Castlemahon Creamery 1890-95

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The setting up of a co-operative creamery in 1890 in the West Limerick village of Castlemahon, and its subsequent sale five years later, are discussed and analysed. The account of its founding sheds light on contemporary economic and social conditions. Its troubled history illustrates the divisions caused by personal animosities and local politics and is a story both of co-operation and non co-operation. Its eventual purchase, by the Cooperative Wholesale Society of Manchester, occasioned a serious and lasting rift between the co-operative movements in Britain and Ireland.

Background

At the end of the 1880s Irish agriculture in general and the Irish butter industry in particular faced serious problems.¹ It was finding great difficulty in coping with increasing competition from other countries, especially in the British market. Producers in France, Holland, Denmark and Sweden employed more scientific methods than their Irish counterparts and also benefited from better machinery² and superior marketing organisations. Developments in refrigeration, particularly from about 1870 on, coupled with increasingly cheap and more efficient transport had meant that perishable foods could now be brought from many countries to compete with Irish produce on the British market. Consequently there was a steady fall in agricultural prices between 1881 and 1887. Successive bad harvests in Ireland in the mid 1880s compounded the difficulties. The butter industry in particular was in crisis.³ Competition from abroad, particularly Denmark,⁴ and the growing popularity of butter substitutes⁵ posed a serious threat and indicated that Ireland was well on the way to losing its traditional British market.

The problem had to be addressed – and addressed quickly - if the British market was to be saved. One possible solution might be the adoption or adaptation of the methods that had proved successful abroad. This meant that factory production along the lines of European agricultural co-operatives or

¹ Irish agriculture in the 1880s was reputedly the most backward in Europe: productivity was low and the quality of products frequently poor, see Cyril Ehrlich, ‘Sir Horace Plunkett and Agricultural Reform’ in J.M. Goldstrom and L.A. Clarkson (eds), Irish Population, Economy and Society (Oxford 1981) p. 272: also Report of the Committee to enquire into the feasibility of establishing a Department of Agriculture and Technical Education in Ireland. (Dublin 1896).

² In 1878 Level developed a mechanical cream separator capable of quickly and hygienically extracting a greater proportion of the butterfat in milk and this, along with the steam-powered churn, was speedily adopted in many European countries.

³ In 1848 379,000 packages of Irish butter had been imported through the port of London as against a total of 576,888 from overseas: by 1884 the number of Irish packages sold in London had tumbled to 5,168 compared to 1,703,772 from overseas. Robert Denis, Industrial Ireland, a Practical and Non-political View of Ireland for the Irish (London 1887) p. 36. Trevor West, Horace Plunkett: Co-operation and Politics (Gerrards Cross, Bucks. 1986) pp 28-9. (Incidentally, West, p. 32, mistakenly locates Castlemahon in Co. Tipperary.) Ireland’s share of the British butter market had dropped from 46.6% in 1860 to 22.5% in 1885, Kevin O’Rourke, Culture, politics and innovation: evidence from the creameries (Dublin 2001) p. 33.

⁴ By 1890 Denmark had about 600 co-operative creameries, producing high-quality mild butter sold in individually wrapped pounds. Danish farmhouse butter was very salty, of very variable quality and sold in small wooden casks (firkins) of varying sizes. Patrick Bolger, The Irish Co-operative Movement Its History and Development (Dublin 1977) p. 64. Danish butter was available all the year round while the Irish product was seasonal.

privately owned creameries would have to replace the traditional Irish farmhouse system of butter production. Ireland’s response to the innovations in dairying had begun comparatively slowly. Some enterprising individuals had purchased mechanical cream separators. Butter factories or creameries owned by individuals, joint stock companies, firms of provision dealers and butter buyers had begun to appear. County Limerick was to the fore in this development. In 1884 Canon Richard Bagot of Kildare, a pioneer of dairy reform, helped establish a joint stock creamery in Hospital and another in nearby Galbally a little later.5

However, in the opinion of some observers, a switch from individual farmhouse butter production to the more hygienic and productive factory system, although a major advance, would not in itself be the complete solution. They argued that a whole new mindset was required. The farmer should not depend on the government and outside agencies but rather on himself and his neighbours. Only by taking business and responsibility into his own hands and seeing the benefits of co-operation could the Irish farmer acquire the qualities of mind and heart, the habits of thrift and industry, that would permanently improve his situation.7 The contemporary butter crisis necessitated such an approach. Farmers, if they wished to establish a local creamery, would have to combine since modern technical developments such as separators and churns were expensive.

Idealistic pioneers of co-operation like Horace Plunkett, R.A. Anderson and Fr Tom Finlay, S.J., went around Ireland, extolling the virtues of co-operation and of farmers taking control of their own destinies. Although the potential benefits of co-operation were compelling, Plunkett and his associates faced a good deal of hostility and even outright opposition. Farmers may have wished to ignore the questions that their visiting speakers posed but steadily falling prices and the realisation that Ireland’s share of the British market was declining rapidly made this less and less an option. The home market was also lower; Danish butter had made a successful appearance in Irish urban shops. It was clear that the preferences of the British housewife and the demands of the modern market for fresh butter rather than for the heavily salted Irish product would have to be catered for rather than the convenience of the farmer.

The availability of more sophisticated butter-making machinery had placed the farmhouse dairy at a considerable disadvantage. How could this state of affairs be rectified? Should the new factory model supersede the traditional farmhouse butter making system? If so, should the replacement be a privately owned butter factory or a co-operative system such as that advocated by Plunkett and his friends? For financial reasons the majority of those who were prepared to change favoured supporting privately owned concerns. Abandoning their traditional farmhouse system was one thing. Risking their small savings and their future income in a co-operative venture, depending on their neighbours on the committee to look after their interests, was taking a massive leap into the unknown. The idea of co-operation was novel and untried and farmers had no tradition of mutual support and interdependence. The Irish co-operative pioneers freely admitted that whenever they visited an area with a view to starting a co-operative they were invariably beseeched to provide from their own resources a creamery to which the farmers could supply their milk. These had already begun to spring up in many parts of West Munster though with varying degrees of success.8 A further difficulty encountered by the co-operators was that some of the clergy were hostile to or at least suspicious of

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7 Bolger, op. cit., p. 197; Plunkett, op. cit., p. 178.

the new movement, although this was not the case in West Limerick where the concentration was almost entirely on creameries.9

Faced with strong opposition from proprietary creameries and their supporters as well as a variety of vested interests, it comes as no surprise to learn that the pioneers of the co-operative movement in Ireland had addressed up to 50 meetings all over the country before experiencing their first success.10

In June 1889 W.L. Stokes, the representative of the English Co-operative Wholesale Society in Limerick, and Robert Gibson, a butter merchant, finally succeeded under the advice and guidance of the Co-operative Union of Great Britain and Ireland in establishing Ireland’s first co-operative creamery at Dromcollogher. The Co-operative Union provided the new enterprise with ‘a model code of rules and an admirable constitution’ and this was to become the constitutional basis for subsequent creamery co-operatives.11

The Debate commences

The prime dairy lands of Castlemahon had obvious potential and the possibility of setting up a creamery had been discussed locally in early 1889 without any practical outcome. In June 1889 a lengthy letter from ‘Bonus’ from Castlemahon appeared in the Munster News complaining about:

The gross lethargy or scandalous indifference of the Castlemahon farmers regarding the proposal of establishing a creamery in the district. Now, when factories are in full swing in a great number of the neighbouring parishes, and when their utility is no longer questionable, it is high time that the farmers here should stir themselves, and promptly take the matter into consideration. A great many of them have been sending milk to the Kilmoe factory at considerable disadvantage and immense trouble, and yet we possess here facilities rarely to be found for the construction of a creamery. It is surprising that men who are alive to every selfish consideration should thus have blindly neglected their truest interests. When the railway from Newcastle to Buttevant was first proposed there was no section of the community more active in its opposition than the farmers around Castlemahon. I am confident that were it not for the fact that the line was intended to be run through the land belonging to our “local leaders”, you would have heard very little of any opposition from

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9 Liam Kennedy, ‘The early response of the Irish catholic clergy to the co-operative movement’, *Irish Historical Studies* 21 (March 1978) pp 55-74. Generally there was no great enthusiasm for the co-operative movement among the clergy, Thomas J. Morrissey, *Thomas A. Finlay SJ* (Dublin 2004) pp 92-3. However, all the clergy encountered in this study favoured the movement: Fr. Irwin in Castlemahon supported the establishment of the local co-operative, as did the parish priest in Ballyhahill.

R.A. Anderson, *With Horace Plunkett in Ireland: The Co-op Organiser’s Story* (London 1935) p. 10. Fr. Gleeson, P.P. of Dromcollogher became President when the local Society was reformed. Fr. John O’Shaughnessy, P.P. of Clonacagh was closely involved with his local creamery and was one of his creamery’s two delegates at the Co-operatives Conference in Limerick in June 1891, which Fr. Mulqueen, P.P. of Shanagolden, also attended, *Munster News*, 1 July 1891. Fr Bob Ambrose, C.C., was an enthusiastic promoter of his local Co-operative, John Hough, *Ireland’s Co-operative Heartland Ardfert C.D.S. A History 1891-1974* (Limerick 1997) p.1. The fact that the Catholic bishop of Limerick, Dr Edward O’Dwyer, was an ally of Horace Plunkett and the co-operative movement may have been a factor in this support, see Thomas J. Morrissey, *Bishop Edward Thomas O’Dwyer of Limerick, 1842-1917* (Dublin 2003).

10 Anderson, *With Horace Plunkett in Ireland*, gives a first-hand account of their trials and tribulations as they travelled around Ireland.

