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Elizabeth Summerfield

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ELIZABETH SUMMERFIELD
MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Sustaining Ireland, Body and Soul:

A Woman Leader's Story of the Cooperative Movement

Abstract

This article tells the story of the Cooperative Movement in Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the perspective of one of its woman leaders. It does so in order to distil lessons for the contemporary thought leadership of sustainability from a period before the term was coined. It does so with the warrant of Albert Einstein:

The distinction between the past, the present and the future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.

Its evidence base is historical literature, but its argument and analysis draw on recent research in leadership studies, neuroscience and theology.

Introduction

Elizabeth Burke-Plunkett, Countess of Fingall, was persuaded to the Cooperative cause in Ireland by its founder and her cousin-in-law, Horace Plunkett. Her autobiography, *Seventy Years Young: Memories of Elizabeth, Countess of Fingall*, is the article's primary source (Burke-Plunkett, 1991). Described as a "co-founder," Burke-Plunkett helped lead the Movement in rural Ireland from the 1880s to the 1920s (Kiberd & Mathews, 2015, 232). Using her voice aims to complement and expand on existing accounts.

Accounts of land and natural resource management are often told through the perspective of their male leadership. This makes sense. Such matters have been traditionally the responsibility of men (Werhane, 2007). That is no less true for accounts of the Irish Cooperative Movement (Doyle, 2019; Digby, 1949). However, there is also evidence of gendered ambiguity in its leadership. Actively encouraged by the sensibilities of its principal male leaders (men who would now be called feminist), women's role in the Movement was a broader reflection of the readiness of Irish women to assume leadership roles in the contested struggle for Irish identity.

The first principles of Cooperation sought to transcend the deep political divisions of the time, manifest in such struggles as Home Rule, the Land Acts, the Easter Rebellion, the War of Independence, and the Civil War. It sought literally and figuratively to ground these more abstract conflicts in the fundamental and shared stewardship of the land. Coincident with,

and heavily informed by, the artistic spirit of the Gaelic Revival, the Movement was a more pragmatic effort to nurture a renewed sense of self-mastery and self-definition in the Irish population. It was as much about reviving the dignity of the Irish soul as it was about creating a sustainable rural economy.

The Cooperative Movement: Beyond Political Economy

Political historian, Patrick Doyle summarises the impetus, purpose, and outcomes of the Cooperative Movement in *Civilising Rural Ireland* (Doyle, 2019). In a fine analysis of its political economy, Doyle's focus is an explanation of the Movement's principle aim to create a revitalized national identity through rural economic cooperation in the context of radical political change.

Doyle's account highlights the leadership of Horace Plunkett, a wealthy landlord and farmer, George Russell, a leading literary figure, and Father Finlay, a Catholic priest and academic economist. The Movement's sensibilities, embodied by these men, already reflected those traditionally assigned to women, in addition to the more typical masculinity of politics and economics (Doyle, 57). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Movement eventually encouraged the formation of the United Irishwomen in 1910. Doyle's comprehensive history notes the role of women in the Movement (Doyle, 61). Complementing rather than challenging existing gendered divisions of labour, there was, he said, a shared endeavour to promote an improved rural quality of life and, importantly, to reduce emigration of the young.

This article expands on Doyle's acknowledgement of women's role in Cooperation. It does so invoking the feminist warrant that "the personal is political" in the selection of evidence. Alternatively, as leadership strategist, Peter Senge would say, its focus is less the "what and how," than with the "who," of leadership (Senge et al., 2004, 5). While its voice is clearly individual and subjective, it contributes this perspective to the general and objective (Appleby et al., 1994, 246).

A convert to her cousin's Movement in the early 1880s, Burke-Plunkett offers a description of the leadership exercised by both men and women in the decades from the 1880s to the end of the Civil War in 1922-23, when the impact of that original leadership began to dissipate.

Plunkett liked the simplicity of slogans and coined this one for the Movement: "better business, better farming and better living." In a booklet introducing the United Irishwomen (UI), he confers principal responsibility for the last on Irish women (Plunkett et al., 1911, 8). However, Burke-Plunkett's account testifies to the blurring of responsibilities of women and men across the three categories. Women's role in promoting Cooperation bled into each category, reflecting the varied roles of women in the agricultural economy. Moreover, male leaders were as concerned with the domestic life and spirit of the rural population as with their capacity to produce goods more effectively and efficiently. In this way, the essential cooperative principle of non-partisanship also operated at the level of gender, even as it recognised dominant, gendered roles.

The articles proceed firstly by summarising Burke-Plunkett's narrative of Cooperation inside thematic categories relevant to the Movement. Then it draws on the literature of systems thinking, neuroscience and Christian existentialism to present an analysis of those themes, suggesting the relevance of the first principles of Cooperative leadership to contemporary sustainability leadership thought and practice. In this way, the article complements Doyle's aim to present the enduring impact of the Movement (Doyle, 200).

