

## **Foreword**

This book, which celebrates the centenary of the Federation of Western Australian Cooperatives, could be viewed as an institutional version of the many local histories which give rich granular detail to the history of Western Australia. However, as the pages of this enjoyable work show, its story is presented on a much larger canvas.

The history of the co-operative movement of which the Federation, now known as Cooperatives WA, is part can be traced back to early forms of co-operatives such as the Shore Porters' Society, formed in Aberdeen in 1498 and the Fenwick Weavers Society, formed in Fenwick in Scotland in 1769. However, the commencement of the modern cooperative movement is generally marked as the establishment, in 1844 of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers by 28 weavers employed in cotton mills in Rochdale. That was a consumer co-operative — its object being to use the collective economic power of its members to buy food and goods at affordable prices. Rochdale began a global phenomenon. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of co-operatives not only in the United Kingdom but in many other countries including Australia. The earliest known co-operative in Australia was the Brisbane Co-operative Society, established in 1859.

Co-operatives in Western Australia date back to 1868 when staff of the P&O Company in Albany formed a co-operative society to purchase goods wholesale from Melbourne and sell them out of their own store in Albany to reduce their living costs. There followed the emergence of a considerable number of farmers' and producers' co-operatives. A leading figure in the movement and in Western Australian history generally was Charles Harper MLA, who was also the proprietor of the *West Australian* newspaper.

An important development in the history was the establishment in 1914 of Westralian Farmers Ltd, which continued as a most significant actor in the co-operative movement in Western Australia until it listed on the Stock Exchange in 1984 and became Wesfarmers Ltd.

3 July 1919 saw the creation of the Federation from a large number of co-operative companies which had been established initially by Westralian Farmers Ltd as a network of local co-operative units acting as its sub-agents around the State. The history of the Federation is embedded in, and clearly affected by, the social, economic and political history of the State and the nation, and by global events, including the Great Depression of 1929. The perspectives of the book, local, national and global, are enlivened by its reference to the personalities and leaders of the co-operative movement in Western Australia over the last century.

A significant international event was Britain's decision to enter the European Common Market. Rumours of that possibility preceded its realisation by many years. Awareness of Britain's new posture led to an enhanced attention to trade opportunities in our region. There is a photograph in the text which makes the point. It shows a number of participants in the South East Asian Co-operatives Congress held in Kuala Lumpur in January 1958. They include ET Loton as an Australian delegate and Mrs Loton.

Diversification of engagement responding to social and economic change in a variety of ways is part of the history of the Federation — engagement with credit unions — with the fishing industry — with indigenous communities and with young people. The movement of women to leadership roles which began in the 1970s was another significant indicator of social change. Environmental issues, which obviously had practical significance for producers, started to appear on the Federation's radar at that time.

The withdrawal of Westralian Farmers Ltd from its close administrative support of the co-operative movement was a blow which 'severely impacted the Federation'. Difficult years followed but they passed and the Federation came back.

At the State level, regulatory legislation was modernised and eventually put on a national footing. By 2018, Co-Operatives WA had returned to an operating surplus for the first time in many years. It had a close relationship with the Business School at The University of Western Australia. The Executive Education Program, in which Co-operatives WA had participated, was to be rolled out nationally.

The book offers a history of the Federation drawn on a large canvas. It is a lively, and at times warts and all, account of an important player in the State's social and economic development. The Federation has had its ups and downs. Its resilience against adverse fortunes, its vibrancy and the optimism which this centenary history reflects are evidence of its continuing value to the Western Australian community. Most importantly, it is being driven by individuals of the kind who have driven it from its beginnings to where it is today.

I congratulate Bruce Baskerville on this work and Co-operatives WA and The University of Western Australia for bringing it to fruition.

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