11 Bolger, *op. cit.*, p. 66; Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 10. J.C. Gray, secretary of the Manchester Co-operative Union, had supplied copies of the Rules to the Castlemahon Committee and Michael O’Callaghan, the Secretary, wrote to him on 2 Mar 1891 asking him to supply Share Pass Books, Castlemahon Creamery Correspondence 1891-1895 (National Archives, Dublin, Call No. 1088/197/1, hereafter CCC). Obtaining Rules in this manner was very helpful financially since a solicitor would have charged £50 for providing the same service, R.A. Anderson, ‘Co-operative Dairying in Ireland’, *Farmers’ Gazette* (3 March 1894) pp 111-2. The National Library of Ireland has a copy of the *Rules of the Doneraile Co-operative Dairy Society Limited*, printed in Manchester in 1891 and, presumably, these were similar to those used in Castlemahon and elsewhere.
them. I state this merely to show you the selfishness which actuates these men – the very men who are directly responsible for having let our Branch of the National League fall through, as a consequence of which the germs of landgrubbing are spreading again, and our parish has become a fitting object for the finger of scorn to be pointed at. I wish to excuse this slight digression on the grounds that if the men of Castlemahon continue to depend on our local leaders to take the initiative in regard to the creamery question they will most certainly and sadly regret it. I, for one, am fully satisfied that I have discharged my duty in pointing out to them the path they should take... For as those who unfortunately for us were our leaders in the past have wilfully abused their position, then by all means let them have the power of abusing it no longer. It is now perfectly evident that we have been losing heavily these last years for want of a creamery and unless we wish to lose still more heavily in the future we should at once embrace the opportunity of having one.\(^\text{12}\)

Apart from the ostensible reason for writing the letter two other points should be noted. First, the tone of the missive was not conducive to the successful establishment of a concern based on mutual trust and dependence. His letter fostered an atmosphere of confrontation rather than co-operation, alienating those whose support and goodwill might be essential to the success of the enterprise. Second, the factories in the neighbouring parishes that he mentions were privately owned concerns set up by local entrepreneurs and, by providing an attractive alternative outlet to the farmer, greatly hindered the establishment and development of co-operative creameries. Selling his milk to a privately owned creamery rather than investing in a co-operative meant that the farmer was not obliged to provide any capital, or risk his small savings, in a new and untried enterprise. On the other hand he had no control over prices, could easily be exploited and would not share in the profits. A common marketing technique used by the private creamery was to pay a very high price for milk initially to induce farmers to switch from the traditional farmhouse system. When this aim had been achieved the price paid suddenly dropped.\(^\text{13}\) Privately owned concerns also adversely impacted on co-operatives in other important areas. A conscientious manager would quickly learn that sanctions could not be easily imposed, particularly when competition for milk was intense, since the existence of privately owned creameries ensured that any co-operative supplier unhappy with milk prices, manager, committee, or any other element of co-operative life, could easily find an alternative outlet for his produce. If all went to all he could revert to farmhouse butter making and sell to the local butter buyer. This militated against the development of a sense of loyalty to the co-operative in its suppliers.\(^\text{14}\)

**Proprietary or Co-operative**

If a creamery was to be established in Castlemahon the first decision to be taken was whether it should be a co-operative or whether a search should be undertaken to find an entrepreneur or group of entrepreneurs who could set up a privately owned concern. Local opinion was divided. Some favoured a joint stock creamery.\(^\text{15}\) This would be owned by a group of individuals, each of whom would hold stock in proportion to his financial stake and share in the profits in a similar manner. No dividend

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\(^\text{12}\) *Munster News*, 5 June 1889.


\(^\text{14}\) The readiness of farmers to switch from one creamery to another was not unique to Castlemahon: James MacKessy, the manager of Newcastle West Co-operative Creamery, complained to Anderson on 29 April 1895 that two members of his Committee were sending milk to Ballintemple Creamery, working in opposition to their own interests, *Newcastle West Creamery Correspondence*, 1891-1901 (NAI, Call No. 1088/743B/1).

\(^\text{15}\) M.O’Callaghan to W.L.Stokes, 13 Dec 1891, CCC.
would be paid to suppliers, except to the small number who happened to be shareholders. This was an obvious low risk option for the conservative majority and was promoted by a local group, led by Mr James O’S. Liston. They emphasised the risks attached to co-operative ventures and the dangers of getting involved in undefined liabilities and their arguments in favour of a privately owned creamery must have sounded very compelling to a conservative or timid farmer. Privately owned establishments became the norm in the 1890s and by the end of that decade they outnumbered co-operatives by four to one in Munster. However the philosophy behind the co-operative movement, which envisaged producers/suppliers as shareholders, benefiting from the dividend, and the recognition of the practical benefits that membership could confer, found favour not only in Castlemahon but also in many West Limerick parishes. The excitement engendered by the example of nearby Dromcollogher and its initial success exerted its influence and on 12 January 1890 a meeting was called to examine the possibility of setting up a co-operative creamery in Castlemahon. At the meeting some local farmers who were already sending milk to privately owned creameries related their experiences. Those who favoured a co-operative assured potential shareholders that as well as being paid for their milk the creamery’s profits would be returned to them in exact proportion to the value of milk supplied. Not everybody was convinced that a co-operative was the correct option and in a society with strongly defined social strata the prospect of a community-wide democratic self-help organisation did not appeal to everybody. Since opinion on what the next step should be was divided, the advice of the local Parish Priest, Fr Michael Irwin, was sought. He favoured setting up a co-operative and agreed to preside at a meeting a week later on 19 January 1890, when shares would be allotted and a site selected.

Raising the Capital

One of the first steps to be taken involved raising the share-capital and so the parish was canvassed. While great interest was shown and support was freely promised, delivering on these pledges was a different matter. Those who took shares tended to be the more substantial farmers. This is understandable since the farmer with a small number of cows might find the overhead cost of bringing his milk to the creamery prohibitive, particularly if he lived a distance away. The task of persuading doubtful shareholders to part with their money proved difficult, a not uncommon occurrence in the case of new co-operatives. Before the erection of the creamery had been completed the Committee

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17 IAOS Annual Report 1899, p. 66.

18 Within the space of a year or two, co-operatives were set up in Ballyhahil, Newcastle West, Feenagh, Ardagh, Glenwilliam, Ballcloon, Shanagolden, Glin, Cloancagh and Granagh.

19 Dromcollogher’s turnover in its first year was £9,660, showing a profit of £417, after paying throughout the year the highest price for milk in the neighbourhood, L. Smith-Gordon and L.C. Staples, Rural Reconstruction in Ireland (London 1917) p. 44.

20 L.P. Byrne, Twenty-one Years of the IAWS 1897-1918 (Dublin 1917) p. 9. Maurice D. Collins, Manager of Dromcollogher stated that the average made by a supplier of milk to the creamery in 1890 was £9 per cow; according to Mr. R. Gibson, this was about £1-10s. to £2 more than the return from the proprietary creameries. The Farmers’ Gazette, 27 June 1891.

21 Ibid.

22 Bolger, op. cit., p. 184. In the first thirty co-operatives established the average member had thirteen cows. In Ardagh Co-operative Creamery, most applicants took between ten and twenty £1 shares, Hough, op. cit., p. 6.

23 See Denis Foley, Mullinahone Co-op The first 100 Years (Mullinahone 1993) pp 20-2. In Ardagh, where shares were to be paid for in four instalments, the first two payments came in on time but there were problems about the remaining two. Legal action was taken against defaulters on several occasions, Hough, op. cit., p. 3.
Secretary, Mr O’Callaghan, who was also principal of the local national school, complained to J.C. Gray, Assistant Secretary of the Co-operative Union, who had been sent to Ireland to assist the local co-operators:

I find the greatest difficulty in collecting the 2nd instalment of the shares... Only 408 shares have been paid up (I mean half the 2nd instalment of 5/0 and all the 1st of 2/6 per share). Our Factory is nearly completed and the machinery and plant will (be) put up at once. Last week we had to obtain a loan of £100 from the local branch of the National Bank, at 4%... The manager of the National Bank told me that if the rate should get lower he would give it to me at the same price as the Bank of England but if it should increase he would not charge more than 5%.

Was there any method, O’Callaghan wondered plaintively to Gray, for compelling the defaulting members to pay up immediately? Incidentally, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, who had assisted in planning the venture, took a £10 shareholding. The total share capital was only £429, due in instalments. £210 was collected in 1891 and some more came early in 1892 but there was still £90 outstanding towards the end of January 1892. Ardagh Co-operative’s shareholders had managed to subscribe £849 by the end of 1892. Castlemahon creamery was seriously under-capitalised and experienced financial difficulties right from the beginning.

New shareholders were slow in coming forward. The opposition of the proponents of the proprietary creamery to a co-operative had not diminished and if anything had increased. Locals were advised against wasting their money in untried ventures. Wild rumours and assertions circulated. Horace Plunkett records in his diary that when he attended a Castlemahon meeting some of his audience believed that if they joined the co-operative they would be liable for its debts and the debts of any others joining it. Apparently they had been so informed by a local solicitor who was also keen to secure the legal fees involved in setting up the Society. To encourage the supporters and win over the undecided, Mr Mulhallen Marum, the Nationalist M.P. for North Kilkenny, a silver-tongued orator whom Plunkett had a few days previously engaged to help promote co-operation, was sent to address a meeting in Castlemahon on 14 Sept 1890. Lord Monteagle, Thomas Spring Rice of Mount Trenchard, Foynes, one of the pioneers of the co-operative movement, was still worried about the situation in early October and suggested to Anderson that ‘it would be well to take some steps to reassure the Castlemahon folk.’ A few days later a letter from him in praise of co-operative creameries appeared in the Munster News. Horace Plunkett, the driving force behind the co-operative