Elizabeth Burke-Plunkett

Burke-Plunkett's memoir concludes in the midst of the Irish Civil War. She tells the story of the fateful night when she and her husband sat in their study at Killeen Castle. Clutching a few precious possessions, he slept and she mused as they awaited the arrival of a group of "Irregulars" sent to raze their home to a ruin (Burke-Plunkett, 436). A messenger had arrived, dispatched by their neighbour John Dillon, whose home was in the throes of destruction, to warn of them of the prospect. The arsonists spared Dillon, his family and some portable possessions, and even apologised for their actions, as they destroyed his home. As the last leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, a nationalist who supported land reform and Home Rule, his crime seemed to be that he had a substantial home that lay in the vicinity of the murder of one of their own the previous evening. The intention, explained the arsonists, was political reprisal and not personal! As Burke-Plunkett sat alongside her sleeping husband, memories of her vast, draughty, marital home, where she had lived since her marriage as a teenager, cycled through her mind. Fifteen years later in her memoir, she documented those memories with a striking sense of calm and apparent acceptance of her countrymen's actions:

I remembered how glad I had always felt about that open gate of Killeen, through which the country and the people could come in, and that there was such a green peaceful stretch round the Castle, and no high walls and thick woods shutting us into our kingdom, as at so many other country houses, which kept Ireland and the Irish people outside...

My thoughts went on. How Killeen would burn. Badly – that old Norman Castle of stone, that had been built as a Pale fortress. Then I remembered the big oak staircase: that would send up a glorious flame. And I remembered, too, how I had often thought that Killeen would make a lovely ruin.

...I thought of a lot of things that night, sitting there with my jewel-case on my knee. Of how we had talked of Co-operation in the Library, and how I had run from that to Fingall, planning his Meets in this room...and the back again to the Library, to Horace and his "Wise Men." Of how H was going to save Ireland by better business, which should lead to better living. And of those nights when he first talked in the old Library upstairs, and a scatter-brained girl came back from her scatter-brained thoughts to listen to him.

The choice to end her memoir there likely reflected the significance to her life of the Movement as well as the dissipation of its leadership wrought by the Civil War. While Killeen Castle was mysteriously spared, Horace Plunkett's home, was not. As a consequence, he emigrated permanently, if reluctantly, to London to live the remaining ten years of his life. He would remain remotely a champion of both the Irish and the Movement. According to his cousin, his relocation to England was made with the same melancholy acceptance of his compatriots' actions as she had displayed that night.

Horace Plunkett

Horace Plunkett was a cousin of Burke-Plunkett's husband, the eleventh Earl of Fingall. A reluctant yet resigned politician, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Plunkett was accused by both nationalists and unionists of betraying the Irish in his deliberate transcendence of both entrenched positions. The decades-long political struggle for Home Rule, closely associated with ongoing land reform, coincided with the broader cultural Gaelic Revival. The personal and the political, the cultural and the economic, the English and Irish, the Protestant and the Catholic, the artistic and the military, were contested binaries in the

quest to re-establish the essence of Irish identity and self-mastery. It was a time of striking division, as much for the material as for the spiritual foundation of Ireland. The Civil War was an obvious demonstration that the essential sustainability of, and route to, the Irish soul was as much in dispute between the Irish as it was between the English and the Irish.

Plunkett sought to transcend and reconcile these deep binaries. Cooperation would concentrate on promoting the tools of practical self-mastery amongst ordinary Irish farmers, including their voluntary cooperation with one another for mutual benefit. For him, agriculture represented not only the dominant feature of the Irish economy, but his people's sense of identity rooted in the land and its productive stewardship.

Like President Theodore Roosevelt, for whom he became a trusted adviser, Plunkett had adopted the life of a cowboy in the 1880s, in the Wild West of America (Burke-Plunkett, 87). Both established business ventures in ranching: Plunkett in Wyoming, Roosevelt in North Dakota (Brinkley, 2009, 134). Both decided to do so, against the expectation of their comfortable upbringings, for reasons that were less economic than existential. They were each driven by a very personal need to revive and sustain the well-being of body and soul. With Gifford Pinchot, also a trusted colleague of Plunkett, they championed the conservation of land and natural resources, including an improved rural life in the USA (Miller, 2001). The Cooperative Movement was Plunkett's version of the same principle of achieving balance and mutual self-interest between the natural world and its human managers. A shared feature of these male leaders was their enlistment of the voice and wisdom of women (McCullough, 2001, 355).

But that enlistment was not the only way in which these champions of sustainability challenged the boundaries of gendered roles. Roosevelt said of his father, the model of his own masculinity, that he combined the traits of both the masculine and feminine in his life's work (Roosevelt, 1913, 23). Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the United States Forest Service, was similarly influenced by his father. James Pinchot was at once a rugged outdoorsman, savvy entrepreneur, and the embodiment of an artistic and emotional sensibility typically associated with femininity (Miller, 1999). Roosevelt and Pinchot, like Plunkett, were practical men, science and business trained, but also literary in their tastes, sensibilities, and scholarship. They straddled boundaries of thought and feeling that informed their views of the sustainable conservation of place and people. Unlike Plunkett, they led the contest for conservation within a relatively prosperous, free, post-bellum society. They argued for the place of sustainable forestry, farming, and society in appropriate balance with the needs of commerce and within a well-established republic.

