "absorbed in looking after its own interest".[43] However, Watkins claimed that a lack of co-ordination between local initiatives contributed to the many co-operative failures. Others had suggested that an over rapid proliferation of societies, with the collapse of ill-planned and under-funded independent schemes, threatened to prejudice popular opinion against co-operation.[44] Watkins noted therefore that "it requires a strong central power, with 'men of known experience' at the head, to hold in check those who would heedlessly dash into an undertaking of which they have no particular knowledge."[45] A more idealistic hope was that co-ordination would breed a wider spirit of co-operation for

> it is only when local jealousies are trampled out, local dissension stifled, and local intelligence developed by a broad and liberal course of action amongst co-operators, that such results shall be obtained. No avaricious snatching at the fruit before it ripens; no base rivalry as to which store shall give to its little knot of supporters the largest immediate return; but a comprehensive view of the tendency of co-operation - a desire in each locality to aid, to strengthen and then to share with others.[46]

There was therefore a need to supplement existing stores willing to work with the National society by stimulating co-operative development from the top down rather than the bottom up. National

society membership was offered to all groups and individuals subscribing 2s 6d per month to accumulate capital as £1 shares. This was to fund new branches once the number of shareholders in a particular locality was considered sufficient to guarantee custom to sustain a store. Initially this threshold was set at fifty shareholders. However the rapid recruitment of nearly 2,000 members between May and August 1860 led to the simultaneous achievement of this total in several places.[47] In the absence of the resources necessary to redeem the original pledge, the target for local support was raised to 100 members by August 1860. This was financially necessary, but caused ill-will between some local groups and the National society leadership, perhaps fostering divisions that would eventually undermine the enterprise.[48]

Initially the National society was reported to be expanding successfully. The geographical pattern of growth mirrored that of Watkins' previous contacts, with clusters of branches in midland and southern England, especially London, and in south Wales. Only the three stores at Vauxhall, Cardiff and Ystalyfera had been opened by the National society by July 1860. The following quarter saw the addition of national headquarters, "a very commodious and commanding centre" on Euston Road in London, plus stores in Aberdare, Middlesbrough, Stockport, Hertford and Eltham. Particular success was claimed in Hertford where "so great was the rush that policemen had to be stationed to keep the doorway clear."[49] Late in 1860 the society added stores in rented premises at Southwark, Tredegar and Taff's Well. Premises were also being secured in Bridgwater, Taunton, South Petherton,

Faversham, Tunbridge Wells, Maidenhead, Aldershot, Chelsea and Rugeley.[50] Elsewhere, in Pimlico, Wellington (Somerset), Newport (Monmouth), Ruabon, Worcester, Macclesfield, Barnsley, Huddersfield, Eston and Dublin, recruitment of shareholders was approaching the threshold for establishing a store. Moreover "many other places were seriously discussing the question of 'independency' or 'the National'." There is evidence of such local debate at places as distant as Gloucester and Bishop Auckland. Instances in which Watkins' journalism was acknowledged as a source of inspiration by societies which followed the conventional co-operative model include Cwmbach and the Bristol Industrial society.[51]

STRAINING AT THE LEASH: THE DIFFICULTIES OF SUSTAINING A NATIONAL INITIATIVE

However, the financial and organisational structures of the National society were already under strain. Difficulties largely reflected tensions between the central directors and a membership which numbered 2,454 by October 1860. One problem was the pressure from members for the opening of new stores as a concrete return for their investment of capital. These demands, backed by threats of withdrawal or withholding of subscriptions, outstripped the society's capacity to fund their fulfilment. In December 1860 the directors warned that branch numbers were increasing faster than had been envisaged and capital was barely sufficient to keep existing stores supplied let alone to sustain expansion.[52]

Financial difficulties were exacerbated by parallel tensions between the centre and existing stores. These branches were not as willing to devote part of their surpluses to promoting co-operation in other localities as the National plan had originally envisaged, preferring to retain their own funds. National society leaders complained that it was difficult to ensure that shareholders' subscriptions continued to flow in from localities with branch stores to counter-balance outlay on these new premises. Many branches displayed "sluggishness" in forwarding money to central funds:

> As an illustration of the magnitude of this evil, we may mention that not less than £1,500 has been expended by the Central, over and above the amount of the collective shares held ... between eight of our branch establishments.[53]

This "unjust retention of capital" was doing "immense mischief" to the National society.[54] Funds also leaked out of the society as branches obtained their supplies from private dealers in their own localities rather than using the National's wholesaling operations in London or the Aberdare depot established for Wales.[55]