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24 The National Bank in Newcastle West was prepared to lend up to £300 to co-operatives without personal guarantees from the Committee, sums above that figure required guarantees, Hough, op. cit., p. 4.
25 O’Callaghan to J.C. Gray, 2 March 1891, CCC.
26 Irish Homestead, 4 Jan 1896, p. 704.
27 O’Callaghan to Gray, 2 March 1891 and O’Callaghan to Anderson, 21 Jan 1892, CCC. In the course of a letter sent later by the creamery committee to the Lord Lieutenant, Lord ZETLAND, and published in The Times, it was claimed that 400 shareholders who had subscribed capital of £400 had started the Castlemahon Society, The Times, 16 May 1891. This statement was not accurate. The Times also carried a lengthy letter seeking governmental assistance from the Ballynakill Co-operative Society. Ballynakill is a townland in Castlemahon parish and would have provided serious competition for Castlemahon Creamery. Its life, if indeed it ever existed, was short: it does not appear on any list of co-operatives in 1891 or later, nor is a delegate from Ballynakill listed among those attending any meeting of co-operative societies.
28 Hough, op. cit., p. 3.
29 23 Nov 1890.
31 1 Oct 1890, CCC.
32 Munster News, 4 Oct 1890.
movement in Ireland, visited Castlemahon on 23 November. He explained the workings and benefits of the co-operative system and his speech was very well received.\textsuperscript{33} Plunkett kept himself informed of progress - an entry in his diary refers to seeing the Secretary of the Castlemahon Society at a meeting in Feenagh on 11 January 1891.\textsuperscript{34} The promoters do not seem to have taken on board the seriousness of their financial situation and pressed ahead quickly and enthusiastically, completing the registration of the Castlemahon Co-operative Dairy Society by September 1890.\textsuperscript{35} In addition the Committee was even prepared to consider the possibility of starting a co-operative store and sought advice from Mr Gray. Mr O’Callaghan was most optimistic about its prospects:

I am sure it would be an unqualified success as the traders of the nearest town Newcastle West are remarkable for the high rates which they charge... Besides it would induce those parties, who are still holding aloof from us under the impression that we are making a big mistake in not forming a Limited Liability Co., to come forward and join the Society when they see the great advantages it enjoys in being established in connection with the Co-operative Union.\textsuperscript{36}

Gray in turn immediately referred the matter to Mr Anderson, the organising secretary of the Irish Co-operative Movement, suggesting caution. He wondered to Anderson if the Castlemahon people were in earnest and ‘mean to go on whether the shopkeepers reduce their prices or not.’ Although the prospect of a store appealed to Gray he did not want any more failures\textsuperscript{37} and so, after consideration, the idea of adding a store was dropped, at least for the time being. This was certainly a wise decision. The co-operative promoters already faced enough opposition without drawing down on themselves the enmity of the local traders and other vested interests.

**Constructing the Creamery**

By mid-November 1890 all the initial arrangements had been completed and the work of erecting the building was about to commence.\textsuperscript{38} By early May construction had been completed and the machinery installed. The total cost was £879, £321 for the site and buildings and £541 for the plant and machinery.\textsuperscript{39} This was much more than the normal average price of £250 for buildings and £450 for plant.\textsuperscript{40} The Committee in neighbouring Newcastle West spent £270 on their building and £457 on plant.\textsuperscript{41} On the other hand some societies spent a great deal more; Ardford premises and plant cost a

\textsuperscript{33} Munster News, 29 Nov 1890.

\textsuperscript{34} Plunkett noted in his entry for that day: *Parnell was leaving (the railway station in Limerick) as we arrived at 11 p.m. What a ragged wild following he had.* Parnell had received a ‘mighty, thunderous and blazing welcome’ in Limerick. Ambrose Macaulay, *The Holy See, British Policy and the Plan of Campaign in Ireland, 1885-93*, (Dublin 2002), p. 320. Co. Limerick followers of Parnell, ragged, wild or otherwise, were to contribute to the difficulties of Castlemahon creamery.

\textsuperscript{35} Munster News, 1 Oct 1890.

\textsuperscript{36} O’Callaghan to Gray, 2 March 1891, CCC.

\textsuperscript{37} Gray to Anderson, 3 March 1891, CCC.

\textsuperscript{38} Mary Dalton O’Connor, “The Early History of Castlemahon Creamery”, *Castlemahon Feohanagh Parish Annual*, (1997) p. 19. In the early co-operative ventures buildings were comparatively cheap and little expensive equipment was installed (Bolger, *op. cit.*, p. 185). Anderson wrote that “the buildings and equipment of the early creameries were primitive in the extreme... bare, ugly barn-like structures, a partition wall dividing the engine-room from the dairy proper.” *op. cit.*, p. 233. However, Castlemahon, according to its secretary, was particularly well constructed.

\textsuperscript{39} 1891 Accounts in CCC.

\textsuperscript{40} John Blount, ‘Co-operative Creameries in Ireland’, *Irish Farming World* (1 Jan 1892) p. 14.

\textsuperscript{41} P.A. McLoughlin to Anderson, 20 July 1891, Newcastle West Creamery Correspondence.
total of £1557. The Creamery secretary, Mr O’Callaghan, proudly informed Horace Plunkett that they had left nothing undone to make the building perfect in every detail. Since the undertaking had got so far despite the propaganda of the opposition he felt that the Society’s prospects were very bright.

The creamery opened for business on 11 May 1891. By this stage it was in debt to the bank to the tune of £550, money borrowed at a high rate of interest. The Committee began to be concerned about this drain on the enterprise’s finances and, in a letter to the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Zetland, suggested that the Government could help by lending them money on easy terms. Their request was not unreasonable, particularly when one considers that the same year, 1891, witnessed Balfour’s Land Act. However a Government that had no difficulty in finding millions of pounds to advance to farmers on favourable terms to help them purchase their farms failed to recognise that it was at least as important to assist them in improving land productivity and income, an area that had been so neglected in the struggle over land ownership, and the society’s request fell on deaf ears. Despite this setback the creamery’s prospects looked promising. Three weeks after opening O’Callaghan notified Anderson that their milk supply was increasing every day and that they were getting good prices for their butter.

**Appointment of Manager**

One of the first duties of the newly elected committee was the appointment of staff and the choice of manager was particularly important. Until the Albert Agricultural College and the Cork Model Farm introduced special courses in 1895 there were no formal courses for training managers – an informal ‘master and apprentice’ system, one of learning on the job, and, ideally, some experience of business and the butter trade, was the best that could be found in those early days. Good fortune as well as good judgment was necessary when selecting a successful manager.

The appointment in Castlemahon was not without controversy. O’Callaghan, the committee secretary, confided to Anderson that a local shareholder who had favoured a joint stock creamery had thrown his hat into the ring at the last minute but without success:

> We were very fortunate... in electing a very suitable manager who has had 8 years experience of the business. There was a local candidate who was defeated because we thought if he were elected the great majority of the shareholders would sever their connection with the Society. He is a brother of Liston’s (the solicitor of ‘Veritas’ fame) and some time ago made himself odious to the people of the district by his action in certain matters...

If Mr Liston was appointed, O’Callaghan maintained, the Society would:

> Be bankrupt in 6 months... As he all along denied that he would become a candidate no preparation was made by the general body of the shareholders to elect men on the committee who would give a conscientious vote and so the concern was very near being ruined as a consequence. Of course if it were a failure certain parties would be only too glad to ascribe it to the fact of its being a Co-operative Society and not to the faults of the manager.

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42 1891 Accounts, Ardagh Creamery Correspondence (NAI, Call no. 1088/9/1); Hough, *op. cit.*., pp 4 -5.

43 Michael O’Callaghan to Horace Plunkett, 8 May 1891, CCC.


45 *The Times*, 16 May 1891.

46 1 June 1891, CCC.

47 24 April 1891, CCC.
The contest for this appointment caused a considerable amount of bad feeling and two weeks later O’Callaghan admitted to Plunkett that ‘the Managership has been a very vexed question with us’.48 To make matters worse the man appointed, Thomas Beary, did not live up to O’Callaghan’s high expectations. In October 1891 both he and the dairymaid were dismissed after a special meeting of the committee and shareholders.49 James O’S. Liston, the original unsuccessful local candidate and a bitter opponent of O’Callaghan, was made a temporary manager. He, too, was soon dismissed but refused accept the decision as O’Callaghan reported to Stokes:

We are in a curious position owing to the Manager whom we appointed provisionally about a month ago but who failed to satisfy the Committee as to his fitness for the position, refusing to recognise the authority of the Committee and entering the Dairy holds possession of it. He is a brother of P.T. Liston Solicitor50 and is of course backed up by that legal luminary. We have acted perfectly legal as Mr. Condon whom we have consulted has informed us and the only thing now to decide upon is as to how we are to get Liston out of the factory. Mr. Condon has directed us to get an order from The Court of Chancery and we are to have a committee meeting on Tuesday next to decide on what has to be done . . . There are many things in connection with Liston’s action which would show an attempt to destroy the Castlemahon Coop. Society and promote a Joint Stock Co. instead. He (the attorney) owes me private pique for its being a Co-operative Society and boasts that not only will he get me out of the Society but will get me dismissed by the Education Board. I do not think nay I am sure that he will not succeed in either move as he will not find 6 out of 49 shareholders to back him up.51

Stokes was alarmed at the prospect of legal proceedings and suggested instead that O’Callaghan should arrange that the next Committee meeting be adjourned until both Mr Anderson and himself would be free to attend when they would go over everything in detail and hopefully arrive at an amicable solution. Stokes also stated pointedly to O’Callaghan that he had ‘heard a different side of the story from others connected with your creamery and naturally am anxious to get at the truth of the whole thing.’52 Stokes and Anderson attended a meeting in Castlemahon on 15 December. The upshot was that all charges against Mr Liston were dismissed and he agreed to hand over possession of the dairy, while not abandoning his managerial ambitions.53. This decision led to a deterioration in the