By contrast, Plunkett's vision for Irish sustainability was contextualised by none of that political or economic stability. His vision was to introduce cooperation and self-sufficiency to an impoverished rural peasantry. While the legal ownership of the land was restored to small farmers through the various Land Acts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it came with a long inheritance of feudal dependency, a great deal of entrenched poverty, and national devastation following the great famine of the nineteenth century.

And, unlike Pinchot and Roosevelt, whose literary, feminist, and spiritual dimensions were not on public display, Plunkett actively enlisted the skill of women, writers, and theologians to his cause. Matters of body and soul, subsistence, and spirit seemed less segregated in the comparative deprivation of the ordinary Irish. Cooperation was informed by the principle of elevating constructive human engagement, as well as a practical means of striving towards

agricultural sustainability. It sought to reconnect people more deeply to their land and through that to themselves and each other.

Burke-Plunkett knew the truth of a people whose identity was rooted in the land. She was the daughter of a West Country farmer who loved his land (Burke-Plunkett, 148). The themes, which emerge from her memoir, offer insights, which go deeper than the political economy of Cooperation in Ireland.

Memoir's Themes of Cooperation

Identity: Beyond Definition by Opposition

Burke-Plunkett says of her cousin that he was “like many Irish leaders, far more English than Irish in temperament” (Burke-Plunkett, 45). Yet, he was descended from a family who had lived in the country so long that “Debrett confesses itself beaten by its antiquity and does not delve farther into its history than its establishment in Meath in the eleventh century” (Burke-Plunkett, 100). It noted that “this noble family is of Danish origin, but its settlement in Ireland is so remote that nothing can be ascertained as to the precise period.” The Danish invaded Ireland in the eighth century and the first English invasion occurred in the twelfth. However, in spite of this deep family history in Ireland, Plunkett was still seen, by his cousin at least, as either Norman- or Anglo-Irish.

Such a view of the “native” Irish was consistent with that of the Gaelic Revival (Burke-Plunkett, 102). It located the restoration of Irish self-esteem in the pre-history of Gaelic culture, one which preceded even the invasion of the Celtic tribes in 500BC. The complexity of Irish cultural history across millennia, the recurrent occupation and assimilation of different ethnicities, had, by the late nineteenth century, settled into the binary opposition between the Irish and the English. The latter, as Burke-Plunkett makes clear, could include families, particularly of the upper class, who had been several hundred years on the island, and whose patriotic allegiance to it and its people was unswerving.

Burke-Plunkett may have considered her cousin more temperamentally English than Irish, but the signature principles of Cooperation he espoused sought to transcend that division. They were inclusion, diversity, and collaboration. As mentioned earlier, the forging of Plunkett's adult identity had occurred in neither Ireland nor England, but in Wyoming. The physical exertion of working the land and its resources was not primarily about learning better farming or business, but about better living. It was about creating and sustaining body and soul. Physical and economic labour, on the land, offered a cure for his chronic, congenital ill health. He established a way of life, of sustaining himself, by creating a business enterprise which would last his lifetime. Profoundly committed to the island of Ireland and his fellow compatriots, his way of thinking about independence in Ireland was both very personal and disinterestedly multicultural. He knew from direct experience how land use and management were not only a means of transcending partisan politics but of transcending the limitations of self. He wanted for his compatriots the same renewed identity through self-mastery he had found from working his land.

Burke-Plunkett's background was an example too of the cultural complexity of Irish identity. As a young woman, she had married a member of the House of Lords, landlord of Killeen Castle in County Meath, one of the oldest and grandest Norman-Irish castles in the country. Immediately prior to her marriage at seventeen, she had spent seven years living and being schooled in France and England. Though far from peasantry, she was not from the Irish aristocracy. Her family came from County Galway, on the western seaboard. She was Catholic,

the daughter of a magistrate, the farmer who was in love with his land. Describing her entry into the Irish upper class, she highlights the class divisions in society at the time, describing her belief that:

it was a disappointment to them that Fingall had not married some great and rich lady to bring money to the Castle and estate which so badly needed it. And I must have looked as I felt, a quite absurd and inadequate child to become chatelaine of one of the greatest and oldest Norman Castles in Ireland, one that had been suggested as a possible Royal residence; and to be the wife of the eleventh Earl (Burke-Plunkett, 95).

Though more constrained in her experience of life than her cousin by marriage, as a teenager she had crossed boundaries of social class, religion and culture. With the same love of Ireland, her perspective was open, undefined by oppositional categories. It suited the Cooperative temperament.

