

# Antipodean Owenite or Colonial Socialist: Charles Harper's Economic Thought

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Agricultural co-operation has long been recognised as an important institution in the development of Western Australia's agricultural sector. Charles Harper (1842 – 1912) has long been considered the founding father of agricultural co-operation in Western Australia. Harper was instrumental in founding the Western Australian Co-operative Producers' Union in 1902 which, among other things, eventually became Wesfarmers Ltd. Harper was also a long standing member of Parliament, a newspaperman, an explorer, a founder of schools, a philanthropist, and an agricultural experimentalist. He was also able to pass his legacy on to his son Walter who led the co-operative movement after Harper senior's death in 1912 and saw to its integration into the mainstream of Western Australian political and economic systems. In considering Harper's contribution to the economic and social development of Western Australia, it is difficult to determine the extent to which his economic thinking in relation to co-operation or other economic questions conformed to such socialistic ideas represented by Owenite Co-operation or Colonial Socialism. Harper was neither a protectionist nor a free trader. Indeed, in this paper, I will discuss Harper's position in relation to a number of economic questions – tariffs, dumping, fair trade, land alienation - with a view to showing that Harper was a pragmatist focused on economic development and determined to place all resources and apply all levers, regardless of source and political niceties, toward that end.

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## **I. Introduction**

In economic terms, Western Australia lagged behind the other Australian colonies throughout the period up to 1890. During the nineteenth century, the colony struggled to expand its population and agriculture – the colony's major opportunity for economic development – was inhibited due to geographic isolation of farmers, poor farming techniques, limitations in transport options reducing the capacity for produce to be brought to market and the constitutional and economic incapacity of the government to make investments to drive change. The lack of infrastructure and a poor government revenue base ensured that agriculture languished and the population grew only very marginally until the late 1880s. By this time, the Goldfields of the West were flourishing and immigration from the Eastern colonies and from around the world meant that the population was growing significantly for the first time in the history of the colony. However, the government and many members of parliament were concerned that the transitory nature of gold mining – in terms of economic stimulus and provision of employment opportunities - meant that the colony needed to capitalise on the opportunities inherent in its new found wealth as quickly as possible (Glynn, 1975, P. 38). The establishment of responsible government in 1890 combined with an increasing revenue base gave government the opportunity to implement expansion policies and to raise funds to meet those policies for the first time. Against the back drop of mining wealth, the lack of development across the agricultural sector stood out on the basis that agriculture was seen to be an important area of wealth creation on a permanent basis. Therefore, the resolution of problems associated with this sector took on greater importance now that this problem became

obvious while the wealth created by the gold rush meant the government finally had the financial resources to do something about it. Essentially, three problems required resolution. These were that there was a need to better handle bulk produce, a need to bring produce to distant markets and, by resolving these two issues, to resolve the problem of subsistence farming that was said to be a practical impediment to attracting immigrants into Western Australia (Sandford, 1955) and which retarded the opening up of further agricultural land. The growth of the population, the removal of middle men (grain traders and transporters) combined with the capacity to get produce to markets around the world were all seen as requirements for the economic security of the Colony and pre-conditions that would attract settlers who would both produce and consume. To date co-operation and government support were seen as the only viable solution that was politically palatable to the Perth based merchants who controlled the parliament (Brown, 1996). Charles Harper (1842 – 1912), growing up on the eastern fringe of the settlement and pioneering in the remote north west, experienced the poor economic times first hand and was frustrated by the limited capacity in the colony to invest to create infrastructure that would serve to alleviate the problems of the day. He saw the opportunity represented by the gold rushes and the capacity of farmers to come together to ensure their industries had the best chance of growing. Charles Harper left us very little by way of written evidence that would betray his economic thinking. However, through the use of various primary sources, we can reconstruct the major themes of his thought and come to an appreciation of the driving forces that led him to be acknowledged as the founder of agricultural co-operation in Western Australia. It will be demonstrated that he sought the establishment of a higher population that could absorb the produce of the colony and sought expansion of agriculture in order to ensure the wealth of the land was available to build a sustainable and stable economic position in Western Australia. It will be shown that, while co-operation was the corner stone to his thinking in relation to economic organization, he was not wedded to any one co-operative model. That of Owen or Fourier did not animate his thinking and while it is demonstrable that Harper was not a novice in relation to things economic, we do not know that he was aware of these theorists or the nuances of their models. Indeed, Harper was pragmatic and focused upon resolving the major economic issues of the day and he saw practical co-operation as a centre piece in a system that would achieve this goal. He was intent upon expanding agriculture by bringing as much land under production as possible and by educating agriculturalists such that they understood how to maximise the productivity of that land. He was keen to ensure markets at home and abroad were available to the man on the land so that a fair return was received for the hard work and risk endured. This return was seen to be hampered by capitalist middlemen who took too great a profit by reducing the price paid to the man on the land and extracting the highest price possible from the consumer, a situation where only the middleman won. It was also hampered by the transport difficulties within the colony and the distance to overseas markets. The movement of perishable goods in bulk within a timeframe that ensured the goods were of saleable quality at the end of the journey was a difficult ask in a time with limited transport options and no refrigeration. In resolving these problems, Harper was content to deploy public resources where necessary. However, I will show that he was not convinced by a single economic ideology. Rather, he reflected on each particular question in the context of a hierarchy of preferred resolutions. As a preference, Harper would see individuals pool their

capacity and influence into private co-operative concerns in order to marshal the necessary resources (both financial and political) to resolve their problems. He understood that producers were isolated and generally would "...suffer enormously..." if they were unable to band together (WAPP, A4, (v. 2), 1897, P.82). He would also prefer the controlling institution of such bodies to be democratically elected by the members of the organization (WAPP, A4, (v. 2), 1897, P.85). However, acknowledging the immature nature of the economy and the lack of wealth of small farmers, he could see that the government was the only entity with the capacity and interest in raising capital and deploying such resources to the establishment of infrastructure and to the creation of a legal and regulatory framework that would support agricultural growth in the interests of the agriculturalists and the greater good. As a first preference, he would see such public resources deployed via an interposed entity, such as a co-operative or a semi-commercial agency, rather than directly to individuals although he could appreciate times when this was necessary. In this paper I shall review Charles Harper's economic thinking closely. After considering Owenite co-operation and colonial socialism, I will demonstrate that Harper deserved the appellation he received in his own time as a man of action rather than philosophy (*The West Australian*, 27 January 1894, P.7) and that he was disposed toward ideas that resolved practical problems without considering the economic ideologies of past thinkers. Throughout his career, Harper was focused on pragmatic solutions to economic problems and placed the achievement of economic growth and sustainability above ideology. This paper is divided into five sections. In section II I shall discuss the idea of Australian colonial socialism and demonstrate the essential elements of classic co-operation with a view to establishing the characteristics of one who harbours such economic thought. In section III I shall broadly review Harper's life in order to place his economic thought in context. Using primary sources of evidence, such as newspapers, hansard and Western Australian Parliamentary Papers, in section IV I shall show that Harper was a pragmatist not wedded to any one economic ideology. Section V shall provide concluding remarks.

## **II. Colonial Socialism and Co-operation**

While describing an era that ended approximately 40 years prior to the period under consideration here, Butlin (1968, 379 – 408) comments that the "monetary history of Western Australia parallels in miniature the general lines of eastern [states] development..." and this is broadly true also of the later economic development of the colony. During the period up to 1890, Western Australia was an isolated society enjoying little success in attracting new immigrants to its shores or in exploiting the various natural resources that were evident and which people such as Harper sought to use to build a foundation for a wealthy and economically important outpost of the British Empire. Two major disasters in commercial immigration schemes undertaken in the early years of the colony<sup>1</sup> reinforced the general apprehension

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<sup>1</sup> The major schemes were promoted by Thomas Peel in the first decade of colonisation and subsequently by the Western Australian Company (promoted and joined by Edward Gibbon Wakefield with a view to proving his principles of "systematic colonisation") shortly after Peel's effort (see, for instance, Hasluck, 1965; Crowley, 1960; Statham-Drew, 2003).

amongst would be immigrants of difficulty and risk associated with transferring ones family and hopes for economic advancement to a part of the world about which little was known. For much of the nineteenth century, immigration to Western Australia constituted a throw of the dice that few would care to pursue given the more proximal and more established destinations such as Canada and the USA as well as the more advanced eastern colonies on the Australian continent. In short, for most of its life in the nineteenth century, the colony lacked capital for infrastructure development (particularly in relation to transport and communications), specie for trade with other colonies and the wider world as well as a population level that would act as a local market for local produce and labour for commercial and agricultural expansion.<sup>2</sup> The principal political and economic questions of the period leading up to the end of this survey were related to these problems and the extent to which the government became involved was a fundamental issue as the government was seen as the most likely to be able to raise funds at a rate that could be sustained, could attract immigrants and could also seek to influence colonial and Imperial policy in ways that benefited Western Australia.

Government involvement in the development of colonial economies was not a new phenomenon when the bicameral Western Australian parliament was established in 1890 following the awarding of responsible government to the colony. In Western Australia, by the beginning of the 1890s, the government had already had significant experience in terms of involvement in the economy of the colony. It had, in a manner similar to the experience of governments of the various other colonies on the eastern seaboard, been the major land holder and seller, acted as an important employer, purchased products and services as well as made provision of infrastructure. Butlin, Barnard and Pincus consider that governments, in the Australian colonial context, were important “contributors to the process of economic expansion and growth” (1982, 10). Further, as investors and borrowers, employers and managers, “Australian governments were prominent in the late nineteenth century as direct actors in all the ... markets”. Colonial socialism, as this model of economic expansion has come to be termed, took on distinct forms during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Butlin *et al* (1982, 10) consider that the term colonial socialism is complex and not uniform, however, this economic development model does have features that were present in all of the Australian colonies, including Western Australia, at different points in time and in response to the economic position the settlers found themselves in from time to time. Specifically, colonial socialism tended to take the form of a relationship between public and private interests that depended upon the

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<sup>2</sup> This last point was particularly critical as the colony of Western Australia extended to cover a land mass of approximately one third of the Australian continent and by 1881 had only grown to a population of 29,708 between 1891 (at which time the population had grown to 49,782) and 1901 the population grew to a total of 184,124 persons or by 520% in 20 years (vanden Driesen, 1986). Broadly, this increase in population resulted from the discovery of gold in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Most of the permanent population resided in Perth and surrounds while other population centres were widely dispersed, geographically isolated and living conditions were poor while return for effort, particularly in agriculture, were small. Life on the goldfields was particularly harsh and impermanent. After 1890 the population started to grow as a result of the gold strikes and those in political and commercial circles turned their thinking to some degree away from immigration to the problem of retention once the gold ran out (Spillman, 1989).

government using its secure revenue base to access funds (predominantly from London) at more sustainable rates of interest than could be secured privately. This lower rate of interest on borrowed funds was passed onto private interests within the colony at very low margins as government was able to accept a lower return than would a private intermediary (Butlin *et al* (1982, 16). The funds might be passed on directly (for instance, through the Agricultural Bank) or via the provision of infrastructure of value to industry. Once the Goldfields had been discovered, the government's revenue base was expanded and its capacity for raising capital much increased. Most important in facilitating this government involvement was the relationship between private interests and public institutions.