48 8 May 1891, CCC.
49 Munster News, 4 Nov 1891; in 1894 Beary joined Ardagh Co-operative Society where he proved to be a most efficient manager. During his term of office it made a profit of £312 in 1894 and £245 in 1895, by which time it had paid off all its debts, Ardagh Creamery Correspondence. Beary seems to have been deficient in interpersonal skills: he was in court in July 1894, having been assaulted at the creamery, Munster News, 18 July 1894 while in 1895 he dismissed the dairymaid after a row. When the Committee subsequently reinstated her, he resigned, Hough, op. cit., pp 14-5.
50 Patrick Liston has his own place in the history of the co-operative movement in Ireland. When Anderson declared at a meeting in Rathkeale that the movement recognised neither political nor religious differences, Liston gravely informed him ‘Rathkeale is a Nationalist town – Nationalist to the backbone – and any pound of butter made in Rathkeale will be made in accordance with Irish, Nationalist principles, or it shan’t be made at all.’ (quoted in Plunkett, op. cit., pp 190-1). C.C. Riddall, Agricultural Co-operation in Ireland (Dublin 1950) p. 6 says that many years later Mr Liston informed him that he had made his statement not because he was personally opposed to co-operation but because he wanted Plunkett to know that he was only wasting his time preaching co-operation to farmers. In November 1891, Mr Liston is described as being solicitor to the Castlemahon Society (Munster News, 4 Nov 1891) but the following month O’Callaghan consulted a different solicitor, Mr Condon, in connection with the managerial impasse involving Liston’s brother.
51 13 Dec 1891, CCC.
52 14 Dec 1891. CCC.
53 Letter from George L. Sheehy to Anderson, 1 Jan. 1892, CCC.
previous excellent relations between Anderson and O'Callaghan and came to a head over the issue of an auditor

Appointment of Auditor

Mr William Swallow, a Leeds auditor who had come to Ireland to assist the co-operative pioneers, had originally been appointed as Creamery Auditor on the recommendation of Anderson but soon found that he was unable to undertake the task. Anderson was then proposed as an alternative auditor. Three weeks after he had attended the meeting in Castlemahon to discuss the Committee's refusal to sanction the appointment of Liston he received a letter from O'Callaghan, the tone of which was in marked contrast to that of previous correspondence:

I am directed by the Committee to inform you that they do not require your services to audit the accounts of the Society. You will therefore please return the check blocks under seal... also all papers furnished to you by the majority of the Committee when you attended here on December 17th 1891 to investigate the action of the Committee in declining to sanction the appointment of a manager.54

On the same day Anderson received a letter from Liston giving a very different version of events:

The Secretary Castlemahon Cooperative Dairy Society states Mr. Swallow auditor is unable to come and audit the books and therefore wants to get an auditor of his own selection. I as a shareholder myself and on behalf of the vast majority of the shareholders object to the course the Secretary intends taking in this matter. It is the wish of the shareholders that you should yourself if possible audit the accounts or have them audited by some other person of your own selection. It would be well that immediate steps should be taken in the matter as cheques of the society are being dishonoured by the Bank. I understand that the five members of the Committee hostile to me are about to issue an advertisement for a person to act in the double capacity of Manager and Secretary in the face of the fact that the charges against me have been dismissed and even before the usual business meeting and Election of a committeeman takes place. Nearly all the shareholders are opposed to O'Callaghan's action and I would be supported in any action you advise. 55

The next day's post brought Anderson a letter from Mr. John R Nix, a prominent shareholder, who had been the Vice President of the local branch of the Irish National League. 56 He confirmed that the committee was split down the centre over the question of the replacement auditor. Four of the Committee wanted Anderson to appoint a successor to Mr Swallow since they would not have any confidence in any person appointed by the majority. The Chairman, Mr Sheehy, maintained that they would accept only their own selection. Nix complained that at the meeting O'Callaghan had cast a vote although he was in receipt of a salary as secretary of the creamery and persisted in voting when this action was questioned. The writer conceded that the majority of the Committee had instructed O'Callaghan to find a replacement for Swallow but predicted that 'our factory will not work if things are allowed to go on as at present.' 57

Mr R. Gibson, a well-known butter merchant for the Manchester firm of Pearson and Rutter agreed

54 O'Callaghan to Anderson, 8 Jan 1892, CCC.
55 Liston to Anderson, 8 Jan 1892, CCC.
56 Incidentally Mr P.T. Liston was Hon. Sec. of the branch and J. O'S. Liston was a committee member.
57 9 Jan 1892, CCC.
to step into the breach and take on the audit. Some extracts from a letter sent by Gibson to Anderson shortly after he had started work on the accounts show the way the business was being conducted:

There was no difficulty with their accts as there were no accts to have any difficulty with. I have had to start and write them up from the start. The cash book was as good as a Chinese puzzle. The first manager neglected the accts but the second man does not seem to have even attempted to keep them in any shape or form . . .
I believe I have already helped to smooth matters a little with the contending factions and I think I can do so entirely . . .
I am striking a bimonthly balance for them and have explained to the Committee that they should insist on having such from their Manager in future, on the lines of the returns you prepared for the factories will you kindy send me a score of them by post. I want to make the Secretary fill them up from mine in the cash book so that he will clearly see how he should have it done.\(^{58}\)

As we have seen, a large part of the Committee's time and energy had been devoted to petty squabbling rather than concentrating on the economic well being of the Society. It is no surprise to learn that in its first year of operation the creamery suffered a net loss of £8 12s. 10d. after charging £35 1s. 10d. to depreciation of plant and machinery.\(^{59}\)

Much of the original enthusiasm for a co-operative had understandably evaporated by the start of 1892. Unlike nearby Cloncaigh with a profit of £152 and Newcastle West good to the tune of £62,\(^{60}\) Clonmahon could pay no dividend since no profit had been achieved in 1891. The divisions in the committee were taking their toll and some of the shareholders suggested letting the factory for a year to Messrs Stokes and Gibson who, in addition to paying a rent, might also be able to reconcile the contending parties.\(^{61}\) Even the normally upbeat O'Callaghan was prepared to admit that they had had great difficulty in maintaining the society as a going concern in 1891 and that any profits in 1892 would be light.\(^{62}\) Their immediate problem was financial - the society was in desperate need of funds. The disappointing outcome to 1891 and the failure to pay a dividend did not encourage any farmer who was contemplating becoming a member or provide an incentive to those whose share instalments were outstanding. The creamery could not approach the bank for a further loan - in fact, according to Liston, the bank had started to dishonour creamery cheques. Funds were available from one unwelcome source. An English butter merchant had offered the committee all the money they wanted, subject to security, but since this would involve them giving a commitment to supply him with their butter they were unwilling to accept his offer.\(^{63}\)

Despite its many problems the society pressed ahead. Denis Hegarty, a Corkman who had previously managed Lissarda Co-operative Creamery, was appointed as the new manager. Meanwhile Gibson had completed his audit and his report to the shareholders on 2 April 1892 gave a clear picture of the underlying problems and confirmed their worst fears. The accounts had been ‘imperfectly rendered and entirely unfinished’. The society ‘through indifference on the part of the managers and even deliberate fraud on the part of somebody’ was ‘seriously involved financially’ and in danger of

\(^{58}\) 29 Jan 1892, CCC.

\(^{59}\) Thomas Scott to Anderson, 9 May 1893, CCC.

\(^{60}\) Cloncaigh 1891 Accounts, Cloncaigh Creamery Correspondence (National Archives, Dublin, Call No. 1088/245/1); Newcastle West 1891 Accounts, Newcastle West Creamery Correspondence.

\(^{61}\) O'Callaghan to Anderson, 21 Jan 1892, CCC.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) Ibid.
closing. Petty bickering and dissensions were rife among its members and Gibson warned that the society was in danger of being ‘permanently harmed or completely ruined’ by this conduct. Nevertheless, ‘he was most happy to be in a position to refute the falsehoods so assiduously circulated, and to show that the work of the society’, in spite of the difficulties, was creditable.\(^{64}\)

A week later a well-attended shareholders’ meeting discussed the critical position of the society and the disunity among the committee. Four committee members were singled out and allegations were made that they had consistently obstructed the work of the committee. The meeting voted by a majority of 27 to 13 to censure the four and these soon offered their resignations. John Nix, who had featured in the dispute over the appointment of the creamery’s auditor, was one of the four. Another was James Cagney who will be mentioned towards the end of this article in connection with a contested Poor Law Guardianship election. The chairman refused to accept the resignation of one of the quartet because of his activity and zeal in the inauguration of the society and the establishment of the creamery. New members were elected to the three vacant positions on the Committee.\(^{65}\)

The replacement of the dissident committee members did not bring the peace and harmony that was so badly needed. Mutual antagonism and distrust and cherished memories of real or imagined past wrongs were too deep-rooted. Political differences intertwined with old personal animosities - the Creamery Committee split down the middle over their support or opposition to Parnell and his successors. The Parnell split permeated contemporary Irish affairs and few areas of Castlemahon life escaped unscathed. Within a month of the split the recently founded G.A.A. club had become one of the first victims. The G.A.A. as a body was solidly behind Parnell,\(^{66}\) as was the Castlemahon club. The Munster News reported on 31 Dec 1890 that a largely attended meeting of the Castlemahon G.A.A. had expressed ‘entire confidence in the political leadership of Mr Parnell’. The meeting also declared that ‘the notice posted on the Chapel gate, and signed by the captain and president, calling a meeting of this association is illegal, and tending to break up the ranks, considering that a notice in due form had already been posted by the secretary, with the approval of six members of the committee’.

Local disputes of this nature, since they must have involved individuals who were also committee members and shareholders, increased the impact of the animosities already existing on the Creamery committee. The intensity of these political Parnellite divisions did not facilitate improved economic co-operation. From the very beginning Plunkett and those sponsoring the co-operative movement had gone to great pains to try to ensure the total exclusion of all political and other extraneous matter from the discussions of Creamery committees.\(^{67}\) However, ensuring that the Castlemahon committee discussed only business at their meetings was easier said than done. This called for a strong experienced chairman and a committee familiar with and prepared to accept normal procedural rules, requirements that the new board could not satisfy.