Land and Identity

Burke-Plunkett named Charles Parnell, the Irish nationalist politician, *the* “Uncrowned King of Ireland.” Recounting his death in 1891, she described his embodiment of the twin pillars of land reform and home rule. Her reference to Parnell was to highlight the difference between him and her cousin’s advocacy for Ireland. Plunkett, she said, was no natural politician: “there was no political thought in it. Horace was never a politician” in spite of his reluctant decision to run for election as a Member of Parliament (MP). She described his as a “new dream” (Burke-Plunkett, 204). It assumed Irish identity and self-mastery was to be found in the people’s successful relationship to the land itself and not in its abstraction in legislative debate, however symbolically meaningful. In promoting the practical skills of land and resource management, he drew on his findings from Europe and Scandinavia, but conscious of the distinct cultural identity of the Irish, where, Burke-Plunkett declared, “there was no method about anything” (Burke-Plunkett, 147). Cooperation’s literally grounded approach sought to transcend its leaders’ view of the comparative superficiality of the partisan political contest as an answer to the Irish question. The Movement aimed to appeal to a deeper humanism in its more inclusive approach to the Irish people. However, in disavowing destructive division for constructive pragmatism, it was suspected by both sides of political and religious positions, while simultaneously attracting support from members of each group.

The land, the place, the island was a shared extension and embodiment of some fundamental cultural identity of the people. After millennia of complex, ethnic immigration and occupation, and with the class divisions that had existed since prehistory, the place represented a shared, if still contested, love. This was exemplified by Burke-Plunkett who, like other members of the Irish aristocracy, spent considerable time in England. Her identity, a sense of sustaining spirit was inseparable from her homeland, as she documents in arriving home from the birth of her first child in London:

We went home to Killeen, arriving on a June evening when the County of Meath was green and white and gold. There is no other green in the world like it, and the High Kings of Ireland knew what they were doing when they lifted their palaces on the Hill of Tara over that fat land. And the Norse and Norman barons – Plunketts and others who followed them, knew too what they were doing (Burke-Plunkett, 95).

In less lyrical language, she described the formation of the Recess Committee in 1896 (Burke-Plunkett, 236). Established by Plunkett, it deliberated during the Parliamentary recess, with the object of discovering how, without political change, Ireland could be provided with a

separate Department of Agriculture and Industries suited to the specific needs of the country. For Plunkett, this work was the most practical public good and held the best prospect of unifying geographical and political divisions. His cousin described it as “the nearest approach to union with the North that there had been in my time... when Horace persuaded the best men of North and South to join his Recess Committee.”

Beyond the more obvious persistent binaries was the gendered. Ireland had a deep cultural history of women’s leadership extending back into prehistory (Kiberd & Mathews, 232). While there was no hint of a Gaelic warrior princess quality in Burke-Plunkett, she had found herself drawn to the Cooperative cause, in spite of herself and her comfortable life (ref). The description of her married, upper-class life includes all of its expected trappings. She tells stories of glamorous balls, dinners, hunts, fashion, and open houses with colour, humour and an obvious enjoyment. However, her work on behalf of the Movement formed the more serious side of her identity. It was where she aligned herself, as a farmer’s daughter, with her compatriots excluded from the glamour.

However, her sympathetic husband remained unpersuaded. He shared her fellow-feeling, but disagreed with the Movement’s means of expression. His principle was that “you should not give the Irish anything they had not asked for” (Burke-Plunkett, 150). That was precisely what the English always did, he thought, and it was deeply condescending in his view. His principles differed from his wife’s and his cousin’s, yet they sought the same outcome: the renewed identity through self-mastery of the Irish people. Therefore, in spite of his difference of approach, he supported the Movement, planting out the most profitable parts of his estate to orchards and tobacco. The Fingalls exemplified the reconciliation of belief systems that were superficially different yet, at their core, contained a profound compassion for their fellow compatriots.

Similarly, though a lapsed Low Churchman himself, Plunkett persuaded the Jesuit Father Tom Finlay to help lead the Cooperative cause. Moreover, despite reading very little himself, he attracted George Russell (generally known as AE), one of the Gaelic Revival’s literary leaders, to a leadership role. Finlay was a trained economist with a charismatic spirituality. Russell was a “poet-accountant,” introduced to Plunkett by W.B. Yeats (Doyle, 112). Burke-Plunkett described this boundary-crossing appeal of the Movement, noting how “hard Northern business men, worked side by side with poets and visionaries” (Burke-Plunkett, 194). With a disarming proclivity for humour, she understood the very serious spiritual intent contained in declaring the wish of these unlikely, disparate adherents “to save Ireland by milk, butter, fowl and bacon!” (Burke-Plunkett, 104).

The *Land Act of 1903* had secured the transfer of land from the estates to the tenant farmers. The Act was powerful but symbolic. In itself, it could not confer on those new owners the skills necessary to secure a sustainable living from the land they now possessed. Success demanded training of, and cooperation between, individual farmers.