The dependence of private economic development on overseas resources meant that the government was pressed into service to support these interests so that labour, communications, transport and representation in international forums would serve to assist private interests to develop their economic capacity. While most colonies in Australia had finished meteoric economic expansion by 1888 (Butlin *et al*, 1982) Western Australia was able to become a destination for capital following the gold strikes of the late 1880s and early 1890s. Both the government and private interests considered that the wealth created by gold mining was likely to be fleeting and that the capacity of the government would be best served by focusing upon immigration, infrastructure development and exploitation of a rapidly improving reputation for the colony in London and other Imperial centers as a result of the wealth flowing from gold. The need to capitalize upon what could have been a fleeting opportunity was not lost on farmers and pastoralists. The agricultural sector was very well represented in parliament and the government and Harper is a glaring example of an agriculturalist with a role in legislating and the capacity to sway government policy toward agricultural interests. Further, and as discussed in section IV of this paper, the lack of infrastructure in the form of transport and packing capacity combined with the significant costs associated with agricultural development meant that Harper and those who would have supported him were very keen to push government toward the provision of solutions to the problems they faced as they tried to build their agricultural interests. Arguably, colonial socialism was a brand of that pragmatism identified by Metin during his tour of the eastern colonies and New Zealand. The instigation of colonial socialism grew out of a need for capital that could not be met through private means and it was unlikely that a model of economic development not involving the government as either provider of capital or participant in markets would have given the colonies, including Western Australia, capacity to expand in any real sense. Further, the closeness of the major private interests to government was effective in ensuring government involvement. However, as the economies grew and new problems (particularly the depression of 1927 onwards) were faced by governments and private interests and as capital markets were more mature within the colonies, the role of government changed and resources provided by colonial socialism were replaced by private players. Effectively, the scales shifted from a predominance of public economic activity to a predominance of private economic activity (Butlin *et al*, 11 – 12). As I will demonstrate, Charles Harper was a supporter of colonial socialism to the extent necessary to ensure the establishment of a strong agricultural sector and a economically sustainable and stable Western Australian economy. While it cannot be identified that he ever used the term “colonial socialism”, where necessary, he was in agreement with the idea of government support and

funding but was always wary as to the moral effect on individuals when funds were provided directly (*The West Australian*, 8 June 1894, P. 2) and was always keen to ensure that an entity was interposed between the government and the individuals it sought to assist. His preference was always for collective private action and this led to his role in the development of agricultural co-operation in Western Australia. I will now consider the idea of co-operation in the context of Robert Owen's ideas in order to have a point of reference from which to better appreciate Harper's own views and to demonstrate that historically there is a general tendency for co-operators to develop pragmatic commercialism by moving away from their ideological roots.

Throughout the history of co-operation in England there is a pattern of co-operative idealists seeking to prevent their movements from being derailed once consumer co-operative organisations became established. E. V. Neale described co-operation as the process of utilising the product of capitalism to replace that very system with one that would usher in social change (Backstrom, 1974). However, repeatedly, co-operative societies stalled once members had a taste for dividends and the prospects afforded as a result of commercial undertakings. Focused on social change in the interests of the common man, utopian co-operators would see the development of co-operation as systems of community development that would enhance all aspects of society through education, housing, fair remuneration, worker democracy and working environments that would enhance the best in men and minimise the worst. Often religion was a central tenet but it did not have to be. Such idealists rejected the idea of government support or involvement and believed there to be beneficial effects upon the character of men when they banded together to better their lot without such official interference. It was this utopian outcome to which common workers subscribed when they became members of consumer co-operative organisations. In order to achieve this utopian outcome, most of these systems required capital. Such capital was intended for housing, setting up of workshops and provision of infrastructure for communities, indeed all of the elements needed to establish each co-operative model in the image prescribed by the founding idealist. A number of co-operative idealists intended to seek this capital from rich philanthropists. Government was never invoked as a source of resources other than in terms of legal protection. However, other than in the case of rare individuals such as E. V. Neale, philanthropists generally did not provide the necessary capital and so the idealists had to find other ways of raising the necessary capital. This they often did by setting up, as a first stage in implementing co-operative systems, consumer societies where members could buy goods at average retail prices. The idea being that, rather than allowing capitalists to enjoy the benefit of the sale, these societies would build up capital for the development of the full co-operative program. They would also encourage membership by dividending profits back to members often in proportion to the amount of purchases individual members had made. Equally often in the early days, these societies ensured that their staff were well remunerated and they were able to enjoy the benefit of profit sharing.

A great difficulty arose, however, when members of such consumer societies became comfortable in their patronage of the society shop and began to enjoy their dividends. Rather than reinvesting profits toward the idealistic end of implementing the full co-operative model they would rather seek to increase their dividend by reducing costs and increasing profits. In

effect, they became the capitalist profit seekers that they had originally sought to avoid. Further, those on committees charged with the management of such organisations saw the opportunity for profit making and also sought to reduce the risks of operations in a capitalist economy by increasing the reserves available against poor trading periods. More often than not the most flexible costs were those of the salaries of their employees and so employee profit sharing arrangements, democratic management arrangements and above employment market wages – elements typical of co-operative associations seeking to achieve the utopian ideals originally conceived of by their founders - were quickly discontinued in order to increase membership dividends. The members of the co-operative consumer societies had merely become capitalists in their own right and the controllers rather than the emancipators of labour. They had succumbed to the temptation of exploiting an immediate opportunity of achieving dividends rather than pursuing the ideal that had brought them together in the first place. Interestingly, the important co-operators all foresaw this problem and sought to insure their model of co-operation against just such an outcome. For instance, Fourier, Owen and the Christian Socialists all attempted to prevent this stalling of their ideals through various means, however, by and large, they were unsuccessful in doing so (Gosden, 1961; Backstrom, 1974; Beecher, 1986; Gilchrist and Moore, 2007). It would seem that the capitalist system became very attractive once those bent on replacing it had a taste of what their economic superiors enjoyed. By the turn of the twentieth century, successful co-operative associations, such as the Co-operative Wholesale Society, were shining examples of co-operative success. Based on capitalist management arrangements, controlled and disciplined labour and a focus on profitability and returns to members, these organisations resembled modern day public companies far more than the idealistic, social change agents they were originally conceived to be. It was these models of success that were sought to be emulated in the Western Australian context at around the same time. The trajectory of Owenite co-operation is an appropriate example here.

Robert Owen was born in Wales in 1771 and, by any measure, was an enigma both in the context of his times and in the view of subsequent generations. He was apprenticed as a boy of only ten years, having already been in the workforce for a year, to a textile house in Lincolnshire. Over the next ten years he worked himself into a position where he was offered and accepted a position as manager of a mill in Lancashire. Managing, at only 20 years of age, a mill employing over five hundred people (Cole, 1964). At 28 Owen became manager at the New Lannark Mills – a new mill when he took over its management after marrying the daughter of its owner. Owen remained at New Lannark for over 25 years, eventually becoming managing partner and built both the business and his reputation as a social reformer and successful businessman. It was during his time at New Lannark that he developed ideas regarding the character of man that he carried and propounded for the remainder of his long life - he died in 1853 aged 82. These ideas became the central theme of his philosophy related to co-operation. Popular thinking in the opening decades of the nineteenth century considered that man was responsible for his actions and his happiness. This thinking was reinforced by the contributions to economics made by the likes of Adam Smith and the polymathic contributions of Bentham as he developed the theme of Utilitarianism. Owen, on the other hand, considered that man's character was molded by the environment in which he lives and works. He believed that the capitalist system, with its focus on profit and the popular belief that it was appropriate for such

profit to be achieved regardless of the human cost to the working classes, inhibited the capacity of working families to achieve happiness because their characters would respond to this environment which encouraged vice, dishonesty and selfishness to the detriment of virtues such as mutual concern, honesty and healthy living (Bonner, 1961). Further, given the working man's time and commitment to his profession, that his character was largely molded by the conditions he was subject to in his working environment. He considered that the evils that had developed out of raw capitalism were not inevitable but could be cured by changing the way workers were treated in the workplace. New Lannark became a working experiment used by Owen to demonstrate the inherent truth in his philosophy. He had provision made for his workers and their families for their health, education and leisure (Tawney, 1964). Putting his ideas into practice at New Lannark, Owen was able to demonstrate that the payment of reasonable wages, provision of more humane conditions<sup>3</sup> and the provision of education did not detrimentally effect the return of a handsome reward to investors who, as time progressed and Owen's business capacity became more well known, were required to accept a fixed return on their capital and to allow Owen to invest increasing sums toward amenity for his workers and their families (Cole, 1964, Tawney, 1964, Bonner, 1961). Owen was antipathetic toward capitalism because he believed human happiness was not achievable via a system that molded human character toward competition, dishonesty, deception and led to employers abusing their responsibility toward their workers using the false proposition that such abuse was required in order for adequate profit to be returned to the providers of capital. Owen actively demonstrated his philosophy over twenty five years at New Lannark where he was an unmitigated success – both financially and in terms of demonstrating his fundamental belief in that human happiness depended on character and that character was molded by the conditions to which humans were subjected (Bonner, 1961). However, it was when he sought to paint on a larger canvass and use his New Lannark credentials to change the world, that he also demonstrated a fundamentally totalitarian frame of mind and incapacity to translate his ideas into a sound philosophy that could be taken up by an audience that was not personally attached to himself. This incapacity was emphasised by the relative success of Dr William King, a contemporary of Owen, who established successful co-operative institutions in Brighton during the period that Owen was occupied at the far northern end of the British Isles. King's approach was one of Christian piety, hard work and pragmatism.

Much like Charles Harper, King's contribution to his contemporary society and posterity lay less in the invention of new ways of thinking as in rendering practical the thoughts of others. He believed that self-help and voluntary association were cornerstones to successful co-operative activity and importantly was able to communicate the idea and practice of co-operation to the artisan and working classes that were less able to comprehend Owen's written contribution much less accept Owen's authoritarian drive toward setting up co-operative models in accordance with his plans. Indeed, Mercer (1947, 14) identified that Owen, amongst others, was inspired by a genuine desire to assist in the plight of the working poor "...but very few manual

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<sup>3</sup> Owen refused, for instance, to employ children less than ten years old, required shorter hours of his employees and made provision of education and housing of a suitable standard for the times (Cole, 1964)

workers were at first able to understand how their fine philosophical principles could be reduced to daily practice.” King’s capacity for communication was best represented in his publishing of *The Co-operator* (1827 – 1829). This weekly only ran to 28 numbers but was instrumental in turning a philosophy into a practical science. The numbers addressed very important elements around the establishment and operation of a co-operative but also spelled out religious and social issues. These later treatises had the tendency to empower the reader with the capacity to speak on the benefit co-operation brought to upper classes (thus ensuring political support) and the importance of Christianity as a value in the establishment and running of a co-operative. Further contributions made included treatises on issues such as the value of labour, provided case studies as examples of good and bad operations and also set out very specific rules for the financial operations of the co-operative. Such rules included ensuring cash only transactions, properly constructed and accurate accounting systems and the importance of capital and knowledge in such endeavours. Similarly to Owen, King set an example by working with others to establish institutions for educating workers and their families but he also involved the upper classes in the provision of patronage and insisted upon a Christian basis to co-operative endeavour. Owen, on the other hand, was to reject all religion and learned the hard way that the upper classes were not supportive of his programme of reform – a programme that, in his view, it was appropriate for government to legislate to implement holus bolus. As a result of his apparent failure to implement his programme in the Old World, Owen migrated to the New World where he believed he would be more successful due to the comparative openness of thinking in the United States.<sup>4</sup> In reality he failed in the United States but returned to England to unexpected acclaim and not inconsiderable influence (Tawney, 1964). While trying to establish himself in the US people, had read his works in the United Kingdom and they were popularly accepted, the ideals being emulated across many local co-operative movements. The expansion of co-operative ideals coincided with the expansion of the union movement; a time when workers were generally politically animated and had by and large determined that any advancement must be derived from their work and co-operation as it would not be derived by the ruling classes (Cole and Postgate, 1971).