Despite their problems, the Committee displayed enterprise and initiative in some areas. Shortly after its foundation the creamery had found a lucrative market in Manchester for its butter.\(^{68}\) Planning for the future, the chairman, George L. Sheehy, and the secretary, Michael O’Callaghan, had attended a dairying conference in Limerick where, \textit{inter alia}, the possibility of setting up a local butter market was discussed. Mr O’Callaghan was one of the featured speakers, delivering a paper on ‘Managers’. Unsurprisingly, both he and Mr Sheehy emphasised the advantages of appointing a stranger rather

\(^{64}\) \textit{Munster News}, 16 April 1892.

\(^{65}\) \textit{Ibid.}


\(^{67}\) Fr. Finlay, ‘Co-operation in Ireland’, \textit{The Lyceum}, 15 Mar 1892, p. 128; Morrissey, \textit{Finlay}, p. 86.

\(^{68}\) \textit{Munster News}, 1 July 1891; \textit{Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator}, 3 July, 1891.
than a local man as manager.\textsuperscript{69} The management had also enough self-confidence and ambition to successfully enter the produce of their creamery in competition. In July 1892 Castlemahon butter won first prize at Limerick Show and soon the creamery’s letterhead carried a logo proudly proclaiming this distinction.\textsuperscript{70} On 14 Sept. 1892 Mr O’Callaghan informed Mr Anderson that they had entered some of their produce in the British Dairy Farmers Association Show. They had previously entered Liverpool and Armagh shows but in each instance their exhibit had been damaged in transit.\textsuperscript{71} Mr Gibson may have had some involvement in the creamery around this time since he attended the Co-operative Dairy Conference in Limerick in October 1892 as the Castlemahon delegate.\textsuperscript{72} On the economic front, however, things were going from bad to worse. At the end of the year the concern turned in a loss of £237 9s. 4d. after charging depreciation of £82 16s. 1d.\textsuperscript{73}

The creamery limped on and the animosity did not abate. Another politically inspired row broke out in March over the election of the local Poor Law Guardian of the Newcastle Union. Edmond Raleigh, described as a Federationist, opposed his neighbour, another member of the Liston family, Terence, the sitting Guardian, who was a Parnellite. Raleigh had replaced one of the dissident creamery directors who had been censured by the shareholders in 1892\textsuperscript{74}. Both parties were legally represented at the election count and ‘after some very heated arguments and objection at each side as to proxy votes which are declared all filled wrong’, Mr Liston was declared elected.\textsuperscript{75} At a later date a recount was ordered and Mr Liston’s election was confirmed.\textsuperscript{76} Personal relations within the parish had clearly not improved and the mood for tolerance and acceptance of difference within the committee was at an all-time low. The situation deteriorated to such an extent that one faction refused to send their milk to the Creamery when their opponents were managing the creamery and vice versa.\textsuperscript{77} This created a crisis since the creamery needed a large volume of milk to be economically viable. The fact that the small quantities of milk supplied were not always of the best quality aggravated an already dire state of affairs. The manager, Mr Hegarty, complained to Mr Anderson that:

Owing to the unfortunate dispute in this place of some time ago which you are aware of we are getting but very small quantity of milk, some of the largest farmers going to other factories. Besides they think nothing of adulterating milk in this district and it is difficult to get at them when they are allowed run on for some time as they have been here. I have just seen an analyst’s report of last year of 9 or 10 samples of the milk coming to this factory and nearly all were adulterated\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} Irish Farming World, 8 July 1892, p. 446.
\textsuperscript{71} CCC.
\textsuperscript{72} Farmers’ Gazette, 22 Oct 1892.
\textsuperscript{73} Thomas Scott, Auditor, to Anderson. 9 May 1893, CCC.
\textsuperscript{74} Munster News, 16 April 1892.
\textsuperscript{75} Munster News, 25 March 1893.
\textsuperscript{76} Munster News, 8 April 1893.
\textsuperscript{78} Hegarty to Anderson, 16 April 1893, CCC. Milk supplied for 1892 yielded only 5.61 ounces of butter per gallon, significantly below the average for the area. The yield in nearby Cloncagh Co-operative was 6.4 in 1893, 6.43 in 1894 and 6.68 in 1896, Cloncagh Creamery Correspondence Annual Reports; Newcastle West Co-operative had 6.04 in 1893 and 6.5 in 1894; Newcastle West Creamery Correspondence Annual Reports; Ardagh had 6.08 in 1892, 6.11 in 1893, 6.32 in 1894, 6.45 in 1895, Ardagh Creamery Correspondence Annual Reports. Glenwilliam had 6.66 in 1893 and 6.78 in 1894, Glenwilliam Creamery Correspondence Annual Reports (NAI, Call No. 1088/462/2).
A new auditor, Mr McLoughlin, had been found to deal with the accounts but his statement of affairs was regarded as unreliable and finally it was agreed that Thomas Scott, a Public Auditor from Millfield in Cork, should check them.\textsuperscript{79} Accepting the task, Scott made his position clear to Anderson:

I will see him (Mr. O'Callaghan, secretary of Castlemahon) when I am ready for him, but if there is anything fishy in their business I'll insist on one or two members of the Committee being present to hear what I have to say... it would not be well to let him be the sole interpreter of the balance sheet I have to submit unless everything is straight and square.\textsuperscript{80}

He quickly found that things were in a mess. Mr O'Callaghan had some of the creamery's books and Mr Gibson had others. The McLoughlin audit that had been carried out in 1892 was 'absurdly wrong'. As regards the committee Mr Scott stated the obvious: 'As far as I can see, they sadly want guidance'.\textsuperscript{81}

It took some months before the balance sheets for 1891 and 1892 were printed and they were circulated on 6 September 1893.\textsuperscript{82} A committee meeting was fixed for 13 Sept. but postponed until the 17th because a quorum did not attend. Possibly one of the factions may have decided to boycott the meeting or perhaps apathy or despair won out since committee meetings had been postponed on a number of previous occasions. Hegarty, the manager, pressed Anderson to attend the meeting if at all possible since any further postponement would leave 'very little chance of effecting a reconciliation between the parties'.\textsuperscript{83} Anderson managed to find time to attend the general meeting on 1 October but the hoped for reconciliation did not materialise. On 28 October he received the depressing news that 'neither Mr Nix nor any of his friends have as yet sent their milk'.\textsuperscript{84} Hegarty, the manager, was himself running out of patience and enthusiasm and enquired from Anderson about the possibility of suitable vacancies arising in other co-operative creameries. Winter dairying did not take place in the area and Castlemahon creamery was due to close for the season towards the end of November.\textsuperscript{85}

The one piece of good news was that Castlemahon butter had been very successful at the London Dairy Show, taking first prize in one class and fourth prize in another.\textsuperscript{86} Despite the excellence of its product the small uneconomic volume of milk supplied ensured that the creamery continued to lose money, although not to the extent of the previous year. The accounts for 1893 showed a net loss in the year's working of £80 14s. 7d. after writing off £71 8s. 1d. for depreciation or an actual net loss of £9 6s. 6d. compared to almost £240 in 1892. The Gross Profit in 1893 was 13.6% on sales compared to 7% in 1892.\textsuperscript{87}

Despite the improvement in 1893 the hard fact remained that the creamery had run up losses in each year of its short existence, was in serious debt, and its creditors were clamouring for their money. The committee and shareholders then advertised their premises to let.\textsuperscript{88} Two parties were interested\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{79} O'Callaghan to Anderson, 10 April 1893; Scott to Anderson, 27 April 1893, CCC.
\textsuperscript{80} Scott to Anderson, 17 April 1893, Newcastle West Creamery Correspondence.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Hegarty to Anderson, 5 Sept 1893, CCC.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 14 Sept 1893, CCC.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 27 Oct 1893, CCC.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 28 Oct 1893, CCC. He later joined the IAOS.
\textsuperscript{86} Limerick Leader, 13 Oct 1893.
\textsuperscript{87} Published accounts dated 3 Feb 1894, CCC.
\textsuperscript{88} Redfern, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 297.
\textsuperscript{89} Irish Homestead, 22 June 1895, p. 247.
but ultimately in the spring of 1894 the Co-operative Wholesale Society (C.W.S.) of Manchester was successful and leased the creamery for a year. The rent was £100 and a half-year’s rent was paid in advance to lessen the Society’s difficulties.

The C.W.S. had played a part in the foundation of Castlemahon, had supplied Rules and Share Pass books and had also purchased £10 worth of shares in the concern. Some of its officials and agents had been intimately involved in attempting to guide the concern for three years so they had a first hand picture of the situation. To the Castlemahon Committee renting meant a break from loss, some cash to reduce debts, a breathing space for both factions among the shareholders and an opportunity for everybody to face the gravity of their situation.

After the creamery had re-opened on 26 February 1894 the C.W.S. improved the physical plant, putting in a new separator and during that period the butter produced at the dairy was packed and sold in rolls. Butter packed in rolls fetched from five to eight shillings more per hundredweight than butter sold in 56 lb or 112 lb boxes. The C.W.S., because of its enormous butter trade, was able to place Castlemahon butter on the most favourable market and pay suppliers a higher price for their produce. W.L. Stokes, the C.W.S. butter buyer, claimed that Castlemahon had been transformed into the most successful creamery in the country. At the start of his tenure, he told the Huddersfield Co-operative Congress in 1895, the creamery had just twenty milk suppliers, representing 400 gallons per day. Fifteen months later the number of suppliers had jumped to more than 120 and the milk supply had increased to over 3000 gallons per day. Competition success was maintained and Castlemahon butter won third prize in Class 2 at Strabane Show. Furthermore on 25 October of that year, at the First Annual Show of the Irish Dairy Association in Limerick, Castlemahon butter was awarded 3rd place in one category and ‘very highly commended’ in two others. In short 1894 was an excellent year for both renters and suppliers.