The National society leadership responded by attempting to assert their control over the entire operation, declaring that "It is impossible to condemn too strongly the conduct of local committees in acting independently of the Central."[56] All receipts from branches were to be relayed to the London headquarters, and all accounts including purchases made locally by branch stores were to be settled centrally. But even with

tighter management extra capital was still needed and the alternatives were floated of appealing for additional investment by shareholders or borrowing £1,000 to fund continued expansion. The former was adopted as the less costly option.[57]

Yet the society was still expanding. During its third quarter of operations ending in January 1861 it recruited nearly 800 additional members. The new total of 3,218 was one of the most substantial of any contemporaneous co-operative body. Nineteen stores had been opened; the new locations included Taunton, Rugeley, Barnsley, Aldershot, Maidenhead and Clapham. Premises had been taken for six more and it was claimed that stores would be opened in at least forty localities in the near future.[58] These of themselves are significant totals at a date when the notion of the multiple retailer owning a chain of stores was still very much in its infancy.[59] Sales also increased; the initial three stores had total receipts of £1,179 for the society's first quarter, by the end of the second quarter takings for nine stores totalled £3,605, a further increase yielded £6,493 from the thirteen stores trading throughout the third quarter.[60] A substantial proportion of this total was contributed by the combined retail and wholesale operations in London and Aberdare which both had quarterly takings of over £1,000; Ystalyfera also had significant retail receipts of around £740.[61] The exact profitability of the trading operations is unclear, but at the end of the second quarter it was reported that a 5 per cent dividend would be granted on paid-up shares and shareholders also received a 10 per cent dividend on purchases.

Half the latter was added to the value of their stock and the remainder was credited as assurance cover. Non-shareholding purchasers also received the assurance dividend; cover included free medicines, death grants and sickness benefits, the precise form depending on the expenditure of the individual consumer.[62]

Less healthy were capital subscriptions; these totalled £848 in the first quarter, rising to £1,269 during the second; yet in the third quarter they were only £827. The fall was attributed to the effects of severe winter weather and increased unemployment; indeed hardship caused some withdrawal of capital from the society.[63] Thus it is hardly surprising that the appeal for additional capital attracted only £169 towards the target of £1,000.[64] The society's problems grew, not because it was totally without resources, but because capital was tied up in premises, fixtures and stock leaving inadequate liquidity to sustain trade. In January 1861 reported liquid assets constituted only £234 from a total of £2,953. Reluctantly the option of mortgaging property to raise money was introduced for discussion, further stimulating the dissention that would destroy the society.[65]

Particular anger was expressed from Cardiff that the future of their store should be threatened by mortgaging its premises. The central directors argued that any branch was not the property of the local membership as it had been financed collectively by all National society shareholders. Therefore decisions about the use of any property rested with the national leadership.[66] Cardiff

members, however, asserted the primacy of local control. Rather than follow central directions they preferred to liquidate their store, with stock being divided amongst them in proportion to shareholdings. Indeed they declared that the National society itself was dissolved.[67] This further antagonised the central leadership, already concerned about what was deemed an illegal independent initiative.

Events in Cardiff precipitated further crisis within the National society. At a special delegate meeting on May 21st Watkins noted that legal proceedings were being contemplated to recover the Cardiff store. He also revealed the National society's deepening financial difficulties. Talk of the collapse had led to suppliers submitting claims for immediate payment "not in their usual way, but by means of writs."[68] There were therefore claims for £500 outstanding against the society which it did not have the liquid assets to cover despite owning property worth over £2,000. While the motion that the society be wound up lapsed unseconded, it was decided to allow groups distant from the London headquarters to secede and buy out their own store. Aberdare had already sought separation and Middlesbrough, Barnsley, Tredegar and Ystalyfera also moved to withdraw.[69] To boost the capital of what remained of the National society every member was asked to pay a levy of 2s 6d per share; yielding a potential total of nearly £700.[70]

However, as Watkins wrote: "This step was fatal, as members became alarmed at the pressure, and the great bulk not only refused to pay the levy, but also withheld their usual share

money."[71] The levy raised around £100, meeting only a fraction of the debt to suppliers. By June 1861 the society's headquarters in Euston Road, London was closed. A committee of members from thirteen of the society's branches appointed to consider the financial position could only bow to the inevitable. Theoretically the society had the resources to continue as assets of over £2,000 in premises, fittings and stock, and £1,260 in unpaid shares outstripped debts of £1,300. But as monies for the levy and share subscriptions were being withheld it was impossible to continue trading; the society was wound up and its stores closed.[72]

Details of the break up of the National society are difficult to unearth. Reynolds's Newspaper noted receiving "countless communications, from all parts of the country" but in referring correspondents to the London accountant appointed as the National society's interim manager the paper added "We have no knowledge of the affairs of the Society, and are therefore unable to give any special information concerning them."[73] Watkins' National Co-operative Leader had ceased publication in May 1861 and other co-operative papers were silent on the demise of the National society.