Seeing his success – success to which he believed he was naturally entitled - Owen decided to place himself at the head of the co-operative movement. This act confirmed his recognition that the workers were required to help themselves as the government and the upper echelons of society would not support any real improvement of the workers’ situation. To that end, he quickly sought to capitalise on this unexpected popularity and apply what he had learnt at New Lannark toward the establishment of his principles across all walks of life. He found many localised co-operative bodies had grown up which were attempting to implement his teachings. These teachings were likely bolstered by the treatises provided by Dr King and described above. It was apparent that co-operators had absorbed the admonishments published in *The Co-*

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<sup>4</sup> Following a failed attempt to coerce the Westminster Parliament to pass a factory act that would, largely, have embodied Owen’s ideals together with his estrangement from the ruling classes of the United Kingdom, Owen decided to leave for the United States in 1824 and found a co-operative movement called New Harmony. The co-operative failed for many reasons, however, having sunk his entire fortune into the venture, Owen returned to England in 1829 (the year that the Swan River Colony was founded) essentially broke.

*operator* as they tended to approach the establishment and development of co-operative enterprise in a methodological and risk averse way. They took the view that they would gradually develop their resource base so that eventually, once co-operative funds had built up sufficiently, they were able to establish the “Villages of Co-operation” that Owen had conceptualized. In Owen’s mind, such villages were to be the fundamental units of a world co-operative commonwealth built upon his ideals and with human happiness to be the primary objective (Cole, 1951 and 1964; Bonner, 1961; Tawney, 1964), however, practical co-operators of the ilk of King were more cautious, more focused and more pragmatic in their thoughts and their deeds. The name Owen became, during this period, synonymous with socialism. Owenite socialists sought to establish local ownership of productive capacity via peaceful, productive means. They sought to establish co-operative bodies that were self sufficient and to ensure any surplus was traded with other co-operatives. Owenite socialists sought to transform “...the entire world” into a co-operative commonwealth “...resting on the principle of mutual service and educating new generations in the spirit of socialist fellowship” (Cole, 1951, P.29). However, they did not reject religion according to the prescriptions of Owen nor did they necessarily follow all of the social models that were developed by him (Cole, 1951 and 1964). They intended to slowly develop their resources and to establish by increments their ideal world. In terms of ideology, competitive capitalism was to be demolished with all peaceful power that could be acquired and replaced by a system that allowed man to be happy. However, from a practical point of view, commercial realities and human weakness tended to ensure co-operation in practice was mutated to accommodate the practical constrictions of the time. The establishment and career of the Rochdale Pioneers is an important demonstration of the practical capacity of co-operative institutions to enhance members’ lives but also an equally important demonstration of the degree to which ideology is set aside by a leadership of practical bent.

The Rochdale Pioneers<sup>5</sup> were founded in 1844 and their scheme made provision for all aspects of social and economic life that would be expected of a co-operative built along the lines prescribed by Owen (Cole, 1951). They established objectives to be achieved out of the accumulation of funds from members and sought to establish business concerns such as mills and other manufactory as well as social infrastructure including housing, sanitation and educational institutions. As a group of confirmed Owenites (Bonner, 1961) they nevertheless adopted the practical admonitions of Dr King and implemented a plan of development along the lines of those described in the 28 numbers of *The Co-operator* which was last published fifteen years before (Mercer, 1947; Bonner, 1961). They would, they said, gradually build up their financial capacity by careful husbanding of their resources and apply profits to the development of educational facilities, expanded business interests and, ultimately, a Village of Co-operation where the benefit of surpluses generated would be applied to the members’ interests and where trade would be kept to a minimum by exchanging of surplus manufactures with other Villages

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<sup>5</sup> This society is a very famous one of a number of such co-operative societies established in Rochdale over a number of decades leading up to this point. Examples of such societies include the Rochdale Friendly Co-operative Society which was established in 1830 (Bonner, 1961).

of Co-operation. The Pioneers were, however, on the whole unsuccessful in terms of their idealistic aims for the development of a model Owenite co-operative community. The various manufactories drifted out of the co-operative to be taken over by factions or to be transferred to other co-operative enterprises based less on Owen's ideals and more on economic and commercial pragmatism. The enduring contribution to co-operative socialism provided by the Rochdale Pioneers was their operating credo that has been summarised by many writers of their history and referred to by many historians as principles of the Rochdale Pioneers. Although the Pioneers themselves never enunciated a statement of principles, the various summaries have served the co-operative movement well as they have allowed promoters to communicate a relatively complex ideology in a very short but compelling message (Bonner, 1961). The principles established a framework for co-operative formation that clearly informed the establishment of co-operative agricultural concerns in Western Australia during the period under review. Although the adoption of the principles did not, in the case of Western Australian development, necessarily indicate the adoption of the entire Owenite programme. These principles provided that co-operative ventures should be based on the ideals of voluntary membership, democratic government, distribution of surplus in proportion to trade, payment of limited interest on capital,<sup>6</sup> political and religious neutrality, neither providing nor receiving of credit and the promotion of education. These ideals have been translated into co-operative enterprises all over the world. It would seem that an unintended but very fruitful combination of Owen's philosophy with Dr Kings practical advice was the appropriate recipe for successful co-operation, however, it was the practical that dominated in those co-operatives that survived the first generations of Owenite socialists. Indeed, it was the practical thinking that motivated Harper in his quest to establish and build on agricultural co-operation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In terms of the practical, the Rochdale Pioneers were also able to effect establishment of what became a very successful and national co-operative purchasing and distribution entity called the Co-operative Wholesale Society. In establishing and making successful this society the leadership chose to limit the extent to which they adhered to the Owenite principles of mutual assistance and the co-operative ideal in favour of a selfish drive to achieve the best result for oneself out of the opportunity of co-operation (Cole, 1951). This society became successful as it was able to exploit the commercial opportunities represented by the capacity to buy in bulk and also because it represented an opportunity for members to achieve a better financial situation for themselves than they might otherwise have gained. It would appear that, from the perspective of Owenite Socialism, the practical fillip of a share in the gains, acquired as a result of removing the middle man, offered by membership was of greater importance to the average member than the dream of a society changed for the better. The co-operative became very successful and established overseas representative offices, invested in shipping and other transport and eventually entered into banking and insurance services. To the chagrin of many of the older

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<sup>6</sup> Consider here Owen's insistence upon the establishment of a set return to his partners in business. He restricted the return to ensure resources were available for the works required to enhance his workers' lives and to allow their character to be accordingly enhanced.

members of the Pioneers – those who had subscribed to the Owenite programme – the Wholesale Society was managed using commercial business management principles. The entity employed workers who were not members of the society and, in the minds of some of the more idealistic members, exploited their labour without allowing them a share in the reward of the co-operative entity. The transformation of the co-operative movement from a socialist ideology to a practical vehicle for commercial operations is as important in the context of this paper as it is in the context of the development of co-operation. The invocation of co-operative ideals in the Western Australian context some fifty or so years after the death of Owen is an interesting consideration. Considering King once more, it was those that took a practical view of the implementation of co-operative ideals that seemed to have most success in an enduring sense and who also seemed to be able to communicate more effectively with those elements of society for whom the co-operative institutions were intended to assist. The Co-operative perspective held by Harper was equally pragmatic in its view and focused toward a better economic outcome for the agricultural communities, leading to a more attractive colony from an immigration perspective, rather than a programme aimed at the improvement of mans' character. By and large, Harper was able to lay the foundation for the establishment of co-operative concerns in Western Australia because of the self interest of those undertaking agricultural pursuits and the logic of the argument from theirs and the government's perspective. The idea of improving the national character, establishing "Villages of Co-operation" in which a social utopia was founded or the inclusion within centres of production of various trades and other support services, education or other social considerations were not the primary purpose of the Western Australian co-operative movement in the eyes of Harper or his supporters. Rather, scientific farming, education, transport solutions, marketing arrangements and, after Harper's death and as the co-operative movement proper established itself, the inclusion of insurance and other ancillary services, were all aimed at the establishment of a wealthier agricultural sector in the economic interest of the state. Those that joined the agricultural co-operative institutions did so after being convinced of the economic benefit associated with such organisations and not before. Indeed, notwithstanding Harper's considerable capacity for travel, argument and research, it was actually his son, C. Walter Harper, who brought the vision into reality and who, after exhaustive travel and continuous promotion, was able to see the establishment of organisations that were to have a long and important involvement in the development and management of the Western Australian (and for many eventually national) agricultural industries.

### **III. Charles Harper – His Life**

Charles Harper born near Toodyay east of Perth in 1842, merely 13 years after the founding of the Swan River Colony. His father was a deeply religious Anglican who became Chaplain of York and the Valley of the Avon after an unsuccessful but tenacious career of 12 years as a farmer. Young Harper appears to have enjoyed the life of an adventurer in the bush around the family home and farm and he also appears to have had a considerably curious frame of mind (Mercer, 1958). His education, as one would expect living in an isolated corner of a very new and extremely isolated colony, took the form of private tuition and he grew up in a household

wherein religious observance was taken seriously.<sup>7</sup> More broadly, it was apparent to many that, in later life, Harper's thinking was shaped to a considerable degree by his father's counsel and example.<sup>8</sup> At the time of Harper's birth in 1842, the Swan River Colony was economically depressed and socially confined. Landholders and merchants were the leading men of the time and the political system reinforced their position by reserving political participation to those classes who had a "stake in the land" as evidenced by the value of their landholdings and the opinion of their fellows (Crowley, 1960). By 1850 convict labour was being imported into the colony which, for a number of reasons, served to stimulate some economic activity in an otherwise moribund economy. Very limited communications and transport systems<sup>9</sup> combined with the government's lack of capacity to make investments of a scale that would ameliorate these obstacles and see the population rise to levels that would allow for economic growth ensured that the colony remained a relatively stagnant backwater for the first 60 years or so of settlement. These harsh economic times are likely to have haunted Harper in later life as he sought to find ways of expanding the economy and ensuring stable economic growth. It is equally likely that he was less motivated by economic ideology as by practical steps taken toward this goal. It was not until the gold rushes of the early 1890's that the colony gained any capacity for economic strength. The limited population and the relative stagnation for those decades leading up to 1890 meant that the Harpers and others of the colonial elite were able to achieve and maintain a social, economic and political position within the colony over a period of sufficient length that they were considered the leading families in politics, commerce, religion and society. Harper used such connections in business dealings with leading families including those with which he grew up – confirming his position as part of the social

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there are many references in travel journals kept by Archdeacon Wollaston and Bishop Short reporting upon the fellowship and religious observance enjoyed at Nardie for the benefit of the family and also the wider community even before Harper Senior was ordained (See Mercer, 1958, Pp. 2 – 5).

<sup>8</sup> For example, T.H. Bath, who only came to know Harper in 1902 when the former was elected to the Legislative Assembly in a by-election, described a number of reminiscences in a letter to Harper's family written after Harper's death in 1912. In this letter, Bath describes the source of Harper's leadership qualities as being the "many quiet talks...in the orchard, farm and home," (Harper Family Papers, 3706A/16). Bath grew close to Harper from the time the former he was made Minister for Lands and Agriculture in 1911 within the Scadden Ministry. The two men worked closely in this period. They had mutual interests and, apparently, a mutual respect.

