

Book Review

Blaszak, Barbara J *The Matriarchs of England's Co-operative Movement: a study in gender politics and female leadership 1883-1921*. Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut and London 2000, Contributions in Labor Studies Number 56

I approached this review with some caution. One reason was that I had read the author's paper in the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* in January 1999 (Vol.31 No.3) on 'Margaret Llewelyn Davies: A Study in Female Leadership', and had been wary of her feminist preoccupation with the sexuality of the eminent Women's Guild leader. So what! had been my reaction. Then there had been Muriel Russell's spirited and cogent riposte to that article in the *Journal* of May 1999 (Vol.32. No.1). Both coloured my approach to the book whose title, "The Matriarchs of England's Cooperative Movement", also made me uneasy.

Once I had read the book such reservations fell by the wayside, and I find that I can commend it wholeheartedly. Even Blaszak's use of the term "matriarch" became acceptable once it became clear that she was referring to Llewelyn Davies's own social background and her impulse to do good in the lower social orders. While much of the book focuses on Llewelyn Davies, and her influence on the Guild, it usefully recalls other Guild leaders of the same period, many of whom were similarly middle, rather than working, class women.

Blaszak's book is a heavyweight co-operative history. It deserves to be ranked with the best. Some earlier British Co-operative histories lacked important research tools such as footnotes. Consequently, you were tantalizingly left wondering where their authors got particular pieces of information, and how much weight you could attach to them. That is not the case with this book. It is extensively footnoted but, more importantly, its notes guide you through situations, developments and arguments. I particularly like the way that Blaszak quotes other Co-operative Women's Guild authors on certain issues and then goes on to debate their findings. In some instances, such as the origins of the Guild, Blaszak comes up with slightly different interpretations, or new insights. All these are firmly based on what I believe is the book's major strength, its extensive and in-depth research. Blaszak consulted, and quotes, a wide range of Co-operative histories, and reveals an impressive grasp of the Movement's ideology. She also makes extensive use of social and feminist works, as well as journals including the

Co-operative News. Historians believe that you cannot be a really good historian unless you get your hands dirty working in dusty archives. Blaszak obviously did that, particularly in the archives of the Guild, now housed at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull, and of the Co-operative Union. In connection with the latter it was good to see her acknowledgements of the help given by the sadly lamented late Roy Garrett, and Gillian Lonergan, now a Vice Chair of this Society.

Her book appears to have benefited from its long gestation. She began work on it almost 20 years ago but had to stop when her career changed direction. Blaszak believes that had she published earlier the result would have been less illuminating. As it is, the intervening years have brought her new perspectives and the opportunity to see what other authors covering similar ground have had to say. Blaszak frequently quotes Peter Gurney's¹ 1996 book, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870 - 1930*, and Gillian Scott's 1998 work, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Working Women*. The latter focuses on the history of the Guild in the inter-war years.

Blaszak's book is divided into three main parts. The first, under the heading of Women's Space/Women's Place, details the "Women's Corner" in the *Co-operative News* and examines the "Gendered Geography of the Cooperative Movement". In Part Two headed "Angels in the Store", Blaszak traces "The Early leaders of the Women's Co-operative Guild, before focusing on "Margaret Llewelyn Davies: A Woman with a Mission". Part Three, "The Dysfunctional Commonwealth" begins with the lurid heading "Rent at the Seams" in which Blaszak explores "Sisterhood in the Women's Cooperative Guild" and then "The Battle between the Sexes in the Co-operative Movement." The book ends with a Conclusion which examines the "Contradictions and Conflicts" within the Guild.

Chapter headings underline the feminine perspective from which this book is written. Hopefully, it will not deter potential readers. We perhaps need to recognise that gender studies now permeate much academic work. For this reason I believe that we can be grateful to Barbara Blaszak, and earlier to Gillian Scott, for bringing British Co-operative history into that spectrum through their studies on the Co-operative Women's Guild.

The major strengths of Blaszak's book are that it is eminently readable and that it is based on remarkably in-depth research. These two characteristics sit easily with each other as well as with a third strength which is that the book is firmly rooted in Co-operative ideology. All in all, a book to commend.

Rita Rhodes

1. Corrected from 'Guerney' in original published article