No National society branches, even those which seceded, continued trading after the crises of 1861. However, in cases such as Reigate, members regrouped to launch a new store.[74] Some of the independent societies whose establishment had been assisted by Watkins and which to varying degrees followed his ideas did

survive on into the 1860s. The Hull Co-operative Mutual Assurance Society was still combining retailing with assurance benefits in 1864.[75] Societies survived as retailers through to at least the mid 1860s in Kensington, Clerkenwell, Marylebone, Twickenham, Brighton and Keyham in Devon.[76] However, even in this more conventional form few endured.

POINTS OF TENSION: DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHIES AND GEOGRAPHIES OF CO-OPERATIVE ORGANISATION

Debate within co-operation about the merits of combining retailing with assurance within a centralised institutional structure was thus resolved. But the result should not lead to underestimation of the importance of contemporary discussion. Local groups contemplating co-operation did consider these issues. There was also tension between leading co-operators; Watkins exchanged argument with officers of the Rochdale Pioneers. Holyoake too asserted the importance of local independence and labelled assurance as a "speculative business" which would endanger the economic safety of co-operation.[77] There were also charges, albeit unproven, that Watkins had mismanaged the registration of some societies and had exerted undue pressure on them to follow his brand of co-operation.[78] Disquiet was also expressed about the negative picture of existing co-operatives given by Watkins; his comments about the ease with which cash dividends could be spent on drink caused particular offense.[79]

Such exchanges testify to Watkins' impact. The reality of debate contrasts with the conventional portrayal of the Rochdale Pioneers as the undisputed focus of co-operative development during the late 1850s and 1860s. Although Watkins' ideas owed much to the example of Rochdale and other established societies they would, if they had been more widely adopted, have created a co-operative system rather different from that which emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century. An examination of the values which Watkins saw embodied in co-operation perhaps prompts us to think in more general terms about notions of collectivity and individualism. The National society's planned use of its surpluses to provide insurance benefits harnessed collective endeavour to provide individual benefits. In many ways this parallels the primacy of reward to the individual consumer under the more conventional co-operative system of dividends on purchases. However, many independent local societies also devoted resources to truly collective provision in such forms as social events, educational classes, libraries, meeting halls and other premises, thus fostering a much stronger notion of co-operation as a communal endeavour. Watkins' erosion of this collective element of co-operation is also consistent with his ideas about the establishment of a national system of societies, which while yielding potential commercial and financial efficiencies would inevitably work against the development of association based on immediate and personal ties.

The failure of Watkins' ideas demonstrates both the power of mainstream co-operation and the difficulties of co-ordinating an

operation on a national scale; the problems of running an extensive business, and of uniting the human sympathies of a scattered membership. The forces of localism which helped to undermine the National society were exactly those which gave independent co-operative societies much of their strength. As Ogborn notes it is misleading to dismiss a desire for local autonomy as necessarily a reactionary or destructive force. Reference to the creative "vitality of local practice" seems particularly appropriate in the case of co-operatives and other popular institutions.[80] However, some of Watkins' perspectives on co-operation found later echoes. His strictures about the potentially destructive effects of rivalry between independent local societies seem to parallel increasing efforts from at least the 1870s onwards to restrict competition on grounds such as dividend levels and to police overlaps between the areas served by individual societies.[81] Moreover, growing concerns about the lack of indigenous development of societies in the so-called "co-operative deserts" led to efforts albeit frequently abortive to induce their establishment through outside financial and managerial assistance. In such initiatives key organising roles were played by national federal bodies, the Co-operative Wholesale Society and the Co-operative Union; institutions which themselves parallel Watkins' ideas about the appropriateness of national organisation for the development of higher order distributional and administrative functions.[82] Indeed by the early 20th century there were suggestions of further steps towards national integration, in particular the scheme for a National Co-operative Society engaged in retailing.[83] Ultimately

moves were made towards such a society, although not to the exclusion of all local initiatives, in the shape of the Co-operative Retail Society established in 1934.[84]