<sup>9</sup> The colony was not connected telegraphically with the Empire until 1877 and there were no railroads established within the colony until 1874 (Crowley, 1960; Crowley, 2000). Further, the postal service between the colony and the outside world incorporated sea transport from all colonies on the Australian continent and the wider world. This sea transport required the establishment of an official mail port (as designated by the Imperial government) and Albany had this honour until as late as 1900. Such a designation meant that mail and passengers arriving in the colony in Albany had to either transship and continue their journey to Perth via Fremantle or take a very uncomfortable land journey of some 350 miles between Albany and Perth with very little in the way of comfort in between. Further, the development and maintenance of the Port of Fremantle as the principal incoming mail port for the Australian colonies remained a significant political issues for many decades and as the service brought commerce and communications to the Western third of the continent that would, otherwise not be available. (Brown, 1996; Evans, 2001).

establishment of Western Australia.<sup>10</sup> Harper made use of the skills of the bushman acquired as a result of his childhood roaming through the Avon Valley and embarked, at the age of 16 on a life of farming by renting a portion of a farm near Beverley punctuating this regimented life with two exploratory expeditions to the north and east.<sup>11</sup>

In 1879, Harper married Fanny de Burgh, the daughter of a farmer local to Harper's childhood home in Toodyay and whom he would have met as a young girl during his traversing of the country between his father's farm and his first farm in Beverley (Mercer, 1958). Over the course of fifteen years Fanny and Charles brought 10 children into the world, Charles Walter<sup>12</sup> being the eldest and born in 1880 and Aileen Fanny the youngest, born in 1895.<sup>13</sup> These children all grew up in the family home built by Harper at Guildford, "Woodbridge"<sup>14</sup>. He became captain of the Guildford Cricket Club in 1879 (*The West Australian*, 17 October 1879, P. 2) and displayed an interest in social development once he had established himself and his family interests. While he was a committed economic developer and entrepreneur he also made a significant contribution in the areas of education and social infrastructure within the colony. As Harper's special talents for clear thinking and action as well as his sense of social service became known, he became respectively a board member of the Museum and Public Library Board and was also involved in various philanthropic activities emanating from his roles in the Parliament, as an agriculturalist and as a lay leader within his church. In an article written describing his life, the *Western Mail* newspaper reported that Harper had a lively concern for

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<sup>10</sup> The "Western Mail" newspaper reported that Harper's pall-bearers at his funeral in 1912 included S. Viveash, W. Hackett, Oliphent (the manager of the Producers' Union – a co-operative venture commenced by Harper and discussed in detail below) and Pearce, while Sir J. Forrest, S.F. Moore, G. Lukin, J. Cowan, W. Padbury, E. Shenton and D. Clarkson all participated in the service itself.

<sup>11</sup> It seems there are a number of legends that have grown out of Harper's leaving home. The dominant story appears to be centered upon the young Harper leaving home after his mother had given him 50 pounds, a horse, cart, a barrel of salt pork and a gun. It would seem a fitting beginning considering Harper's future career in the bush and in politics and fits well with the idea of opportunity being there for the making in Western Australia.

<sup>12</sup> Of the siblings, Charles Walter is most pertinent to the story of Co-operation in Western Australia as he inherited his father's interests in this area of economic development and went on to become a foundation Trustee of Co-operative Bulk Handling and was chairman of Westralian Farmers Co-operative. He determined to resign from Co-operative Bulk Handling due to a perceived conflict of interest relative to a business deal between Westralian Famers Co-operative and Co-operative Bulk Handling. Monger, the chairman of Co-operative Bulk Handling warned of irreparable damage to the co-operative bulk handling movement should Harper not remain as a Trustee. The following day Harper acceded to remaining as a Trustee (Zekulich, 1997). Charles Walter went by the name of Walter as a separation from his famous father (Sandford, 1955).

<sup>13</sup> The remaining children were Clara Julia (born 1881), Harcourt Robert (born 1882), Gresley Tatlock (born 1886 and killed in action on Gallipoli in 7 August 1915), Prescott Henry (born 1886), Mary Elizabeth and Mildred Louisa (both born in 1888), Wilfred Lukin (born in 1890 and killed in the same action as his brother Gresley Tatlock, on Gallipoli on 7 August 1915), Geoffrey Hillesden (born 1892 and died in infancy) and Aileen Fanny (born 1895), (Mercer, 1958)

<sup>14</sup> Reverend C.H.D. Grimes indicates that the house was named after the village in Sussex, England where the Harper family came from to settle in Australia (Letter: Grimes to Mrs Harper, 19XX, Harper Family Papers).

the State (22<sup>nd</sup> April 1912). This concern incorporated a desire to develop educational opportunities for the children of farming families and was evidenced in the opening of the Woodbridge School which later became Guildford Grammar as well as various other voluntary roles in the establishment and running of private schools that have since become some of most respected educational institutions in Western Australia (Harper Family Papers, 1113A/4; Sharp, 1993).

All records indicate that life at Woodbridge was delightful for a young family. Indeed, the Reverend C.H.D. Grimes described his experience of the family as one full of life. A favourite saying of the family seems to have been that a life uncriticised was a life unlived (Letter, C.H.D. Grimes to Mrs Harper, Harper Family Papers, 3706A/16) and this motto seems to have been a driving principal in Harper's life. Grimes grew to have great respect for the capacity, drive and selflessness of Harper during his final days of illness. The house he built at Guildford became the centre of a wide ranging life for Harper. All of his interests in terms of agriculture were represented in this microcosm of the wider colony. Here Harper undertook agricultural experiments, grew fruits, and experimented in packing of produce for transport to markets in England. It was from this seat that he wrote to contacts far and wide to seek answers, obtain examples and identify opportunities for improvement in Western Australia. Life was not always easy even in this relatively civilized riverside homestead. However, it was certainly a comfortable home and restful retreat when the pressures of politics, business and other interests became significant. Harper was also able to seek strength from his religious convictions. He was an Anglican Layman (Alexander, 1957) and was a major proponent of the major non-catholic faiths (Gilchrist, 2009).<sup>15</sup> Grimes left us with a written portrait of Harper as a reserved man who believed in prayer and held a sincere faith but "...was not given to talking easily about sacred things" (Letter, C.H.D. Grimes to Mrs Harper, Harper Family Papers, 3706A/16). He believed that suffering was not pointless but, rather, allowed one the prospect of perfection. His father's simple faith seems to have infused Harper and allowed him to read and think and to broaden his views of many issues but also ensured that he retained a practical focus throughout all his endeavours, whether business, political or agricultural.

At various times throughout his life, Harper held a number of significant positions within the business community that were commensurate with his standing in society and also his capacity as an entrepreneurial developer. He was a local director of National Mutual Life Ltd together with Burt and Forrest and his name is included among the directors of the company in its

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, an allotment of land was made available to Guildford Grammar School upon Harper's death on the proviso that the school remained under the control of the protestant religion - the Anglican religion was not expressly identified but rather it appears that Harper was happy provided the school was neither Roman Catholic nor secular (Harper's Last Will and Testament, Harper Family Papers, MN94/1973A/10). A further example of apparent religious indifference occurs in a letter written by Harper (and which may not have been posted) wherein he writes as the vice-chairman of the Girls College of Western Australia. It is unaddressed and undated, however, it describes as a natural imperative the need to meet the demand for the education of the girls of Anglican families in the colony rather than then needing to go to Adelaide in order to receive appropriate education. In this letter, however, he is indifferent as to whether the religious education ought be Anglican or Presbyterian (Harper Family Papers, MN94/1973A/15).

newspaper advertising<sup>16</sup> – an indication of the Harper name commanding recognition and credibility. He was also reported by the *Western Mail* in 1912 as having been a director of the National Mutual Life Assurance Society (22<sup>nd</sup> April 1912). In 1879, Harper purchased the group of newspapers with Sir Thomas Cockburn-Campbell that were to become the *West Australian* and the *Western Mail* newspapers. He was deeply involved with the intricacies of running this publishing house until Hackett became a partner and editor in 1883.<sup>17</sup> In 1882 Harper became a foundation director of the Perth Ice Company and he was appointed chairman of the West Australian Trustee, Executor and Agency Company in 1892. His wide ranging interests identified above also led him to become involved in companies associated with technologies that would, to his mind, provide a stimulus to the colonial economy by enhancing agricultural industries.<sup>18</sup> At the time a natural role for a man with such qualities was to enter politics.

Clearly, Harper was a leader in a place and at a time when leadership and sheer willpower were valuable commodities. With an enduring interest in things Western Australian, Charles Harper focused on the development of business and agricultural interests that would both provide him and his family with wealth but also act as a catalyst for further and greater expansion in production, trade, infrastructure and population needed to enhance the Western Australian economy and also leave a legacy for future generations. It is in this context that his role in Parliament is explored. His approach to Parliamentary election seems also to have been based on a sense of responsibility and duty to the nation (Letter: Harper to MaCrae, 6 October 1877, Harper Family Papers, 1973A/6). Harper first came into the colonial legislature in 1878 following election for the Northern District (Black & Mandy, 1998). So few were the voters of each constituency that MaCrae, in a letter to Harper of 21<sup>st</sup> September 1879 (Harper Family Papers, 1973A/6), was able to list the political position of a significant proportion of the voters of the Northern District which comprised the north west of the colony. The legislature that Harper joined at this time was a single house, partly appointed and partly elected by landholders and dominated by agricultural and business interests. The House had the hallmarks of a conservative, elite club of which the Weld Club, established in 1871, was the proximal rest to

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance the edition of *The Farmer* for September 1909 although the advertisement appeared in several editions that year.

<sup>17</sup> Hackett remained a partner with Harper in the “West Australian” until Harper’s death in 1912. In that year, the shares recently transferred to Harper’s three sons where to transfer to Hackett with the intention of Hackett becoming sole proprietor but at a valuation agreeable to all parties. Correspondence in the Harper Family Papers (1973A/10) show that Hackett was less than accommodating in terms of agreeing a value of the shares and expediting the transfer. Ultimately the shares were transferred after arbitration being sought from a firm of professional valuers in South Australia and the shares were transferred for 88,000 pounds. However, one expects that some considerable social pressure was applied to Hackett who wrote to Harper’s widow on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1913 recognising a “coolness between their two families” and following what Hackett termed in that correspondence to be two pages of scolding about the affair from no less that Sir John Forrest.

<sup>18</sup> Letters extant evidence Harper’s promotion of a an Ice Company in 1888 amongst other technology ideas that he supported with a view to resolving the principle problems preventing agricultural advancement in Western Australia – namely, packaging and transport of bulk produce and shipment of that produce to very distant markets in a condition such that it was suitable for market on arrival (Harper Family Papers, 1973A/7).

which many of the members repaired after their deliberations (Crowley, 1960). Harper was a natural and comfortable addition to this coterie and remained a conservative throughout his political career – well after the establishment of universal suffrage and responsible government saw the relative eclipse of the colonial elite (Phillips, 2004). Notwithstanding, he also demonstrated a capacity for accepting change in a timely fashion and his acceptance of female adult suffrage and payment for members of parliament may be considered to be examples of this changeability.