Beyond promotion of the skills of practical survival, Cooperation also sought to enhance the quality of people’s lives in place. Through improved education, social activity, health care, and expanding opportunity for meaningful local work, it sought to reduce the loss of the young, who had been driven away by a mix of poverty and dullness of rural life. In a comprehensive, grass-roots approach, the Movement sought no less than the remediation of the economic, social, and spiritual life of rural Ireland and its people, who had witnessed the halving of its population in the famine’s wake. In the author’s words, at its heart was not the,

mere material prosperity for the Irish farmer. If his movement had been only that he would not have got the Jesuit, Father Finlay, into it heart and soul, or Lord Monteagle, the high-minded gentleman, or the poet and visionary AE, who put his poetry and art into H's work for Ireland. Better farming, better business were only the first steps on the road. The goal, better living, was to be spiritual as well as material. He wanted to help the Irish farmers to help themselves (Burke-Plunkett, 194).

It was this multi-dimensional humanism that drew her, and later other women, priests, writers, and businessmen to Cooperation. An eloquent expression of this appeal is contained in the letter AE wrote to Plunkett in 1899, outlining the reasons for his own attraction to Cooperation:

My dear Mr. Plunkett,I think your article is excellent. Your economics are the only economics I understand and which ever interested me. A really philosophical something lives in them and I find them the best material solution of problems which had to be solved for Ireland before the transcendental idea which people of the class of Yeats and myself hope for, could take any deep root. In our philosophy, the fundamental idea is the spiritual unity of humanity; and your co-operative movement which is teaching the value of unity to Irishmen in their daily lives, is giving to our intellectual successors and to all idealists, their best illustration and argument. For this object lesson, though its first most necessary application is to material ends, must inevitably react on the minds of co-operators and promote corresponding desire for a greater nearness to the human hearts in those about them. It is on this basis that I am content to work...for I think that if there is any truth in them they will naturally flourish in the societies we are starting (Burke-Plunkett, 241).

At a more prosaic level, Burke-Plunkett describes the example of Plunkett's "man-servant" Reid, "a black Northern Protestant who used to curse the Papists with terrible curses and live with them in perfect amity" (Burke-Plunkett, 148). The ambivalence between connection and disconnection, exemplified by Reid, is what the Cooperative movement sought to leverage, appealing to something more profound and more reconciled than surface categories of identity. While competition for dominance and control of political or religious opinion abounded, the leaders of the Cooperative movement fought for an inclusive body and soul of their fellow citizens. Against odds they understood, they strove for the foundational power of self-mastery and its practical expression in and through the land.

The Cooperative Principle: Both/And, Not Either/Or

As political opposition between England and Ireland, and within the Irish themselves, dominated late nineteenth and early twentieth century life, the Cooperative movement achieved some positive structural outcomes. The Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (later Irish Cooperative Organisation Society), the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (later the Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Food in Ireland), and the Society of United Irishwomen (later the Irish Countrywomen's Association) were established as institutions embodying and furthering its inclusive, practical work. However, as important as these manifest achievements, were the grass-roots effort they represented.

As an example, by the 1890s, Burke-Plunkett "had begun tentatively trying to do things for the cottage people, to improve their breed of fowl, and give them plants and seeds for their gardens...." Her husband, vocal in his disapproval, said: "How would you like it if Mrs....." [a lady in Meath famous for her interfering habits] "told you that your delphiniums were the wrong colour, or that your fowl were not the right kind....?" Yet, also in acknowledgment of their shared goal, he "gave up his best paddock to be an orchard....I grew tobacco too, in the garden." But, unlike his wife, he refused to go on the road to educate and evangelise for

Cooperation. Using Ireland's first motor, she and her cousin undertook such expeditions as going "to Carna by the newly-made road, where I opened a knitting industry started by some good young women from Liverpool" (Burke-Plunkett, 206). She also travelled to London to watch Plunkett, as MP, in Commons' debates, including those on Home Rule. Her own view was apolitical but pragmatic. As she declared to Mrs. Gladstone, who had assumed her support of the Bill because she was Irish, "Oh, no, Mrs. Gladstone,...you see, I *live* in Ireland!" While she understood the symbolism of self-government, for her, the self-worth of the Irish was dependent on practical self-sufficiency and improvements in daily social life. She could see the economic value of both continued English involvement in Ireland while this came to fruition.

On another trip taken with Plunkett and Finlay, the author highlights a local example of the Cooperative leadership of women in better farming and business:

One of our expeditions was to Foxford in the County Mayo, for the Connacht Exhibition, organised by that great woman and wonderful Sister of Charity, Mother Morrigh Bernard. She had built up at Foxford, within a few years, an industry that, with its many offshoots and wide embracing roof of Christian Charity, was like a Guild of the Middle Ages. The Exhibition was designed primarily to advertise the woollen goods being produced at the Foxford mills. But the side sections indicated the width and imagination of Mother Morrigh Bernard's work in her district for better living, towards which we were all, in our different ways, trying to help the people. There were prizes for gardening, domestic science, poultry, dairy products, even for the most humble and necessary trade of mending.... (Burke-Plunkett, 228).

