

Guest Editorial

R L Marshall: 90 not out – and still wonderful

There must be very few active co-operators in the UK who do not know that Dr Robert L Marshall, his family and his friends and one time colleagues have been celebrating his 90th birthday – and looking forward to further years of his company and wise observations. Over the late summer and early autumn *Co-operative News* carried testimonies from a range of co-operators. Tribute was paid to his Principalship of the Co-operative College, his Presidency of Congress and his general standing in the movement. One-time students and former colleagues in the employment of the Co-operative Union (now Co-operatives^{UK}) wrote eloquently about his learning, his wisdom and his inspirational administration. Individuals gave testimony to the help and advice that had received. Careers had been fashioned and influenced and it was reported that some had prospered beyond, far beyond, the expectations, indeed the dreams of the beneficiaries.

Anyone who read carefully - and many did - could be excused for thinking that it had all been said. Yet they are wrong. Two other aspects - at least two other aspects - of this great man have yet to be reported, one of great relevance to this Society.

The first is that Bob Marshall is a Scot. More, he is in and of the line of the Scottish Reformation. That Reformation was different from the opportunistic version in England. It created a people of hard work, of principles, of duty. It was one of the greatest contributors to the Protestant work ethic. Furthermore the Scottish Reformation put great emphasis on education.

Knox looked for a Dominie in every parish. There would be three educated, well-educated men in every parish - the Laird, the Minister and the Dominie. In the 16th Century, Scotland had four universities (five if one counts the two in Aberdeen separately), while England and Wales had two - Oxford and Cambridge. Buchan and Scott wrote about the 'Lad O' Pairts', the boy who came from 'nowhere' and by intelligence, hard work, study and diligence goes on to do

great things.

It is a digression but the 'supplanted stock' of Ulster was largely of this tradition - Scots by ethnic language and Presbyterian by affiliation. The Americans called them the Scotch-Irish. They contributed very substantially to the War of Independence, the Declaration of Independence, the writing of the constitution and the formation of the nation.

Bob Marshall was and is of this tradition. He was born and raised in Chryston, a mining village off the Glasgow-Stirling road. His two grandfathers, his father and his uncles were miners. Aged 11 he went to Coatbridge Academy, a Scottish senior secondary. He was day and came out with an exceptional Scottish Higher Leaving Certificate.

In the early evening of the day the results of 'The Highers' became known, two National Union of Miners office bearers called at the house to see Robert's father. Their message was simple and generous. "That chiel of yours is too good to have anything to do with mining. No way is he going to be a clerk. Tell him to pick a university and we'll pay for it."

So it was that Robert Leckie Marshall went up to St Andrews, came down with a double first in classics and English and went on to do post-graduate work at Yale.

After America he taught for a spell, then came the war. He went into the Army, was commissioned and rose. By the end of his service he was a Lieutenant Colonel.

It was while he was in the Army that he met and married Beryl. She had been on a bond-selling tour of Canada. On her return he met her off the boat at Southampton. He had an emergency marriage licence. Fortunately and wisely she accepted his proposal. The honeymoon was in Llandudno.

It was to prove to be a wonderful marriage. Each had attributes denied to the other. They became the epitome of synergy.

The story of the remarkable acquisition of Stanford Hall near East Leake and the part played therein by Arthur Hemstock of the Co-operative Productive Federation - an organisation of producers' co-operatives mainly in footwear and clothing and strongest in Leicester and Nottingham is outwith our remit but is worth the telling.

What is important is that the Educational Executive of the Co-operative Union had the good fortune and wisdom to

make Bob Marshall the Principal. He stayed and served it magnificently until he retired. Not only was he Principal of the College, he was the Chief Educational Officer of the Union and so of the Educational Executive. I had the good fortune to be coupled to that body. So it was I worked with Bob, Bill Lawn and Walter Frost - the two chairmen under whom I served.

My CV tells me that I did almost 20 years on that body and so came to know and appreciate his many qualities. That linkage was extended when in our different ways, we served the then Independent Broadcasting Authority. Bob served on the ITV forerunner of the Broadcasting Complaints Commission. The broadcasters found him severe which is another way of saying that, knowing their duties and obligations, Bob thought they should adhere to them.

The same integrity, probity and rectitude came through in his years on the Monopolies Commission.

And so to the second of the under-recognised features - his role in the affairs of the Society for Co-operative Studies.

This story starts with a Professor Lambert, a Belgian who came to these shores with a missionary zeal.

Professor Lambert represented - indeed was - CIRIEC, a quasi-research organisation, strongest in mainland Europe and non-existent in Britain. He travelled widely advocating that we join his organisation and its advocacy of the merit of the public and co-operative sectors of economy. It would be ungracious to say Lambert was a 'Bon Vivreur' but he revelled in the generous hospitality we provided.

Lambert both succeeded and failed!

He failed in that no CIRIEC units were formed in Britain. Truth to tell, not many of those whom he saw warmed to Professor Lambert. The few CIRIEC folk in Britain encountered through him were very European. They, like Lambert were good linguists who went in and out of German and French with an ease that was both admired and resented. We may even have been a shade xenophobic.

He succeeded in that two other organisations did come into being.

One was PACE - Public and Co-operative Enterprise.

This was based in West Central Scotland and centred on and in the Economics Department of the University of Strathclyde. It had a stronger 'trade union' interest than the

other organisation. The Chairman was the late Sir Kenneth Alexander who was involved in the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders exercise and who went on to run the Highlands and Islands Development Board, Principal at Stirling University and Chancellor of the University of Aberdeen. PACE, in its structure and activities, was very akin to the Fabians. Thus it held meetings, received 'papers' or other lectures. It initiated minor research programmes and responded to relevant green and white papers. It no longer exists.

The other bigger organisation was our Society for Co-operative Studies which operated at national level but was at its best in London, the Midlands, Manchester and Glasgow. It publishes its Journal, holds occasional meetings and annually holds an AGM.

From its earliest days the Society succeeded in bringing together those involved in the day-to-day business activities of the co-operatives, the Union and the federations, lay activists and academics with an interest in the movement which 'interests' generally extended to an anxiety to see the co-operative trading organisations prosper.

From the very beginning, Bob Marshall was at the heart of our affairs. He was like the centre-piece of a clock around which the attention is paid yet without its omnipresent efficiency nothing would occur.

It was in no small measure that through his influence the Society was supported by political, academic and 'trading' giants.

Not least were his activities as Editor of the Journal. Ostensibly there were two editors, R L Marshall was one and I was the other. In fact, Bob Marshall did 90-95% of the work, yet he never complained. Even after he retired he remained in post as Editor and remained a stabilising influence on our affairs.

Yet again it was substantially under his leadership that the Society was extremely wide-ranging in its interests.

In no small measure, Bob Marshall and the Society for Co-operative Studies were synonymous.

It is a matter of considerable regret that Robert Marshall never received the knighthood he so rightly deserved. Bob would not and does not mind. It probably never occurred to him.

But I do mind. I would have liked to address him as Sir Robert and I would have loved to call Beryl Lady Marshall.

T F Carbery
October 2003