Harper remained a member of the legislature within the colony and then the State of Western Australia from 1878 until his retirement in 1905 with a break when he was succeeded by MacKenzie Grant in the Northern District in 1880.<sup>19</sup> He was elected for York in 1884 after a four year hiatus and moved from the Legislative Council to the Legislative Assembly in 1890 when he was elected to the first responsible Parliament for Beverly. During that time, the highest office Harper held was that of Speaker and he was never a minister, opting not to take the position of Education Minister in 1897 due to private commitments (*The West Australian*, 10 May 1897, P. 5). He retired from the elected Legislative Assembly as Father of the House<sup>20</sup> and a deeply respected remnant of the Forrest Party, having drifted away from Forrest but retaining his conservative values and rural perspective (de Garis, 1991). The extent to which Harper was conservative in his political and economic ideas is somewhat difficult to determine. We shall review his economic thought below, however, in terms of conservatism, Harper grew to dislike the extent to which politics had become party based and to which members sought political gain above the interests of the colony. While Harper maintained an attachment to the Forrest Party for the majority of his membership of the Legislative Assembly, he was not unused to speaking his mind and also utilizing political process to delay and resist government action.<sup>21</sup> This political changeability was also seen in his support for female suffrage while

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<sup>19</sup> The circumstances of his initial retirement from politics in 1880 are suggested in some of the secondary literature to have been related to his predilection against public office. However, examination of primary sources in the form of letters from MacCrae to Harper (21 September 1879 and 5 November 1879, Harper Family Papers 1973A/6) indicates that Harper was less than satisfactory from the electors' perspective as a representative of the North District. Amongst other things, MacCrae provides a list of those electors who were opposed to his re-election. Citing Harper's apparent opposition to responsible government and his lack of interest in the North, the list of opposing opinion even includes close business associates such as Grant and Edgar. Indeed, in the second letter dated 5 November 1879, MacCrae reports that the "...people seem dissatisfied and the majority against you." Of course, the issue of distance and the difficulty of communicating with an electorate so removed from the legislature combined with the lack of understanding that electorate may have had for the political situation in metropolis may have contributed to Harper's stepping back from offering himself as a candidate for the new House.

<sup>20</sup> The member with the longest service in the House.

<sup>21</sup> For example, during the debates surrounding the Fremantle harbour question in 1892, Harper successfully moved the appointment of a committee to review the question and to report to the House the most appropriate action, notwithstanding the Forrest government's scheme. Two schemes were being considered for the construction of an appropriate harbour in proximity to the colonial capital and the rail terminals for railways bringing grain and other export products to the city. The first scheme consisted of the making of a channel through the Parmelia Bank into Owen's Anchorage off of modern day Cockburn. This scheme was supported by Premier Forrest and the government. The second, and ultimately successful scheme, was that developed by C.Y. O'Connor, the colony's

during debate regarding the payment of members, Harper was seen as a survivor of the “amateur-gentleman tradition” (Bolton, 1991, p.478) in opposing the question. Harper also supported, in combination with a rump of 4 remaining members of the Forrest party, the forming of the first State Labour ministry notwithstanding his not inconsiderable criticism of the Labor platform in 1901 (Mercer, 1958). Perhaps his political fluidity ensured Harper did not achieve high office within government. In 1905 the Speakership was available for contest and Harper had support for re-election but did not act on it. He indicated as his reason for not re-contesting the position the fact that the Speakership was becoming a “party prize” and that his capacity for presiding over the House would be diminished because of party control and discipline. However, there is evidence that he would have had to contest the position and he was not enthusiastically disposed to such a challenge. Of course, he was also considerably busy with other responsibilities and endeavours beside politics.

Charles Harper was both a promoter and an exemplar of scientific farming and contributed greatly by establishing his farm at Woodbridge as a “show place” (d’Espeissis, 1993). Not only did Harper undertake his own experiments in agriculture, viticulture, dairying, grazing and fruit growing, he extended his scientific interests by undertaking experiments in the packaging and transport of agricultural produce in order to extend the range of export opportunities available to Western Australian primary industries. Further, he was very adept at sleuthing out solutions and experience from across Australia and around the world. He would sift through information, ask questions, receive samples and send examples in order to resolve problems. Indeed, his role as founder of co-operation does not signify that he held unique ideas but, rather, that he was able to communicate those ideas, study the ground and coherently develop co-operation on a basis that those in agriculture, government and commerce could readily understand and subscribe to. Transport and the tyranny of distance significantly retarded the capacity of the colony to develop an export trade due to the difficulty of transporting relatively bulky items that were perishable. Harper also encouraged others to undertake such tasks as the establishment of vineyards and orchards.<sup>22</sup> Overall, an important issue was self sufficiency for the State in terms of agricultural produce<sup>23</sup> and economic stability. These interests led to Harper being appointed as the first chairman of the Bureau of Agriculture which was established in 1894.

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Chief Engineer. This scheme envisaged the dredging of the Swan River mouth and the establishment of a harbour within the river itself. Interestingly, the Government’s (and Forrest’s) scheme was also supported by Harper’s partner in the “West Australian” newspaper who was willing to write in support of the government (Evans, 2001). Harper ultimately sat on the Committee<sup>21</sup> that ultimately saw the recommendation for O’Connor’s plan leading to the construction and opening of Fremantle Harbour in 1897 (Evans, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> For example, he cajoled a group to undertake the development of a vineyard in Caversham in 1893 and sold them the land on which to undertake the task. However, one must consider the extent to which some of these activities were undertaken in fully voluntary capacity given that one of the participants in the Caversham vineyard was John Nanson, a sub-editor with the West Australian (d’Espeissis, 1993).

<sup>23</sup>For instance, in 1904-05, 400,000 pounds worth of butter and cheese alone was imported from the Eastern States (Cullity, 1979).

The development of the Bureau of Agriculture and ultimately the Department of Agriculture grew out of recommendations made by the Commission on Agriculture, chaired by Venn and of which Harper was a member who made a significant contribution. The Commission submitted its final report in 1891 and an Agricultural Bureau was established in 1894 with Harper as Chairman. The Bureau was then recreated in the form of a department of government in 1898. The overriding purpose of this organisation was to enhance the productive capacity of the agricultural industries in the colony (Mercer, 1958; Crowley, 1960; Cox, 1966) and it sought to do this via experimentation, exemplar activities, education and any other support it could provide or coerce from the government. Charles Harper was a logical choice for the position of foundation chairman for this institution. While I will review more closely Harper's economic thought in section IV of this paper, it is important to recognize that he was not alone in calling for government to support initiatives aimed at improving agricultural production by providing money and legislative backing for initiatives associated with these aims.

During the two decades under review, various editorials called for the provision of public funds which would be applied to the interests of agricultural production. Of these editorials, that of *The Farmer*, was most specific in its call for government funding and a return to the man on the land by making a call for the limiting of government spending to agricultural programs only (May, 1909). The same editorial went on to argue that it was only reasonable to place public financial resources in the hands of farmers as they were "... in the strictest sense, truly Western Australian. The miner, the timber getter, the merchant are all, by comparison, birds of passage." Such "fair not preferential" treatment was to be provided regardless of religion, politics or status of the farmers in need. Over a period of two or three years, the editor of *The Farmer* developed arguments aimed at bringing farmers together in co-operation and calling upon the state government to place public resources in the hands of such organisations to ensure the agricultural development of the state.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, this monthly newspaper appeared to bring most economic questions back to the idea of farmer co-operation and government preference (in the guise of fairness) in terms of providing financial and other support to the man on the land. An example of the logic suggested by this monthly is painted by reference to the difficulty co-operative and private flour mills had in amassing sufficient capital in order to ensure they were able to purchase enough wheat to keep the mills running. *The Farmer* posited that it was the state's responsibility to subsidise flour milling or the co-operatives that undertook it (June, 1911). While we will see that Harper was not so insistent upon such substantial government assistance and he was certainly more supportive of schemes focused on self-help and private co-operation, it is likely that he would have had sympathy with the intent.

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<sup>24</sup> The various editorials published in "The Farmer" deployed a number of arguments in support of their drive to achieve government support of agricultural interests. These included a May 1909 reference to a scientific report from the British Association for the Advancement of Science predicting a shortage of wheat by 1931, an October 1909 and again in May 1910 reference to the "great economic essential" being the population of the Australian continent and the suggestion that this would be achieved when farming was properly supported, and, in October 1910, an editorial devoted to co-operation as a natural evolution akin to the labour and merchant associations.

The influence of Charles Harper can be seen even after his death in 1912 in the establishment of scientific farming in the State and in the formation of co-operative institutions. T.H. Bath became minister for lands and agriculture in 1911 as a member of the Scaddan government and he was a close associate of Harper. It has already been identified in his reminiscences regarding Harper that Bath held Harper in high esteem and was particularly impressed by Harper's approach to co-operative agriculture. Bath informed the Harpers, after Charles' death, that he did not know Harper until he (Bath) was elected to Parliament in 1902. He also stated that he did not know anything about co-operation up to that time but that he was involved in a "little group of Kalgoorlie Boulder men" who sought to establish a consumer co-operative based on the model of the Rochdale Pioneers. However this endeavour ultimately failed apparently due to a lack of agreement as to how to go forward. Bath recognised Harper as having a flair for resolute and inspired leadership of co-operative endeavour – likely an attractive characteristic given Bath's experiences with perhaps less than resolute leaders of co-operative organisations. While Charles Harper has been given the accolade of founder of agricultural co-operation in Western Australia, the next section of this paper shall show that his economic thought was diverse, pragmatic and focused on economic development of Western Australia to the widest extent possible.

#### **IV. The Economics of Charles Harper**

The economic thinking of Charles Harper was pragmatic and focused upon the achievement of economic strength and sustainability in Western Australia (see for instance *The West Australian*, 27 January 1894, P.7). Like many in the colony, Harper considered that the gold industry was a fleeting boon while agriculture would be permanent and the key to national economic security (Glynn, 1975). As such, he was primarily focused on two things, (1) the increasing of the local population and (2) the advancement of agricultural settlement in order to create the produce required to meet the increasing demand resulting from the first priority. As such, each question faced by Harper was considered in the context of these two objectives and solutions proposed were intended to meet the practical needs of the time and place. Therefore, there are a significant number of instances where we find Harper's view of certain questions to be inconsistent and some where he changes his mind in relation to a similar question. However, there were a number of elements in his economic thinking that were consistent throughout his long career. While Harper did not espouse a particular economic line of thinking, he was consistent in relation to a few key articles of faith that he carried to his deathbed. These were that (1) agriculturalists were entitled to a fair return for their effort and risking their capital, (2) middle men and capitalists were capable of creating monopolies and taking the profits to the detriment of the agriculturalist in the form of lower prices for produce and the consumer in the form of higher than necessary prices, (3) that, in order to enjoy the benefit of government financial aid in any form, agriculturalists must also prove their capacity in improving the land and increasing the productive capacity of their holdings in order to ensure the best possible produce was available for markets and (4) that farmers, orchardists and others involved in primary industries must be prepared to invest their time and effort in pursuing their own interests and those of their class. Charles Harper did not articulate a treatise explaining his economic thinking. As such, in this section I will demonstrate Harper's economic thinking through

consideration of the reports presented to Parliament by Commissions and Committees upon which he either sat as a member or which he chaired, through his speeches and comments as reported in Hansard and the newspapers of the day and through his meager writings. Of course, questions arose during Harper's time relating to all aspects of economic management within the state. Transport, education, taxation, consumer protection and protection of industry were all considered throughout the period of Harper's activities. Co-operation, of course, was also considered in public debate and Harper's ideas regarding this aspect of agricultural organization are also considered in this section. I shall demonstrate his thinking by reference to each of these economic questions.