When she first conceived of establishing the Providence Woollen Mills, the Mother had been advised to write to a local expert, Mr. Smith of the Caledon Mills, Tyrone. He replied..."Madam! Are you aware that you have written to a Protestant and a Freemason?" She was, but this mattered less than their shared human purpose. Burke-Plunkett notes that, won over to his correspondent's more unified view of the world,

...in due course the Protestant and the Freemason travelled at his own expense to Foxford....he advised Mother Morrigh Bernard to abandon her scheme. When that had no effect he placed himself ... "at her disposal." ...And what a good alliance-the Protestant Freemason from the North and the Southern Catholic nun, both filled with the same spirit of charity.

In another example of Mother Morrigh's trans- or bi-partisan leadership, Burke-Plunkett recounted how some of the woollen mills' employees had hissed the local priests at a political demonstration. In response, the Bishop ordered her to dismiss the offending men. She refused, telling the Bishop that she could neither excuse the men nor dismiss them. Burke-Plunkett saw this as an example of the Mother's view that the politics of religious denominationalism had "no place in their industry....She had left all that in the world. If she allowed the men to be dismissed it would mean-like so many other things in Ireland-politics would enter the mills disastrously." Unconvinced, a second request came from the Bishop. Committed to her principle, she again refused. However, she did guarantee an apology from the men and read it herself in public on a Sunday morning, standing between those who had been insulted (Burke-Plunkett, 229).

Burke-Plunkett refers often to the intense emotions that she believed were not only part of what she regarded as the essential Irish character, but also formed the response of newcomers to the country (Burke-Plunkett, 231). Outsiders were also prone to falling in love

with and having their hearts broken by Ireland. The implication was that a right balance of feeling and rational thought was needed. As she recalled the productive work done by Gerald and Arthur Balfour, both British Conservative politicians, on behalf of Ireland, she noted the advantages of an atypical detachment to their success:

...unlike other Englishmen and Scotsmen who came to Ireland...Arthur and Gerald Balfour never fell in love with Ireland. Fortunate and wise men! They kept their heads and their hearts and their vision clear, where men in love lose all these faculties. Gerald... left her, for his service, more I believe, than any other Chief Secretary. His Land Act, the Department of Agriculture, the Local Government Act.... (Burke-Plunkett, 232).

She describes how Gerald Balfour had seen the wisdom in, and subsequently championed, Plunkett's idea of creating an independent Irish Department of Agriculture. His approach of attachment combined with deliberate disinterest enabled him, to see "round corners and the other side of the question" so that he "could work even with his opponents...". However, in return for such constructive detachment, he paid the price of the "unpopularity of all reformers, especially with the Irish landlords who considered that he had cheated them out of their properties."

As mentioned, she alludes to Plunkett's leadership as more characteristically English than Irish. However, she also talks about the Plunkett family's inclusive response to its longevity in Ireland. This description is more consistent with Horace's both/and rather than either/or leadership, and the strength of his attachment to the country. The Plunketts, she says, "like other Irish and Norman Irish families, through Irish history... were found to be on either side – now outlawed by the English Crown, now serving it. I have marveled at their power of survival." In fact, she says, "all the Irish must have had great staying powers or the conquest and repopulation of the country would have been complete." So, as well as the "fierce heat" of the "native" Irish, there was also evident in the general population something of the combination of thought and feeling which drove leaders like Plunkett and Balfour (Burke-Plunkett, 102).

In her various, sometimes contradictory, descriptions of Cooperation's ability to tap into a willingness of opponents to come together over land and resource management, Burke-Plunkett suggested what the source of the "great staying powers" of the Irish was. That power of the Irish spirit to sustain itself appeared to lie in the capacity to straddle the boundaries of its own opposing categories. Oscar Wilde declared that "the way of paradoxes is the way of truth" (Breuer, 1993). It is in paradox, in the ability to contain and reconcile apparent opposites, that the general lessons of leadership of Irish cooperation may be found. These are explained in the following analysis of the narrative, using, aptly, the literatures of systems thinking, neuroscience and Christian existentialism.

Cooperation's Lessons for Present Sustainability Leadership

This section suggests the relevance of the Irish Cooperative Movement, from the 1880s to the 1920s, to the contemporary leadership of sustainability. Research in each of these fields shares a common theme, differently expressed, which helps to understand the potential impact of the first principles of Cooperation. While the particular detail of contemporary sustainability issues is self-evidently different from that of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland, the tendency to default to conflict between entrenched binary divisions of thought persists. The history of Cooperation could contribute tools to support contemporary leadership education.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is a sub-discipline of leadership research. It asks us to consider the whole rather than its component parts. It considers the latter to be a product of the post-industrial mindset which encourages fragmented and over-specialised thought and action. Donella Meadows and Peter Senge, two prominent American theorists of system thinking, have distilled its core methods (Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006). These include extracting the often invisible, unconscious mental models, or assumptions, on which a leader's thinking may be based; assuming a posture of open learning rather than certain knowing; going beyond what is obvious in the present to understand its origins in the past and implications for the future; employing thinking and listening that goes beyond the framework of a leader's specialist training, that is being inter- or transdisciplinary in approach; acknowledging rather than repressing the relevance of care in decision-making; and navigating legitimate complex, inclusive and often contradictory thought on the way to achieving comprehensive outcomes.