When the year’s lease was up the divisions and internal difficulties among the committee and shareholders remained as deep as ever. Mr Stokes, the butter buyer, believed that reconstructing Castlemahon as a co-operative was ‘an utter impossibility’. Although Parnell had been dead for more than three years by this stage, the bitterness caused by the split was still very real. In March in a contested election of a Poor Law Guardian, James Cagney, who had been censured in 1892 for obstructing the work of the Creamery Committee and resigned, was one of the candidates. He had regained his place on the Committee and was legally represented at the Poor Law election by none other than the redoubtable P.T. Liston. The election gave him 60 votes while his opponent, James

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90 This was the production and distribution branch of the English Co-operative Movement. A major buyer of Irish butter, it had set up its first purchasing depot in Tipperary in 1866 and another in Kilnamuck in 1868. Four more depots had been established by 1874. Its Irish headquarters was located in Limerick city. Butter represented up to one third of its annual store sales.

91 Renting a co-operative creamery was not a completely new idea: Castlemahon shareholders had considered the possibility less than a year after the creamery opened, O’Callaghan to Anderson, 21 Jan 1892, CCC. Nearby Dromcollogher had been rented for a year, Irish Homestead, 9 March 1895, p. 10 and it was subsequently sold to a private company, Fr T. Finlay, ‘A Fatal Outflow of Capital’, New Ireland Review (June 1899) pp 217-8.

92 Rowbottom, op. cit., p. 143.

93 Irish Homestead, 22 June 1895, p. 246.

94 In Francis Guy, Directory of Munster 1893, p. 95, published in Cork in 1893, the name of the creamery in Castlemahon is given as Co-operative Society of Great Britain which suggests that the CWS got involved at some stage in 1893.

95 Redfern, op. cit., p. 297. A fourth separator was added in 1895, Rowbottom, op. cit., p. 146.

96 Irish Homestead, 4 Jan 1896, p. 703. Suppliers were paid every fortnight in cash.

97 Irish Homestead, 22 June 1895, p. 247.

98 Munster News, 1 Aug 1894.


100 Irish Homestead, 22 June 1895, p. 24.
Enright, got 59, a result that was soon challenged.\footnote{Munster News, 23 March 1895; Limerick Leader, 25 March 1895.} This voting indicated that the parish was still split down the middle and the prospect of peace and harmony breaking out seemed remote.

The C.W.S. offered the creamery back to the shareholders but they were reluctant to accept.\footnote{Irish Homestead, 22 June 1895, p. 247.} The local farmers told Mr Stokes that they did not want a Co-operative Society but wanted the C.W.S. to run the business.\footnote{Irish Homestead, 29 June 1895, p. 261.} Faced with the likelihood of closure, desperate efforts were made to save the concern, according to Mr O’Callaghan. He resigned as Secretary but remained a director while the chairman, George L. Sheehy, also fulfilled the duties of the vacant post. The Committee was prepared to hand over the management of the creamery to the minority faction in the Society and to undertake to support them afterwards. These would only accept the offer on condition that the existing committee would still be responsible for the Society’s debts, which by this time had risen to around £800. This of course was not a realistic option. The next proposal was to try to lease it to the C.W.S. for £850 for 10 years but apparently the Wholesale would only consider an outright purchase. The C.W.S. had considered the desirability of leasing creameries but their review group did not recommend it.\footnote{Redfern, op. cit., p. 297.} The Committee then approached the Provincial Bank and also the Munster and Leinster Bank to borrow money from them but after a good deal of correspondence both declined to give a loan, principally because the money was to be used to pay another bank.

The next plan was to let it for a few years to the highest bidder and use the rent to reduce liabilities. The possibility existed that perhaps in the course of three or four years matters would have cooled down to the extent that a reorganisation of the Society could be accomplished and the working of it taken over.\footnote{Redfern, op. cit., p. 298.} Meanwhile, in the midst of all this frantic activity, the creditors continued to press for payment. Bailiffs were put in and finally the creamery was put up for sale.\footnote{Irish Homestead, 22 June 1895, p.247. Catherine Webb (ed.), Industrial Co-operation: The Story of a Peaceful Revolution (Manchester 1917) p. 244.} A butter buyer showed some interest,\footnote{O’Callaghan to Anderson, 2 Sept. 1895, CCC.} as did the Irish section of the C.W.S. The latter had invested a great deal of time and expertise in keeping the creamery going and were well aware of its potential. They now were faced with the possibility that a rival butter buyer would take over and reap the rewards of their labours. Authorisation to purchase Castlemahon was sought from headquarters and this was granted to the Committee of the C.W.S. in March 1895. The purchase price was fixed at £850, roughly the amount required to pay the creamery’s debts, and a deal was done for this sum.\footnote{Bolger, op. cit., p. 197; Irish Homestead, 16 March 1895, p. 23. Horace Plunkett complained at the British Co-operative Congress in Huddersfield in 1895 that the C.W.S. had paid more for Castlemahon than it was worth, Irish Homestead, 22 June 1895, p. 245.} There was an initial problem in establishing title to the satisfaction of the C.W.S. but the sale was finally completed by the end of 1895.

The C.W.S. version of the events leading up to their purchase of Castlemahon gives a different picture. One of their officials, James Rowbottom, wrote in 1899 that in 1893 some of the creamery’s shareholders had begged Mr Gibson, the butter buyer, to take it off their hands. Then during 1894:

The committee gave up the idea of re-uniting the factions as hopeless, and towards the end of the year approached the Wholesale with a request to take it over entirely. After a great deal of negotiation (sic) and the necessary amount of consideration, before the big corporation would
undertake such a distinctly new departure as Butter-making, the question was forced to an issue by a letter from the committee of the creamery, saying that if the Co-operative Wholesale Society did not wish to buy, they would be “compelled to arrange with some others immediately.” The Wholesale Society had no desire that the creamery should lapse into private hands and so decided to take it over.\(^{109}\)

Which account is correct? Perhaps there is some truth in both versions. Given the degree of mutual antipathy it is easy to visualise one faction on the committee negotiating independently of the other. Presumably the Liston faction advocated the sale. Despite past traumas, the looming debt mountain and pressure from creditors, O’Callaghan, ever optimistic, and his supporters were reluctant to throw in the towel and admit defeat. Since the daily milk supply had now grown to more than 3000 gallons O’Callaghan argued that if the creamery could be kept in local hands the debt could be cleared in three or four years. Members of the present committee, he wrote to Anderson, were not anxious to sell and would continue to be responsible for the debts if there were the smallest chance that they could ever be paid off.\(^{110}\)

It seems most unlikely that this optimism was general and the majority of Castlemahon’s 79 shareholders must have viewed the C.W.S. offer with relief. Initially some would have had reservations about the wisdom of buying shares in the new creamery and trusting their neighbours on the committee to look after their interests. The whole concept of co-operation was new to them and some, particularly those who were not well educated, may have found it hard to comprehend the logic behind the new venture.\(^{111}\) Abandoning their traditional home-dairying had been a major departure and supplying a proprietary creamery rather than assuming the responsibilities that a co-operative creamery had been correct after all. During the previous four or five years their experience of co-operation had not been very positive. The Promised Land, which they had been assured was round the corner, seemed as far away as ever and the dividends and co-operative benefits promised had failed to materialise. While most of the neighbouring co-operatives had shown a profit while still managing to clear most of their debts, their story was very different. The manager and dairymaid had been dismissed, money had disappeared, the committee had spent its time wrangling, their creamery was up to its neck in debt, no solution seemed in sight and their shares were practically worthless. However a white knight had appeared in the shape of the C.W.S. and rented their concern for a year, during which time they had got a better price for their milk. Now they had a very generous offer that would result in their debts being cleared and their milk taken by the previous renters without any of the risk and frustration that had been their experience to date. Naturally they were very happy to sell.

Throughout all these deliberations and negotiations little consideration and even less thanks was given to those individuals who had been involved in setting up the creamery or trying to keep it viable. No creamery in West Limerick, with the possible exception of Dromcollogher, had received as much care and attention from the Irish co-operative movement as Castlemahon. Horace Plunkett and Lord Monteagle had made visits, addressed meetings, written letters or dealt with queries. The Kilkenny M.P., Mulhallen Marum, had been sent to rally the troops a week before his untimely death. Butter buyers like R. Gibson and W.L. Stokes had answered innumerable queries and assisted in a variety of ways. The indefatigable R.A. Anderson, who held more than 200 meetings throughout Ireland in 1891,

\(^{109}\) James Rowbottom, op. cit., pp 143-4.
\(^{110}\) 2 Sept 1895, CCC.
\(^{111}\) While Castlemahon had a well-regarded national school, attendance only became compulsory in rural districts in 1898, while as late as 1880 only 74% of bridegrooms in Ireland could write their names, O’Rourke, op. cit., p. 9.
in addition to visiting Sweden to see the latest innovations and systems in action,\textsuperscript{112} managed to attend many committee meetings in Castlemahon and acted as adviser and counsellor on a variety of day-to-day issues. This article has more than twenty references to correspondence sent either to or by him. Englishmen J.C. Gray, Assistant Secretary of the Co-operative Union, Mr Pophrey, a Director, and William Swallow of Leeds, an Auditor, had either visited Castlemahon or became involved in its affairs. Yet the local committee and shareholders, as a group, engrossed in their own disputes, seem to have taken it all for granted and not felt any reciprocal obligations or gratitude to those who had laboured so selflessly on their behalf.

In mitigation, it is well to remember that in the early days of co-operation the impetus for co-operative creameries came from the top down rather than from the bottom up. It was not a case of farmers identifying a need, analysing the situation themselves and coming up with the idea of a co-operative creamery as a suitable response. Rather it was a case of well-intentioned, well-educated outsiders telling farmers what they believed would be in their best interests. Bearing in mind that a number of influential persons regularly denigrated the co-operative movement, it may be harsh to accuse the Castlemahon shareholders of disloyalty to co-operation when many of them may not have understood or subscribed to its ideals.