In considering the issue of transport, Charles Harper was as susceptible to political motivation as the next candidate for the local legislature. As described in the introduction, transport was a very important consideration in terms of opening up the land, providing access to markets within the Colony and ensuring agriculturalists could compete with imported foodstuffs, silage and other produce. Principally, the solution to the transport issue revolved around the establishment of a network of railways throughout the Colony. However, the exact path prospective railways should take and their stopping points were often a matter of contention as the choosing of one town or district over another may be the death knell of that district or town which is ignored. As such, Harper was keen to press, when considering the need for a rail connection with the Yilgarn goldfields, that the Great Southern Railway from Albany ought to be extended through Beverley (the centre of his constituency) to the Yilgarn on the basis that this would allow for a fast transmission of people and goods from Albany to the goldfields (*The West Australian*, 15 December 1891). While the suitability of this idea is probably addressed in the fact that the idea was not pursued by the ministry, the role of rail transport was well understood and its government sponsorship supported by Harper. Indeed, by 1894, Harper used his seat on a Select Committee to advocate for the development of rail necessary for the cartage of meat to the Goldfields and the Metropolitan markets (WAPP, No. A12 (v. 2), 1894) thus allowing for a better return for farmers and pastoralists and an increase in the likelihood that Western Australia would become financially self sufficient. However, he demonstrated his lack of socialist ideals by identifying alternative sources of finance and alternative operators when considering the role of rail more generally. In the same year as he considered the transport of meat, Harper was a member of a further Select Committee considering the utility of Pioneer Service Railways (WAPP, No. 15 (v.2) 1894). He introduced into the evidence taken by the Committee examples of private financing arrangements he had identified in the *Times* of London and had garnered from readings about France. He was keen to show that there were examples extant of privately funded railway construction and management. He considered that the government did not have to invade the field of private enterprise and that there were alternatives to having the government as owner and operator. One cited example was of the idea of government building the infrastructure and private enterprise operating it with or without penalties where costs and / or income were not as planned. However, Harper was aware that the state was the most likely source of capital for the provision of railways and the report of the Royal Commission on Immigration, chaired by Harper and held in 1905, provided a significant support and encouragement for investment in this area by government. Encouraging this view,

Western Australian railways were also identified at the time as having sound management leading to one of the few state owned systems in the world that had made a profit since inception and that, while the usual political interests served to ensure the railways were not as efficient in Western Australia as they could be<sup>25</sup>, no less of an anti-socialist than E. A. Pratt indicated that this state was unique in terms of the appropriateness of its state owned rail network (Pratt, 1908, P. 78).

The report of Harper's immigration Royal commission identified that the state ought to establish a "15 mile" policy if it is to achieve the fullest development of the agricultural resources available (WAPP, No. 17, 1905, Pp. 21 - 30). Such a policy would mean that the opening up of land would depend upon the capacity of government to extend railheads to all locations such that particularly wheat farms are at a maximum 15 miles from them. In Harper's view (as ascertained by reference to the report his committee prepared) this would make settlement for wheat farmers more attractive and also increase the value of the land itself. This increase in value could be used to assist in defraying the cost of establishing the lines as prospective settlers would be able to be charged more for the land and a sinking fund could be established for the purpose of repayment of the capital outlaid on the railways using the additional funds. Indeed, the report identified that "[t]he construction, therefore, of railways through land suitable for cultivation must be recognised as the most powerful factor in securing settlement" (WAPP, No. 17, 1905, P. 22). It was noted that if the government adopt a ten mile policy this may spur settlement on at greater speed and enhance the value of land accordingly. The report went on to make recommendations regarding the type of rail to be provided and methods of construction and so on. Of course, the question of investment in transport affected not only the capacity of agriculturalists to compete with imported foodstuffs, but also affected the price paid by consumers. A further issue pursued by Harper relates to the government provision of capital support for refrigerated transport. As discussed elsewhere (see Gilchrist, 2009), Harper maintained a close interest in all things new and innovative. Refrigeration was of particular interest to him as the distance between production and the markets, both within Western Australia and abroad were considerable. This was especially so given that the majority of high value food stuffs produced (such as fruit and meat) were highly perishable and the capacity of the land was not taken up as orchardists, farmers and pastoralists could not achieve the highest prices for their produce. It was also recognised that, in order to maximize their return on the land, those engaged in agricultural activities needed to access markets beyond Western Australia but this was a very difficult objective given the isolation of Western Australia from the rest of the world in general and the London markets at the centre of the Empire in particular. Remarkably, in 1906, Harper was able to have 422 frozen lambs transported to the markets of London in order to achieve higher prices for local farmers who were seeing higher costs and low local prices reduce their return (*The Producers' Review*,

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<sup>25</sup> For instance, the government required the Commissioner for Railways to use Collie Coal as a matter of policy notwithstanding the Commissioner could access better and cheaper coal from Queensland. Water usage was also expensive for the state railway due to the need to pay for the supply of water to the Goldfields and the South West (Pratt, 1908, Pp. 78 – 81)

March 15, 1907, P. 4; April 20, 1915, P. 3). In the pages of *The Producers' Review*, Harper's fellow traveler, M. H. Jacoby, in reporting Harper's intentions regarding a frozen meat market, writes of the need for "a little judicious government expenditure" to create the industry (March 15 1907, P. 4).<sup>26</sup> This short phrase from Harper's close compatriot serves to encapsulate much of Harper's thinking in relation to the provision of government funding in many areas of agricultural endeavour.

As indicated above, Harper did not seek to establish a socialist order in Western Australia nor did he particularly have socialist predilections. Rather, he sought to develop the economic base of the State as fast and as sustainably as possible and he considered that the development of the agricultural sector was likely to be the most effective and enduring option available to the government. Ultimately, he held to the opinion that the development of the economy should lead to the betterment of all and that keeping prices down for the consumer while allowing the producer (usually the farmer) to get a just reward for their effort and risk should be a fundamental objective of government. Indeed, through his time in the public arena, Harper made reference to the issue of consumer prices many times. Again, this was an issue that arose during discussions pertaining to migration into Western Australia and he felt that the higher the standard of living for all the more people would settle and the greater would be the consumer capacity to absorb the goods and services provided by the manufacturers, agriculturalists and service providers within Western Australia. Harper's opinions relative to consumer prices are reflected elsewhere. For example, in chairing the Royal Commission on Immigration, Harper caused the report subsequently published in the Parliamentary Papers (WAPP, No. 17, 1905) to include a significant amount of information pertaining to the suitability of the country for settlement. He caused the publication of statistics comparing Western Australia favourably with Canada as a destination for farmers. Citing individual gross earnings, the report indicated that the local person was better off by, on average, 158 pounds and 15 shillings as compared to his Canadian counterpart.<sup>27</sup> The issue of prices and return for the producers continued to return to

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<sup>26</sup> Born in Adelaide in 1869, Jacoby died in Perth in 1915. His interest in agriculture was established when he became a viticulturist in Mundaring in 1893. Jacoby was politically inclined toward universal suffrage, the democratic election of both Houses (he was particularly concerned that the whole of the tax payers funded the Legislative Council when only a section of the taxpayers elected the members) and he was a keenly interested in things agricultural. Jacoby established and editorial *The Producers' Review* (from 1906) and worked closely with Harper in developing and advancing co-operation in agriculture. He founded *The Producers' Review* in order to provide political commentary and up-to-date knowledge of practical farming issues. Working closely with Charles Harper, he assisted in establishing the first really successful co-operative in Western Australia in the form of the Producers; Co-operative Union Ltd and then participated in the establishment of the Western Australian Fruitgrowers' Association. He was an astute politician and a member of the Farmers and Settlers Association and encourage farmers to consider political questions from their own standpoint and to stand up for their interests. Taking over from Harper as Speaker in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 1904, Jacoby's continued cry was "co-operation rather than state interference" demonstrating that he was more dogmatic in his economic thinking than the pragmatic Harper (*The Producers' Review*, 20 April 1915, P. 3; Philips, 2004, Pp. 113 – 116).

<sup>27</sup> The report was written like an advertisement for immigration. Containing information about the abundant advantages of Western Australia over other prospective destinations for migrants, the issue of income disparity was further emphasised by identifying that not only did Canadians earn comparatively less than Western Australians,

the fore in relation to a number of committee process in which Harper participated and he did not resile from the idea of using government funds to provide necessary infrastructure to allow for better market opportunities for producers or cheaper prices for the consumer. For instance, in relation to the provision of cheaper meat from the North West to the Metropolitan area, Harper agreed it was important that the government provide support in the form of well sinking and the building of reservoir tanks for water such that cattle that are too far from rail heads can be driven to them and that public abattoirs and refrigeration should also be provided (WAPP, No. A12, (v. 2), 1894; WAPP, No. A8, (v. 2) 1898). This same report considered that Road Boards were not able to provide this infrastructure and that the Western Australian government was the appropriate body to be called upon. Speaking in the Legislative Assembly in 1903, Harper made known his belief that the provision of state funding for refrigerated vessels would expand the trade opportunities of pastoralists based in the Wyndham region and reduce the cost of meat to Perth residents by 2d per pound (Hansard Vol. XXIII, 1903, P. 237). In this speech, he described his desire to expand the industry, deliver produce to Perth markets at a reasonable price and ensure capitalists were unable to establish a monopoly that would ensure they reap the profit and that the benefit of the industry would not be spread over the entire community. Of course funding was not only sought for the establishment of infrastructure but also for the provision of capital to individual settlers with a view to both attracting them and then establishing them on their properties. However, in general, Harper was not in favour of the provision of any funding directly to individuals. His preference, as suggested by review of newspaper reportage and the various committee reports, was that he would prefer government funding to be provided to an entity which would then transmit the funds to individuals in accordance with established business principles.

In the establishment and operation of the Agricultural bank, Harper was to get his wish fulfilled. M. H. Jacoby chaired the Select Committee into the working of the agricultural bank while Harper sat as a member of the committee (WAPP, A33, (v. 4) 1901-02). From 1901 to 1902, this committee reviewed a number of aspects of the operation of the Agricultural Bank which had commenced operations in 1895 with 100,000 pounds in capital raised via government guaranteed bonds and with a maximum loan limit to individuals of 400 pounds. Originally, the bank was to be operated along commercial lines (Spillman, 1989). So commercially was it operated that the 1901/02 committee congratulated the manager for only losing 10 pounds in seven years of operations to bad loans (WAPP, A33, (v. 4), 1901-02, Pp. 24 – 32). In the eyes of the committee, the purpose of the bank was to provide “state aid to farmers” in order to create “new men” and give them every chance of success (page 776 of the report) while maintaining a commercial discipline in order to protect the state’s interests. This was not the first time that the government had attempted to provide financial resources to farmers. Indeed, in 1893 the government attempted to pass a Homestead Bill which, amongst other things sought to encourage people onto the land by offering cheap loans once they had established a homestead. Harper spoke against this idea because he said that this type of encouragement

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the Canadians also had to spend their incomes on protection from the excessive cold, including more fuel, clothes and food (WAPP, A17, v. 2, 1905, P. 15). Other issues identified included poor access to water.

would cause homesteads to be developed and land not to be cultivated. He also said it was a great risk to the government as they would have to make advances to all whereas an interposed entity (say, a bank or co-operative corporation) could consider character (*The West Australian*, 30 June 1893, P. 3). Thus, Harper was also keen to ensure that money flowing from government for the purpose of supporting and encouraging agriculture should not flow directly. In the context of the establishment of the bank in 1894, he had spoken of the need to funnel money through local boards in order to prevent the unsatisfactory “moral effect” caused by direct funding (*The West Australian*, 8 June 1894, P. 2.). That the committee focused on the opening up of the land is evident both in the transcripts and the recommendations made.