This is much harder than lapsing into the standard binary of decision-making between one option and its counterpart, or avoiding complex thinking in a rush towards a solution. Both self-imposed time constraints and the view of strength in being decisive may incline leaders to do the latter. Such oversimplified choice, declares Meadows, is a natural response to wanting, or appearing to display, the authority and certainty of control. She acknowledges an inbuilt contradiction in the human mind which both inclines us towards thinking oppositionally and recognises that in so doing we are also denying a messier inclusivity in decision-making. It is understanding the discipline required to may proper attention to the latter that characterises the integrity of comprehensive thought leadership. As Meadows' explains:

...there's something within the human mind that is attracted to straight lines and not curves, to whole numbers and not fractions, to uniformity and not diversity, and to certainties and not mystery. But there is something else within us that has the opposite set of tendencies, since we ourselves evolved out of and are shaped by and structured as complex feedback systems. Only a part of us, a part that has emerged recently, designs buildings as boxes with uncompromising straight lines and flat surfaces.

One of the divides which systems thinking seeks to reconnect is that between thought and feeling. It advocates not only rational thought across specialised disciplinary boundaries, but also the inclusion of affect in decision-making and action. As Meadows argues, "living successfully in a world of complex systems means expanding not only... thought horizons; above all it means expanding the horizons of caring" (Meadows, 2001).

Neuroscience

Recent research in neuroscience reinforces the biology behind this point. This scholarship represents a powerful challenge to the Enlightenment assumption of knowledge-making, declared in Descartes' famous aphorism: "I think, therefore I am" (Damasio, 2006). American neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, argues the physiological connection between thought and feeling, the catalytic and reciprocal importance of the latter to the former, and the importance of paying balanced attention to both in the human drive towards homeostasis. Educators have followed suit. Together, Immordino-Yang and Damasio employ the developing science of consciousness to refine approaches to curriculum and teaching. In doing so, they declare the counter proposition is "We feel, therefore I learn" (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

Damasio argues that human feeling has catalysed creative intelligence. He proposes that there is a dynamic exchange between these elements of human being that tends towards the

achievement of individual and cultural balance, even in the midst of oppositional conflict. The effort to reconcile the divide between emotional and reason is the route towards achieving balance. He describes the science behind the holistic method of systems thinking, summarised above, arguing that there can never be predictability, certainty or control, however much the human desire for that sort of mastery drives the process of decision-making. In language both scientific and social, he argues that:

...cultural homeostasis is merely a work in progress often undermined by periods of adversity. We might venture that the ultimate success of cultural homeostasis depends on a fragile civilizational effort aimed at different regulation goals. This is why the calm desperation of F.Scott Fitzgerald – ‘so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past’ – remains a prescient and appropriate way of describing the human condition (Damasio, 2018, 32).

In both the systems thinking and neuroscience outlined here, the implication is that sustainability and its leadership demand continuous engagement with the recognition and navigation of apparent opposites. The effort of inclusion and reconciliation, against the knowledge of a continuously emerging rather than fixed endpoint, represents the integrity and purpose of sustainable leadership.

Christian Existentialism

One of the abiding oppositional divides in Irish culture was, and is, that between Catholic and Protestant. Both Burke-Plunkett and AE referred to Cooperation as a struggle to overcome this entrenched form of partisanship. AE, in his letter to Plunkett, referred to the “spiritual unity of humanity” that the Movement promised. He envisaged “better living” as being “spiritual as well as material.” The prominence of what constituted true Irish spirituality indicates the pertinence of the literature of Christian existentialism to an interpretation of the Irish Cooperative movement. Like systems thinking and neuroscience, it too speaks of both the necessity and difficulty of recognising and straddling opposites.

Existentialist theologian, Paul Tillich structures his autobiography as a list of oppositional categories (Tillich, 1966). This work represents a condensation of his theological writing, summarised in another title *The Courage to Be* (Tillich, 2000). The list includes city and country, upper and lower classes, reality and imagination, native and alien land, church and society. Tillich, himself a reluctant, yet grateful, German emigrant to North America in the 1930s, describes the same tendency to conceive of categories as either this or that, as binary opposites demanding a choice between them.

In the chapter titled “Between Native and Alien Land,” he wrote of the principle and hope of unity on which his adopted American home was founded:

...an ideal which is more consistent with the image of one mankind than that of Europe with her tragic self-dismemberment. It is the image of one nation in whom representatives of all nations and races can live as citizens. Although here too the distance between ideal and reality is infinite...nonetheless it is a kind of symbol of that highest possibility of history which is called “mankind” and which points itself to that which transcends reality (Tillich, 2000, 91).

The title of the autobiography, *On the Boundary*, echoes Wilde’s view that “to test reality we must see it on the tightrope” (Wilde, 2006).