Watkins was a figure of some importance to his contemporaries, but what of his historical significance? Perhaps this has been underestimated. The most positive aspect of Watkins' work was his journalism, particularly in Reynolds's Newspaper which brought co-operation before a mass audience, and he supplemented this with an active involvement in promoting societies. His ideas also stimulated debate about the nature of co-operative endeavours, involving themes which would continue to attract attention long after the details of Watkins' plans had passed out of the collective consciousness. But Watkins also had a more negative impact; the collapse of many of the bodies which he helped to establish doubtless damaged the image of co-operation. The greatest difficulties were often in locations where there was little incentive to persevere with ailing societies or to replace them immediately with new foundations. The false start represented by the failure of such early ventures, especially in southern England and Wales where there were few alternative models of co-operative success, may have acted to delay the advent of more enduring societies. Memories of the failure of an earlier National society affiliate were, for example, cited as contributing to the difficulties of a new co-operative at Burton-on-Trent some ten years later.[85]

This is hardly the legacy of a co-operative "hero", but the fact

that Watkins brought such mixed blessings should not detract from his importance. William Watkins deserves attention, firstly for his specific contribution to the development of co-operation and secondly as a symbol of the complexities of institutional developments and institutional geographies in nineteenth century Britain. The issue of tensions between national administrative efficiencies and local knowledge and loyalties which has been studied in the context of the Victorian state merits equal attention in relation to other more popular institutional developments. In this latter sphere attention is drawn more overtly to the dynamic force of local initiative. Debate is not therefore to be cast simply as a struggle for power between national and local organisations or the erosion of local autonomy, rather it centred around notions of the most appropriate level at which to perform key functions. Watkins was overly ambitious in seeking to develop a national society, but he was not the first to propose such an enterprise or to espouse the logic of co-operation between, as well as within, co-operatives. Nor was he wholly mistaken in suggesting that such a structure would allow the extension of co-operation into key areas such as wholesaling. However, he struck a balance between national integration and local autonomy that was unacceptable to many of his contemporaries, according too many functions and privileges to the former level. Watkins' efforts demonstrate the need for sensitivity in negotiation of the relations of interdependency between local and national levels within popular institutions. The difficulties of such negotiations continued to beset co-operation for many decades after the 1860s. Indeed they

were a key facet of the development of a wide range of institutional initiatives in nineteenth century Britain.

NOTES

1) G J HOLYOAKE (1875 & 1879) The History of Co-operation in England Its Literature and Its Advocates (Trubner, London, 2 volumes); B POTTER (1891) The Co-operative Movement in Britain (Swan Sonnenschein, London); G D H COLE (1944) A Century of Co-operation (Allan & Unwin, London); A BONNER (1970) British Co-operation (Co-operative Union, Manchester).

2) S POLLARD (1960) "Nineteenth century co-operation: from community building to shopkeeping", in A BRIGGS & J SAVILLE (eds) Essays in Labour History Volume 1 (Macmillan, London) pp. 74-112; R G GARNETT (1972) Co-operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain, 1825-45 (Manchester UP, Manchester); J TANN (1980) "Co-operative corn milling: self-help during the grain crises of the Napoleonic Wars" Agricultural History Review 28: 45-57; M PURVIS (1986) "Co-operative retailing in England, 1835-50: developments beyond Rochdale" Northern History 22: 198-215.

3) P N BACKSTROM (1974) Christian Socialism and Co-operation in Victorian England (Croom Helm, London).

4) Watkins may, however, have been associated with earlier Owenite co-operation during the 1820s and 1830s as an individual of the same name was one of the leaders of the First Western Union Co-operative Society of London. See

L J FLETCHER (1984) "Robert Owen's Equitable Labour Exchanges", unpubl. B.Phil. thesis, Open Univ. p.31. However, he is clearly not to be confused with W P Watkins (born 1893) the prominent co-operative educationalist and administrator.

5) COLE (1944) op. cit.; BONNER (1970) op. cit. (Note 1).

6) HOLYOAKE (1879) op. cit., pp.117-18 (Note 1).

7) M PURVIS (1990) "The development of co-operative retailing in England and Wales, 1851-1901: a geographical study" Journal of Historical Geography 16(3): 314-31

8) Reynolds's Newspaper 29 July 1860.

9) Social Economist March 1868.

10) E P HENNOCK (1982) "Central/local government relations in England: an outline 1800-1950" Urban History Yearbook pp 38-49; M OGBORN (1992) "Local power and state regulation in nineteenth century Britain" Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 17(2), 215-26; P CORRIGAN & D SAYER (1991) The Great Arch. English State Formation as Cultural Revolution (Blackwell, Oxford).