The committee made a number of recommendations including that the bank’s remit be extended to allow for the manager to advance sums for the discharging of current mortgages in order that further advances could be made to allow for more land to come into cultivation. The committee saw that land was lying idle because farmers could not clear more expensive debt and so their encumbered title prevented them from accessing bank loans. This recommendation was opposed by Harper due to the need to bring new men onto the land to open it up – he saw this recommendation as suggesting advances would be made to existing men. This would be a waste of the bank’s scarce resources as it would not be able to lend money to new men (see page 39 of the report). No direct recommendation as to the government providing resources directly for clearing was made, however, Harper’s thinking is clear. The committee also recommended that the bank make provision of advances for the purchase of stock (stock was very expensive in Western Australia due to the transport costs from the eastern states) such that around a million acres of new land would be opened for pastoral grazing. Finally, the committee recommended that the bank be allowed to advance sums for the establishment of orchards, vineyards and gardens. The committee was in favour of these amendments to the lending options of the manager because the strict commercial view taken by the manager meant that the provision of advances was generally made only to those who were in a very sound financial position and that those without capacity were unable to develop their land. Such men that had capacity to clear their land and present sound security to the bank were low risk but few and far between. The committee was concerned that this strict banking practice in effect reduced markedly the opening up of land because of the few men able to meet the bank’s lending criteria. Additionally, the fact that higher value operations (such as gardens and orchards) had a long establishment time meant that a return and capacity to start repaying loans was longer in coming. This delay meant that prospective orchardists and gardeners needed to have around five years worth of operating resources in capital and to have cleared their land prior to making an application to the bank (WAPP, A33, (v. 4), 1901-02, Pp. 167 – 187). The committee was keen to see orchards established as they saw in that industry a better return to the state and the prospect of self-sufficiency. Indeed, one member was keen to see the establishment of the bank along such liberal and “useful” lines that the genuine horticulturalist without money would be able to commence an orchard after clearing and draining the land and commence to pay back the advance from the bank after seven years (WAPP, A33, (v. 4), 1901-02, P. 187). The manager of the bank was not supportive of the idea of making advances under such conditions due to the risk. When queried as to why the state should take such a risk, a member of the

committee responded by saying that is why we want the assistance of the government. Indeed, the chairman declared that "...we have established this bank because no private person would do it" (page 223 of the report). Harper was keen to test the extent to which the bank could assist horticulturalists to become established and enquired whether the bank would support such men if the government paid for the initial clearing. (page 227 of the report). He was also interested to know the extent to which the bank would support funding for stock and whether experimental grazing ought to be undertaken to allow for ewes to be grown at government expense to be sold to smaller farmers who were unable to send elsewhere for stock due, in part, to the small order numbers (page 337 – 348 of the report). Additionally, Harper was interested in the efficient operation of the bank to ensure that applications for advances were approved and provided within a timeframe that allowed farmers to work their land and that they were not awaiting answers for longer than necessary. For instance, he could not see the value of ministerial involvement in each transaction (page 129 of the report) and was keen to ensure co-operation between the bank and the Department for Lands such that the same valuation could be made for both parties but ensuring the valuations were adequate to the needs of both.<sup>28</sup> The committee continued to range over the operation of the bank in the context of issues associated with the opening of lands. However, a number of other issues were also identified during the proceedings as working to inhibit the taking up of land for productive purposes.

For instance, evidence introduced into the committee hearings suggested that fertilizer suppliers were defrauding farmers by providing adulterated and otherwise poor quality goods and a government monopoly of the fertilizer trade was considered. The committee discussed the options for government monopolies by reference to experience of the Dutch Settlements in South East Asia in their government coffee monopolies as well as the fact of tobacco monopoly held by the French government (WAPP, A33, (v. 4), 1901-02). While the committee rejected the idea of a monopoly at this point, it felt that as the Western Australian experience was more profound than elsewhere largely due to the distances covered for delivery and the practical difficulty involved if the farmer is dissatisfied with the fertiliser, the government should make a trial shipment of fertilizer with a view to testing the idea (WAPP, A33, (v. 4), 1901-02). Such government monopolies were considered essential as the committee felt, and Harper spoke to his belief specifically in this regard, that the opening up of land was being inhibited by the lack of quality fertilizer being made available at a reasonable price to farmers (page 483 of the report). Indeed, this issue of the provision of quality fertilizer and the use of a government monopoly to ensure it was delivered to farmers at an appropriate price and quality was addressed by Harper in a number of forums. In addressing the Select Committee into the

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<sup>28</sup> The department required a valuation to ensure the improvements required under the terms of the allocation of the land were fulfilled while the bank required a valuation in order to ensure that it had sufficient collateral. Often the valuations were different and both organisations dispatched different valuers for their individual purpose causing considerable delay particularly if the property in questions was a remote homestead. Interestingly, it was reported that the department would not accept the bank's valuation as this would be unfair to the farmer as the bank would always value conservatively. On the other hand, the department would seek to use a higher value in order that the farmer had the best chance of acquitting his responsibilities to that department in the form of improvement (WAPP, A33, (v. 4), 1901-02, Pp. 24 - 32).

Working of the Agricultural Bank (WAPP, A33, (v. 4), 1901-02) Harper also made reference to one advantage of the establishment of a government monopoly on fertilizer to be the derived capacity to develop a fertiliser works in Western Australia with a view to ensuring bone dust and superphosphate was available to farmers at an appropriate price and quality. In the same hearing, Harper was prepared to forego the idea of a government monopoly if government could regulate the price of fertiliser. G. Throssell, his fellow committeeman, agreed that such a move would not be “spoon feeding farmers but protecting them from the commercial man who wants to make too much profit” (WAPP, A33, (v. 4), 1901-02, Pp. 809 - 814). The issue of fertilizer quality and cost remained one that Harper sought to pursue throughout his career and he ensured that it was discussed in the Royal Commission on Immigration which he chaired in 1905 (WAPP, A17, (v. 2), 1905). In that commission discussion centred around the key drivers for immigration and land settlement and Harper (we can deduce from the report provided to the legislature) had become more supportive of the idea of state support being more directly provided to agriculture. This change of heart was exemplified in the evidence provided with regard to farmers’ access to fertilizer, The need for access to quality fertilizer was again raised and the commission considered that it was acceptable for the state to co-operate with farmers with a view to ascertaining the remaining supplies of guano available in state reserves and that such a co-operative venture might include the manufacture of a suitable fertilizer from the raw material (WAPP, A17, (v. 2), 1905, P. 33). In the same royal commissions, the Agricultural Bank was once again considered in the light of development since the Select Committee held in 1901/02 and on which committee Harper also sat. Specifically, by 1905, Harper’s committee felt that funds should no longer be made available to people immigrating to Western Australia. Indeed, these people should be required to bring capital with them. Rather than use the bank’s resources to attract people to the states, it should focus its attention to better use of the capital. For instance, the committee raised the question as to “[w]hy should the savings of the people...or the credit of the state be absorbed in giving monetary aid to strangers, while thousands of residents are hampered and state lands left idle through lack of railways?” (WAPP, A17, (v. 2), 1905, P. 36). The commission went on to discuss the individual responsibility of farmers and identified co-operation as an opportunity for self-help and a source of protection from capitalist middle men intent upon extracting the maximum profits possible with minimal long term value to the state.

Harper spoke consistently in parliament and elsewhere against the monopolization of industries and the need to prevent capitalist middle men from taking excessive profits with no advantage to the producer or the consumer. Indeed, government monopoly was seen by him as being a preference to the idea of profit driven commercial combinations. He saw protection against dumping, protection against commercial combinations and protection for infant industries to the greater good of society. Speaking in the Legislative Assembly in 1902, Charles Harper identified that a combination of business men had raised wood prices to local consumers and that he believed the government should take possession of waste timber and sell it in Perth with a view to keeping prices down (Hansard, 1902, P. 327). Interestingly, Harper sought to maintain lower prices through competition rather than regulation. Co-operation was, of course, another form of resistance to such an outcome and this is discussed in part six of this paper below. The

issue of the provision of quality fertilizer for a reasonable price has also been identified as one where government could step in to prevent capitalists from taking profits which he thought would be a detriment to the greater good. Such capitalists were seen to operate within Western Australia and also from the eastern states effectively dumping produce at prices that were deleterious to local producers and of a quality that was of little value to consumers. In 1900, in relation to the protection of infant industries, Harper moved for the establishment of a central winery and storage by government in order to support the infant wine industry (Hansard, 1900, P. 2113). He also moved for the provision of funding by government to advance the industry and for government guarantees so that banks would lend more readily. He did, however, suggest that such resource should be made available to a co-operative to be established for the purpose rather than provide funds and guarantees directly. In the same speech, Harper identified that mining industries were supported, quite correctly, by government in the form of the provision of public batteries and that such similar support was "...a matter of life or death for the wine industry..." as increasing competition was likely from the eastern states, where government aid was prevalent. Via various committee meetings during his time in parliament, Charles Harper advocated the use of government resources to support fledgling industries subject to adequate security and provisions ensuring the recipients of such support where required to place their own resources into the industry, that the industry was viable and useful to the state and that there were satisfactory performance requirements to be met at stages through the project and before all of the government support was required. Such industries included pearl farming (WAPP, A2, 1880), ostrich farming (WAPP, A9, 1885), north west sugar (WAPP, A7, 1885) and the utilization of guano deposits in the state (WAPP, A12, 1887). Besides support for industry and the provision of government resources for infrastructure, Charles Harper was also keen to ensure the taxation arrangements in place were conducive to the expansion of the local economy where needed and protected against the evils of dumping from Eastern States sources.

Operating from the general desire to see taxation minimalised (*The West Australian*, 30 June 1893, P. 3), Harper also recognized the need for taxation revenue in order to allow the government to have the capacity to undertake the schemes about which he was passionate. For instance, he was in favour of taxing those land industries that required regulation in order to protect them (WAPP, A4, (v. 2), 1897). He also saw the value in using the taxation system as a protection for local industries from the predatory action of eastern states capitalists. The tariff was the most important source of revenue for the state government (Glynn, 1975, P. 38) and was also used as a method of protection. Charles Harper chaired the 1893 Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Operation of the Existing Customs Tariff of the Colony (WAPP, No. 22, 1893). Again we must infer from the report written as a result of this commission where Harper's views lie and given he was chairman we can be confident that he agreed with the major recommendations made and the direction of the discussion recorded in the evidence. The commission was not able to examine alternative forms of raising taxation as it was required to "preserve the Customs Tariff [which] precluded any divergence from the general nature of the Tariff Act" (Page 3 of the report). However, the commission evidence and report serve to highlight Harper's thinking regarding the use of the tariff for trade protection, the method of applying the tariff and the extent to which he sought to ensure the prices of everyday consumer

essentials were maintained at a level that was sustainable for the average man. Indeed, Harper's introduction to the report indicated that the recommendations made "...are...mainly confined to the removal of anomalies, the lightening of the load upon industry and enterprise and upon some if the necessities of life" (WAPP, No. 22, 1893, P. 3). However, consistent with his thinking already reviewed, Harper was keen to ensure that the tariff was not used to afford undue protection to industry by balancing the development of competition among local industry while still keeping out of Western Australia under priced and poorer substitute products. Further, where protection was justified, Harper considered the provision of protection should not be open ended. Speaking to his constituents in 1893, Charles Harper indicated that he believed that a protective tariff should apply only until the price of the good entering Western Australia hit a certain limit and then that good should be allowed entry for free. Such an arrangement would see local producers still needing to compete with foreign producers and not become lazy or inefficient. As such, there would remain downward pressure on local prices. This comment also served to address the issue of maintaining affordable staples for the "...poor man" (*The West Australian*, 30 June 1893, P. 3). While considerable pressure was placed on the committee to recommend higher tariffs in the interest of local producers, Harper's committee considered each representation from sector groups on their own merit. For instance, the committee considered evidence from the local engineers who sought a 25% tariff on certain manufactory in order to protect their businesses from eastern states competition (page 3 of the report). In support of this request, the interest group cited their requirement for labour should such protection allow the industry to flourish. The committee's response was to reject the submission on the basis that the industry did not have the capacity to meet local needs and that the labour employed in trying to do so would be better deployed in mining and agriculture. On the other hand, the committee sought to give protection to the colonial beer industry in order to facilitate its establishment in the context of significant eastern states competition. The extension of this protection was sought of the committee by brewers through the levying of a tariff on colonial wine production, however, it was identified that the wine industry constituted a potential export while beer did not and so the request for further protection was rejected (page 4 of the report). The provision of protective tariffs was also considered in the light of dumping effected by the eastern colonies. Pages 17 – 20 of the report included evidence to the effect that dumping of agricultural produce and manufactured items was the result of poor economic conditions on the eastern seaboard, mainly in Victoria. Where the committee considered that dumping reduced the market available for local produce and in which market it was reasonable to expect that Western Australia may expect to become self sufficient, where the goods dumped were of inferior quality or in cases where both of these situations applied, it sought to make recommendations for the establishment of increased tariff rates (page 4 of the report). This was an especially important issue for local agriculturalists as Victorian farmers were able to land produce in Perth markets and sell at a cheaper price than local Western Australian producers (*The West Australian*, 30 June 1893, P. 3; WAPP, No. 22, 1893, P. 4). The problem was exacerbated by the fact that Western Australians seemed to have a preference for exotic rather than local products.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the report was ended with a note reinforcing this point and calling