**Reaction to the Sale**

The local newspapers did not report the sale, just as they had ignored the arrival of the C.W.S. as lessees of the creamery in 1894. The frustration and anger of those individuals in the Irish Co-operative movement who had expended so much time and energy in trying to guide and nurture the concern for three long years was speedily and vehemently expressed. Anderson rejected the C.W.S. line that if they had not stepped in the creamery would have been forced to close. They should have let it rot, he berated them indignantly, rather than purchase it.\textsuperscript{113} Fr Tom Finlay, S.J. lambasted the Committee ‘you, would presume to decide the destinies of your country while you exhibit to the world the miserable spectacle of a divided community which cannot agree to keep the churn in its creamery revolving.’\textsuperscript{114} On another occasion he concluded an account of the creamery’s history with these words ‘I dare say every member of the committee felt himself competent to govern the country; all they collectively demonstrated was their incapacity to manage a churn.’\textsuperscript{115}

An article in the *Irish Homestead*, the organ of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society and the Co-operative Movement, had a similar sarcastic tone, ‘in Castlemahon...those good folk are so absorbed in settling political issues that they cannot spare time for the prosaic business of making and marketing butter, and so while they are arguing out their questions of party politics, the English Society steps in and appropriates their business.\textsuperscript{116} The *Irish Homestead* regarded the purchase of Castlemahon by the C.W.S. as nothing less than an act of war:

> We regret that any association of farmers should deliberately cut themselves off from the advantages of the Agricultural Co-operative movement, for in so doing they sever their connection, for the present, at all events, with the thousands of Irish farmers who are joined with us in a movement fraught with great promise for Irish agriculture. They have handed

\textsuperscript{112} L.P. Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 9.


\textsuperscript{114} Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 76.


\textsuperscript{116} *Irish Homestead*, 4 Jan 1896, p. 703. Almost two years later Fr Finlay was still scathing in his references to the Castlemahon shareholders when he addressed a conference in Newcastle West, *Irish Homestead*, 9 Oct 1897, p. 634.
over their industry to a body whose avowed object is to obtain for their English consumers every commodity they require at a minimum price. The Co-operative Wholesale Society has doubtless acted rightly from its own standpoint as a trading body, but how will this transaction be viewed by those who have the true interests of the Agricultural Co-operative movement at heart? We look upon it as ‘an act of war’.

It was equally scathing about the shareholders:

The Castlemahon folk have gone on supplying milk to the English society, just as they would supply it to any other capitalist who chose to set up among them and make a profit out of them. They seem contented with their new state and, such being the case, it is not our wish to disturb their self-satisfaction. If they cannot manage their own business themselves, the best thing they can do is to let someone else manage it for them. If they are unable to work for themselves the proper thing is to work for others. The English Wholesale Society is a rich body, it can afford to treat them generously; if they serve it faithfully it will, no doubt, deal handsomely with them. To its tender consideration we are content to leave them.

W.L. Stokes, the C.W.S. agent in Limerick, one of those who had been pivotal in getting the first co-operative creamery established in Dromcollogher four years earlier and who had frequently supported the co-operative movement, was accused of complicity in the deal. He denied this, pointing out that if C.W.S. had not bought the creamery some unfriendly butter merchant would have done so. His former associates in the Irish co-operative movement were not happy with this explanation, old friendships withered and both sides sniped at each other for a long time afterwards in the letters column of the Irish Homestead and elsewhere. With hindsight, it seems a pity that the two co-operative movements, the Irish producing butter and the C.W.S. purchasing it, couldn’t manage to reach some form of agreement.

Reasons for failure
The analysis of the Irish Co-operators that the failure of Castlemahon was due solely, or even mainly, to political differences must be questioned. As we have seen, the climate in the parish when the enterprise was first contemplated, long before the Parnell Split, was one of confrontation and mutual distrust rather than of co-operation and confidence. Opting for a co-operative rather than a joint stock creamery had not met with the approval of all and a sizable minority seems to have set out to prove that this was a poor decision and to have been prepared to work to ensure that the creamery would fail. A faction ensured that valuable time and energy was expended on endless discussions and disagreements over routine managerial decisions on matters such as the appointment of auditors and contracts with coopers, distracting attention from more important business. The availability of alternative outlets for disposing of milk and the ever-present option of returning for a period to farmhouse production gave disgruntled customers a very powerful lever. Withdrawing their supply from the creamery could make the whole operation uneconomic and the dissident faction was in no way reluctant to use this deadly weapon. If the co-operative were to fail it would obviously injure and discredit its promoters and prove that the advocates of a joint stock creamery were correct all the time.

117 Irish Homestead, 16 March 1895, p. 23.
118 Bolger, op. cit., p. 197. A C.W.S. official, James Rowbottom, wrote in 1899 that ‘Mr Stokes was largely responsible for bringing this matter under the notice of the Wholesale Committee, and persuading them to take the favourable consideration of the Castlemahon Creamery, and so endeavour to extricate the creamery committee from its difficulties,’ op. cit., p. 144. Some C.W.S. directors also confirmed this version to Anderson, op. cit., p. 77.
It could also result in a situation in which the physical plant could be purchased cheaply and re-activated as a joint stock creamery by the more prosperous local farmers.

This is not to say that opposing political viewpoints did not play a major part and exacerbate an already difficult situation. Politics preoccupied the country in the early 1890s. Fervent Home Rulers throughout the country cast a jaundiced eye on the non-sectarian non-political Co-operative Movement and feared that the pursuit of economic prosperity would distract the Irish from the all-important business of Home Rule. The fact that Horace Plunkett and Lord Monteagle were both Unionists only added to their suspicions. When a co-operative was first proposed in Castlemahon political rather than commercial reservations may well have influenced the attitude of local Nationalists towards the project although no direct evidence exists for this suggestion. Strong political differences did exist in the parish. The Liston brothers and Mr Nix were prominent members of the Irish National League, Mr O’Callaghan and Mr Sheehy were not. The League and the G.A.A. strongly supported Parnell, the Church and the more conservative elements in the country did not. O’Callaghan, the principal teacher in the local national school, is likely to have belonged to the latter grouping. While politics undoubtedly contributed to the creamery’s difficulties, it is an exaggeration to lay all the blame for failure at its door. Incidentally Castlemahon was not unique in having a divided committee. A study of contemporary creameries in South Tipperary found that committee wrangling and introversion were integral features of many co-operatives. However in few cases were the consequences of dissenion as severe as in Castlemahon.

The extremely strong reaction of the Irish Co-operative movement to the sale of a single, debt-ridden and divided creamery, irrespective of the purchaser, needs explanation. No one disputed that if the C.W.S. had not become involved the creamery would have collapsed or ended up in the hands of a private individual or company. The C.W.S. was not a newly-arrived predator. It had been a major purchaser of Irish butter for more than a quarter of a century and could justifiably claim a personal interest in Castlemahon. It had been involved in the establishment of the creamery, had a small shareholding and had helped nurse it through difficult times. Having successfully rented it for a year, it had invested in a new separator, had continued to manufacture prize-winning butter and was well aware of its potential. Since the local co-operative shareholders were reluctant to take it back, should it now allow a competitor reap the fruits of its labours? The C.W.S. argued that its action in purchasing the creamery had been both friendly and positive, that instead of allowing a co-operative society to die it had revived it and turned a failure into a success. But the fact remained that while the sale in itself was inconsequential - and the Irish Co-operators accepted this - there were major implications involved in the purchase of an Irish co-operative creamery by the C.W.S. and the precedent created for further developments in the same direction. The possibility of such purchases and expansions, first mooted in 1891, had greatly alarmed Irish co-operators at the time. The sale and purchase of Castlemahon four years later now brought matters to a head and precipitated a serious rift between the Irish and English exponents of co-operation. It highlighted philosophical differences that had existed for a number of years, not only between the English and Irish Co-operators but also within the English Movement itself, differences that had been glossed over and ignored.

Some of the original British co-operators regarded the co-operative store movement not as an end in itself but as a step towards reconstructing society and ultimately establishing a co-operative community. In their vision stores would spread throughout the country and go on to form a co-operative purchasing union. At some time in the future, this union would be supplied by workers’ co-

operatives. An essential element of this development would be that the producers of these goods, i.e. the workers, would also share in the profits. Producers' co-operatives of this type best embodied the co-operative spirit, in the opinion of the older, more idealistic, more middle-class co-operators, and would ultimately lead to a Co-operative Commonwealth. This point of view reigned supreme in the early days.\(^{122}\) The C.W.S. initially went along with this view and shared profits with its workmen and officials but dropped this practice in 1876.\(^{123}\) ‘All profits to the consumer’ became the gospel of the C.W.S. Its policy was to provide the co-operative consumer with the best quality goods at the lowest possible price. One general principle ran through all the purchasing done by the society, namely, to go straight to the source of production, whether at home or abroad, so as to save or at least minimise the commission payable to middlemen and agents. So while in theory the C.W.S. was committed to the principles of co-operation and of encouraging co-operation in Ireland there was an obvious contradiction in attempting to help Irish co-operative societies get the best possible price for their produce and at the same time purchase the same goods for its English consumers at the lowest possible price. For the newer working-class members the store movement and its dividends was what was important and this new emphasis on consumers’ interests as opposed to partnership between producers and consumers came to prevail. The ‘partnership’ wing persistently protested at successive co-operative congresses at the dominance of this policy but to no avail.

The Irish co-operative movement’s ideology was not unlike that of the ‘producers’ or ‘partnership’ wing. Irish co-operators saw in the C.W.S. purchase of Castlemahon and the strong likelihood of further expansion a serious challenge to the whole philosophical basis of their movement.\(^{124}\) They firmly believed that only by attempting to take control of his own destiny, taking responsibility for his own life and accepting that in some ways his own prosperity lay in his own hands and the hands of his neighbour could the Irish farmer acquire the qualities necessary for future improvement.\(^{125}\) Any C.W.S. purchase or expansion would militate against the spread of this philosophy to new districts since farmers would then be more likely to ask the C.W.S. to set up and run a creamery for them rather than assume the responsibility themselves. Even existing concerns could be affected since farmers who believed that the C.W.S. would be prepared to do the work for them might not persevere in working together and running their own creameries.