Tillich describes how this dialectic between oppositional categories is both a feature of cultures, and of individuals. He regards access to truth both culturally and personally as requiring insight that comes from a position on the boundary. Such a position is not to be confused with chronic ambivalence, or indecision. He acknowledges that the discernment of truth, or reality, from such a position is very difficult to achieve and sustain, but how it must be the method for societies as for individuals. He describes the approach and implies why it may be so regularly discarded in favour of opting for one or other side in decision-making:

...each possibility that I have discussed...I have discussed in its relationship to another possibility – the way they are opposed, the way they can be correlated. This is the dialectic of existence; each of life's possibilities drives of its own accord to a boundary and beyond the boundary where it meets that which limits it. The man who stands on many boundaries experiences the unrest, insecurity, and inner limitation of existence in many forms. He knows the impossibility of attaining serenity, security, and perfection (Tillich, 2000, 97).

Tillich goes on to refer to the spiritual nature of man's "boundary-fate" in ways which resonate with the paradox of the Cooperative Movement's very grounded efforts to enhance Irish both subsistence and, through it, an essential spirituality. In his description of the process of striving towards a spiritual destiny, even without the prospect of its ultimate achievement, can be seen the real success of the Movement even in the absence of any lasting material demonstration of its ideals. Tillich explains:

...there remains a boundary for human activity which is no longer a boundary between two possibilities but rather a limit set on everything finite by that which transcends all human possibilities, the Eternal. In its presence, even the very center of our being is only a boundary and our highest level of accomplishment is fragmentary (Tillich, 2000, 97).

However, it is towards this ultimate boundary, which Tillich elsewhere labels "Being-Itself," that humanity's efforts must be directed. It was in the exercise of boundary crossing itself that the Movement's deep humanity and appeal to those on opposite sides resided.

Unlike Castle Killeen, which was spared, Plunkett's own home, which Fingall described as being built for the people of Ireland, was not. She says that he accepted with sadness, but with the same equanimity she had displayed, the destruction of his home and subsequent emigration to England. In doing so, Plunkett, like Fingall, seems to have understood the inevitability of struggle in the emergence of a renewed, sustainable way of life and identity for Ireland and the Irish. Committing to a solution that embodied a public good and sought to transcend the attachment to division, and working towards its realisation, was the sustaining purpose and goal of the Movement's leaders.

Conclusion

Unlike the sparing of Castle Killeen, Plunkett's home was razed. She says that he accepted with sadness, but with the same equanimity she had displayed, the destruction of his home and subsequent emigration. In each of those personal endpoints, Burke-Plunkett and Plunkett, seem to have understood the inevitability of struggle between opposites and the need for leadership "on the boundary" in the emergence of a renewed, sustainable life and identity for Ireland and the Irish. Committing to a solution that embodied a public good which sought to transcend the attachment to division, and working towards its realisation, was the sustaining purpose and lesson of the Movement's leaders.

In describing Burke-Plunkett's account of Cooperation, this article has challenged a stereotypical view of Irish history as defined by the seemingly intractable and destructive

contest between a divided Ireland. The survival of the Gael, the Celt, the Norman and Anglo Irish spirit through millennia was arguably dependent on the trait exemplified by leaders of the Cooperative Movement: acknowledging but aiming toward common purpose between apparent oppositional categories of politics, religions, class and, as this article has argued, gender.

In doing so, it has reaffirmed using historical case study the temporal requirement of systems thinking: “expanding your time horizons” — that is, the impossibility of deeply understanding the present without deep examination and reconstruction of the past. The oppositional categories of human activity, differently described in the disciplines represented by Meadows, Senge, Damasio, and Tillich, are evident in her narrative. However, so is the evidence for their bridging, embodied in the Cooperative leadership of both women and men, and contained in the stories of common purpose by those aligned to one or other grouping.

Cooperation engaged in the struggle is much harder than adopting one or other opposing position. It “tested reality on the tight rope”— seeking to elevate the renewal Irish self-mastery and identity beyond divisive binaries, and to restore a sense of common purpose through people’s work on and identification with the land and place. That literally grounded restoration of people through the land and its material produce contained its apparent opposite: the spiritual. Successful land and resource management was intended to feed the body and soul of the Irish.

In concluding her narrative, Burke-Plunkett’s capacity to envision Killeen Castle as a beautiful ruin was striking and metaphoric. She could appreciate calmly and without rancour that the prospect of its burning was a stage in the ongoing renewal of the Irish and Ireland. It exemplified the way in which the means, guided but not determined by, the end, was the core of Irish sustainability as envisaged by both the men and women leaders of the Cooperative Movement.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my late friend, Dr. Donato Longo, a fine leader and scholar.

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About the Author

Elizabeth Summerfield

Elizabeth (Lizzie) Summerfield is an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Her principal research interests are in the history of thought leadership and its application to contemporary problems of sustainability and gender. She has published in science, leadership, and education journals. Her first book, published in 2022, is titled *Transmitting Gender across Generations*.

She can be reached at: elizabeth.summerfield@unimelb.edu.au.