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<sup>29</sup> For instance, evidence in the report identified that "...one witness declares that his goods, though rejected with

“...a marked and emphatic attention to the blind and unreasoning prejudices exhibited by the general public in its treatment of local manufactures” (page 4 of the report). Finally, the committee wished to ensure the protective qualities of the tariff were retained by recommending that tariffs should be specifically identified rather than having an *ad valorem* tax. This was a pragmatic recommendation in that, if a particular good was to carry a tariff because it was being dumped in the local market, the striking of an *ad valorem* amount may not necessarily make the good more expensive than the local alternative whereas the striking of a value could be made to do so. Finally, the committee also considered the ubiquitous issue of land alienation and believed that the process of settling land would be supported by protective tariffs. Of course, the responsibility was not all the government’s. From a very early point, Charles Harper was keen to allocate responsibility to the individual where he believed it was possible for them to take that responsibility and to groupings of democratically managed co-operating individuals where individuals themselves lacked the capacity to act. Harper was always keen to use elected farmers for local representation and the implementation of initiatives. He felt that those elected from the body had a strong interest in the outcome and would work hard as they had offered themselves up for election (WAPP, A4, (v. 2), 1897, Pp. 110 -114). For instance, in considering the supply of cheap meat to the Metropolitan area, he was keen to ensure that while the government may be called upon to provide the necessary capital for infrastructure, it was equally possible for the drovers to form themselves into unions with a view to maintaining infrastructure once it was provided by the state (WAPP, No. A12, (v. 2) 1894). Indeed, co-operation was often cited as a preference to government involvement or, at least, as a method of reducing that involvement or ensuring that it was related to the provision of capital and not public operation. It had the added benefit, in Harper’s view, of allowing producers to avoid capitalist rings (Hansard Vol. XXIII, 1903, P. 237).

Sitting on the Royal Commission into Immigration in 1905, Harper directly addressed his belief in co-operation as follows:

“Trusts or combines established for the elimination of competition in trade are frequently denounced as devices for securing tyrannous control over prices. If traders aim at this by combination, producers may defeat them by co-operation”

(WAPP, 17, (v. 2), 1905)

Charles Harper went on to describe a number of examples where co-operation resolved problems associated with transportation, marketing and grain storage by reference to the work of the Western Australian Producers Co-operative Union (Producers Co-operative) (WAPP, 17, (v. 2), 1905, Pp. 38 - 39). Reinforcing his belief that an interposed entity should be placed between the producer and government support, Harper identified that the success of the Producers Co-operative was partly as a result of that body being assisted directly by

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...[his] firm’s brand upon them, are sold readily under the magic brand “Imperial”...Yet another says his goods are run upon when placed in French boxes, upon which the retailer forbids him to place his name (WAPP, No. A12, (v. 2) 1894, P. 4)

government and by the government owned and operated railways. Indeed, he saw support from the state as being increasingly important for the success of the Producers Co-operative. State control of the harbours, the railway and the government policy to give the "...utmost facility for fostering the export trade", constituted, in combination with the Producers Union, a unique opportunity for farmers according to Harper and one that he was keen to emphasise to them (WAPP, 17, (n. 2), 1905, P. 40). A comprehensive, and perhaps most mature, statement as to Harper's position on co-operation was laid down in his own hand in a petition to the State legislature three years before his death. The petition sought support for a motion to ensure the government enacted suitable legislation toward the promotion and establishment of co-operative bodies as a means of developing the economy, the agricultural industries and enhancing the reward for the man on the land (HFP, 1973A/8). The petition was constructed in the form of a letter to W.J. Butcher, member of the Legislative Assembly for the Gascoyne, and was written in 1909. Harper uses the correspondence to direct attention to the major arguments in support of co-operation. He argued that co-operation is a natural state of economic organisation for all of those with like interests. He cited as examples of co-operative enterprise organisations such as commercial multi-national corporations and local unions. He argues that co-operation is a natural state toward which farmers must also move as they are required to submit to the effects of others' co-operation (that is, commercial corporations and trusts) without currently having support for their own defence.<sup>30</sup> If farmers cannot co-operate then they cannot achieve a full return on their labour and, by natural deduction, this state of things results in a retardation of the economic development of the state. Without putting the argument in the theatrical terms used by *The Farmer*,<sup>31</sup> Harper saw that co-operation was at once a defence for those on the land and an opportunity for enhancement of the state's capacity to expand economically. In his view, if the people on the land did not unite, then their profits would be reduced to the extent that middlemen would stand in the market to deliver the produce and market it. Further, such middlemen would undertake such roles at rates that would serve to ensure the farmer did not receive sufficient return for his labour and, because of their lack of capacity for united action, farmers would not have the ability to influence the middlemen in their operations. Building on this theme, Harper insists that if the government were to assist by provision of funding and other forms of aid, then the state would also move forward from its reliance on mining and the transient population that came with it toward a more stable, secure economic base built around the idea of sufficient rewards for those with a true stake in Western Australia. Harper thought that the government's role in setting this inequality right included the fostering of co-operation amongst farmers and ensuring them a voice in the transport of produce to markets (local, national and international) and the disposal of their produce. Citing the experience of the farmers of the Victoria District who had formed a co-operative for the purposes of milling and exporting grain, Harper was keen to demonstrate that the government's intentions remained unclear in relation to support of co-operative enterprise at that point and that clarity of intent by the government – naturally in support of the co-operative movement – would also provide the necessary impetus for the establishment of a strong co-operative movement as confidence would be increased. The farmers of the Victoria District had formed their co-operative and had received support from the state government in the form of sheds for the storage of grain to be

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<sup>30</sup> Harper noted that mercantile and shipping interests were able to decide when grain comes onto the wharf at Fremantle and these mercantile groupings were able to ensure their interests were protected by collaboration with the result being that farmers forfeited a proportion of their just rewards for their labour.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, in its editorial of June 1909, *The Farmer* described the idea of middlemen contracting with farmers for their produce as an "unholy alliance".

transported. However, the government placed the sheds in the control of the merchants, rather than the co-operative, who were to buy and then transport the grain to markets. Naturally Harper viewed this scenario as only a partial solution saying that the sheds should be in the charge of the farmers who would then be in greater control of their destiny. He joined this requirement for a clear declaration from government supporting agricultural co-operation with the state's land policy by suggesting that such clear support by government of co-operative arrangements would see the government's land policy aim of the fullest possible agricultural development as being more likely to be fulfilled if the farmer received an appropriate return for his work. In short, Harper's idea of an appropriate model for the development of the resources of the state included the establishment of publicly recognized, democratically operated agricultural co-operatives, the provision of government funded infrastructure and the encouragement of the settlement of the land through continued government policy aimed at this outcome.

## **V. Concluding Remarks**

Charles Harper was born into a colony at the very edge of the British Empire in 1842 and lived through very lean and frustrating economic times. Together with many of his compatriots, Harper identified great natural resources and was eager to exploit them in his own interest and those of Western Australia. However, the essential source of frustration for him was the lack of capital and people available to be applied to the development task until the gold rushes, commencing in the late 1880s, at last saw the stagnant Western Australian economy have an opportunity for fundamental change. In seeking to exploit such an opportunity, Harper was eager to place economic development above all other considerations. Notwithstanding his political, community and educational roles, he has been remembered mostly for his contribution to the development of the agricultural sector in the West and particularly for his role in the establishment of agricultural co-operation. While he was not prone to describing his economic thinking in writing, we are able to come to a considerable understanding of Charles Harper's economic thought via a review of his extant papers, his recorded actions, records of his speeches in Parliament and on various Parliamentary committees as well as newspaper reports of his activities. Harper saw in co-operation an opportunity for the man on the land to manage his own destiny by coming together with others on the land to apply political and economic pressure to ensure an adequate return for the risk and effort they undertook in opening up that land. Harper's view was, that if agriculturalists were adequately rewarded, more people would migrate to Western Australia and so the colony would develop both its own market and also increase its capacity to pursue opportunities toward meeting the demands of distant foreign markets. To this end, co-operation was seen by Harper as not only an answer to issues surrounding the immediate economic development of the colony but also a great source of potential in terms of the development of distant markets and the resolution of problems associated with getting bulky and generally perishable produce from the most isolated British colony to distant European markets. In pursuing this goal, Harper was challenged by a number of questions regarding economic policy. Such questions included the extent to which government funding should be provided to ensure adequate capital was available to enhance economic development, how such funding should be provided and in what measure. Clearly, the development of the economy required investment in infrastructure such as rail, ports and education. Further, Harper was not alone in identifying the need for a scientific approach to farming if the land was to produce maximum output and for an appropriate taxation structure so that infant industries could be protected but that healthy competition, ensuring efficiency in production across the economy, was not destroyed. Additionally though, he was also keen to ensure that the common man was able to enjoy the benefits of a strong economy and that

middlemen and capitalists were prevented from taking excess profits by reducing payments to farmers for produce and inflating prices to consumers. He was not an Owenite co-operator because he did not see the need to change men's character and was not ideologically opposed to the use of government interference or religion. Rather, he saw co-operation as a key factor in building capacity within a largely agricultural based economy. While preferring farmers to stand on their own two feet and to co-operate privately to achieve the economic goals he set, Harper could also appreciate that the government was the principal source of capital in the young colony. While not a colonial socialist per se, he understood that the government, with its sovereign revenue stream and capacity for policy setting and implementation was likely to be the best entity to provide capital and to instigate change for the better. Such capital was likely to be provided more cheaply to the government than to individuals and the centralization of the source of capital provided a method of rationing capital to agriculturalists, via the Agricultural Bank for instance, such that policy goals were more likely to be met. To that end, Harper was always keen to ensure that an interposed entity was placed between the government funder and the individual farmer. There is little doubt that Harper's pragmatic and focused thinking in terms of economic development saw the establishment of co-operation in Western Australia. While he did not live to see the movement blossom, he did establish the first really successful co-operative the West and set the scene for his son, Walter, to pursue the establishment of entities that became Australian commercial icons such as Wesfarmers and Co-operative Bulk Handling (or now CBH Group Ltd).

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