The Irish movement argued that there were two systems of Creamery Manufacture – one in which the farmers establish producer co-operatives and work for themselves at their own risk, for their own profit and under their own management and control; the other in which their work is done for them by an outside capitalist, company or society. It maintained that the first system, the co-partnership of labour, was the one most in line with co-operative principles while the alternative system was really a capitalist structure. Such an alternative capitalist system could easily check the rising spirit of industrial independence among Irish farmers and would reduce their role to merely supplying a proprietary factory.\(^{126}\) In effect, with the C.W.S. takeover of Castlemahon, the English struggle between the rival producer and consumer philosophies was transferred to Ireland and was further complicated by the fact that the producers were now Irish while the consumers remained English.

The row over the purchase of Castlemahon was referred to the supreme authority of the British Co-operative Movement - the National Congress of Co-operative Societies. At the annual meeting in


\(^{123}\) T.A. Finlay, ‘Saxon or Gael?’, _New Ireland Review_ (Nov 1898) p. 132.


\(^{126}\) Ibid.
Huddersfield on 4 June 1895, Plunkett proposed the motion that:

the acquisition or establishment of creameries in Ireland by the Co-operative Wholesale Society, while not calculated to produce better results than those already obtained by the existing dairy societies, will largely destroy the work of the Irish Section, which has succeeded in organising farmers and farm labourers into co-operative societies to conduct this business on the lines advocated by the co-operative movement.127

The Agricultural Economist reported that this resolution produced perhaps the hottest discussion during the Congress.128 After Plunkett and Anderson, Secretary of the Irish movement, had each addressed the meeting, Henry Pumphrey, a director of the Wholesale Society, who had visited Castlemahon to investigate at first hand the situation at the creamery, defended the action of his Board in taking it over. Stokes, the C.W.S.’s agent in Limerick, a man who had given invaluable assistance in getting the Co-operative movement off the ground in Ireland, took the side of his employers ‘Have not the Wholesale to cater for their members, and look after their interests, and if they find that by production they can do so better than in any other way, are they not justified in doing so?’129 Stokes’s intervention may well have been crucial since, as the Society’s Irish agent, his viewpoint merited respect. When a vote was finally taken, a large number of delegates did not cast a ballot and Plunkett’s resolution lost by a small majority. Broadly speaking the British ‘producer’ wing supported the Irish position while the ‘consumer’ group opposed.

The approval by Congress of the decision to buy Castlemahon and establish its own creameries in Ireland soon led to the virtual dissolution of the Irish Section of the Co-operative Movement. The Irish Section held only one other meeting, on 10 July 1895, and it met simply to pass a resolution of practical resignation, ‘in view of the apparent approval by Congress of the action of the Wholesale.’130 At the next Congress it was stated regretfully that the Irish section was ‘practically lost.’131 The C.W.S. pressed ahead and soon had established twelve new creameries. Shortly afterwards it invested in about eighty other creameries, some of them close to existing co-operative ventures.132

The Irish co-operative movement continued to raise the question of the Castlemahon purchase and the subsequent expansion throughout Ireland with the C.W.S. and lengthy discussions took place at subsequent Annual Congresses. Many of the English co-operators were greatly aggrieved, feeling that both their good will towards the Irish and their past generosity had been thrown back in their faces. The Co-operative Union decided to terminate its contribution to the IAOS. Relations continued to deteriorate133. The Irish movement, having initially emphasised its non-political and non-sectarian nature, was now prepared to play the nationalist card and categorise the C.W.S. as the English or the foreigner trying, once again, to interfere in Irish affairs and to swallow up the Irish dairy industry for its own profit. It realised that such a political approach could be used to promote the co-operative cause, could counter any attacks made by ardent Home Rulers and might even encourage them to support the movement. The C.W.S. complained with some justification that it was being singled out for attack while proprietary creameries that were acting in essentially the same manner were being

127 Irish Homestead, 4 June 1895, p. 245.
128 Ibid. A ‘stormy debate’ is the description in Plunkett’s diary.
129 Ibid.
130 Redfern, op. cit., p. 298.
131 Ibid.
132 Bolger, op. cit., p. 197.
133 Some individuals restored friendly contacts with each other after a while: Anderson and William Swallow, the Leeds accountant, resumed their friendship, see Ardgagh Creamery Correspondence, 25 Feb 1896.
ignored.

Even four years after the sale Castlemahon shareholders had not been forgotten or forgiven. Fr Finlay commented on the irony inherent in their decision to sell to the C.W.S.

The spectacle of a body of intelligent Irish farmers insisting on a society of English artisans taking over the control of their industry – and this in the intervals of a passionate debate as to who shall be their leader in the struggle to wrest from England the management of their own concerns – is a sorry matter for laughter to the thoughtful Irishman.
Again I do not blame the English society for buying what the Irishmen were willing and eager to sell... 134

After the turn of the century, as the co-operative creameries became more and more professional, some of the privately owned concerns found that they could not compete effectively, were put up for sale and ended up as co-operatives. The C.W.S. found itself in a similar position. Its difficulties were compounded by the fact that it was a ‘foreign’ organisation, managed from abroad, many of whose suppliers felt no loyalty to a British group and were prepared to exploit it. It offered to sell its creameries en bloc to the I.A.O.S. 135 This offer was rejected so its creameries were sold on an individual basis between 1903 and 1911. By this time the C.W.S. was estimated to have lost £100,000, apart altogether from trading losses. 136 Castlemahon was one of those disposals. It was sold first to an individual and then back to the farmers in 1907 for the modest sum of £300, at which time the creamery became a Co-operative Society, affiliated to the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (I.A.O.S.) 137

Conclusion
By the end of the 1880s foreign competition and consumer demand in England had dictated that the Irish butter producers needed to switch from farmhouse to factory production if they wished to compete in the English market. Whether the butter factories involved were privately owned or co-operatives was not important. The C.W.S. recognised this and while promoting co-operation in Ireland advised the farmers to go in for creameries ‘co-operative or otherwise’. 138 This necessary first step was a major innovation for many farmers since it meant abandoning a familiar traditional method that had involved a number of family members and adopting a factory system. Switching to an untried co-operative undertaking was a giant leap further at which many understandably baulked. The co-operative principle required that the farmer must trust his neighbour and expect him to return that trust for the sake of mutual progress. Leaving aside the economic factors essential for success, it was vital that the local climate should be conducive to such a venture. An individual farmer’s decision to adopt or reject the co-operative ideal could depend on like-mindedness among his neighbours. Moreover the active support and encouragement of at least the majority of the local leaders was necessary. Above all, in the words of Fr Finlay, if a co-operative was to be successful ‘There is required from all concerned, the faculty of working in harmony with others, of making allowances for their views and even for their prejudices, a disposition to join together in a strong and earnest effort for the common good.’ 139

135 Anderson, op. cit., pp 80-1; Bolger, op. cit., p. 198.
136 Bolger, op. cit., p. 198; Anderson, op. cit., p. 82; Redfern, op. cit., p. 305.
137 Irish Homestead, 16 Feb 1907, p. 125 and 23 Feb 1907, p. 156; Bolger, op. cit., p. 288.
138 Horace Plunkett’s letter to The Co-operative News reprinted in Irish Homestead, 29 June 1895.
139 ‘Co-operation in Ireland’, The Lycceum, 15 March 1892, p. 129.
Castlemahon in the early 1890s did not satisfy these conditions. As we have seen the parish at that time was not ready for a venture in which mutual co-operation and loyalty was essential. While many recognised the need to change from the traditional farmhouse system the existence of proprietary creameries provided some potential suppliers with convenient alternatives to a co-operative. Farmhouse butter still enjoyed a substantial local market and the butter buyer still maintained his usual round. Despite these obstacles Castlemahon creamery had started in a wave of enthusiasm. Difficulties caused by an inadequate capital base and initial high borrowings could have been surmounted if the committee and shareholders had been united. From a commercial point of view the creamery, located in prime dairying land, was economically viable. When local hostilities were suspended during the period of the C.W.S. management good profits were made and milk suppliers received high prices. The ability of some nearby co-operative creameries to cope with the normal start up problems, turn in regular profits, pay dividends and still manage to reduce or eliminate their debts supports the view that with a modicum of goodwill Castlemahon could have thrived. However some committee members and shareholders seem to have regarded the new Society as simply another arena where old battles could be fought. Indeed the allegation was made that some members did not want the co-operative to succeed so that they could then attribute its failure to the others. It might then be purchased cheaply and run profitably as a joint stock creamery.\textsuperscript{140} Dissident factions could indulge themselves by withholding milk supplies at will since local privately owned creameries or a return to farmhouse dairying provided readily available alternative outlets. Political differences due to the Parnell Split lent an edge to existing animosities and some members, despite valiant outside efforts at reconciling the warring factions, were prepared like Samson to bring the whole venture down around their own heads. Undoubtedly the creamery would have gone bankrupt but for the C.W.S. intervention. Its committee could hardly have anticipated its sale becoming a \textit{cause celebre} or foreseen the ensuing controversy between the Irish and English co-operative movements. One is reminded of Patrick Kavanagh’s \textit{Epic}, when Homer’s ghost whispers to him:

\begin{quote}
\textit{He said: I made the Iliad from such}
\textit{A local row. Gods make their own importance.}\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{140}Nearby Newcastle West Co-operative managed to make a profit of £62 3s. 6d. in 1891, a profit of £90 6s. 5d. in 1892, a loss of £76 4s. 4d. in 1893 and a profit of £174 12s. 7d. in 1894, a total profit of £250 over 4 years. Feenagh Co-operative lost £26 in 1892, Newcastle West Creamery Correspondence, 1891-1901. Cloncagh Co-operative had a net profit of £152 14s. 9d. in 1891, £218 11s. 6d. in 1893 (by which time the concern had almost completely repaid its debts). £120 12s. 9d. for 1894 and £205 16s. 10d. in 1896 so creameries could be profitable, Cloncagh Creamery Correspondence.