

The Likes of Us: A Biography of the White Working Class
By Michael Collins

Granta Books, London. ISBN 1 8620 7600 6 £12.

Reviewed by Rita Rhodes

This book has been reviewed in the national press and promoted in national booksellers from which we may deduce that it is considered to have wide appeal. Certainly, at first glance, its subject matter would seem to be of interest to readers of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

Collins has written his book because of a number of fears he has. One is that the white working class is becoming obscured by successive waves of immigrants. Another is his belief that all too frequently white British workers are caricatured as xenophobes while their tastes and attitudes are mocked. Although he acknowledges that many social commentators have studied and written about the white working class, he fears that in the main they have been outsiders and, as a result, their views have often been patronising.

Collins seeks to redress these wrongs by writing as an insider and concentrates on assembling his families' memories. He then links these to a number of themes - work or its lack, war, slums, redevelopment, music halls, football, the churches etc. In so doing he attempts to illustrate the culture of the white working class which he believes is shaped to a large extent by its location. Collins traces his family from the early 19th century to the present, in their homes in south east London, in particular, Southwark. A sound approach, this undoubtedly adds to the entertainment value of the book which is well-written, as one could expect from a television producer and journalist. Nevertheless, it disappointed your reviewer for two main reasons.

The first was that its claim to be a "biography of the White Working Class" can hardly be sustained. It relates to a very small area of London, and at best can only therefore be partial. For example, just across the River Thames at Stratford there were different industries which gave rise to a somewhat different working class which had

different trades unions, co-operative society and football teams.

The second disappointment is that those interested in co-operative history will find very few references to the Co-op in the book. This is a big surprise. Even the few that do exist are indirect and occur within the context of larger events. An undoubted strength of the book is its extensive use of personal accounts. One of these is a vivid account of a woman returning to Walworth after a bombing raid, late at night and in the blackout. She records:

We turn into Walworth Road. Further down it's pandemonium. Shop's been bombed. I hear someone say "Co-op's been hit", so naturally I panic, thinking about my Bill. Well, it was unbelievable, 'cos the shops are being looted. You can see these shapes - people running down the street with the dummies from the shop windows, with the clothes on 'em. Woman comes running up to me, she's got her apron open and she's cradling bundles of cutlery in it like it's a baby. She comes up right close: 'Go in, mother, get yourself some crockery.' So I realise it's the Royal Arsenal Co-op with all the furniture and that. Not us at the funeral Co-op.

This is one of very few passing references to the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society founded in south east London in 1868. The Society's operations were well within the book's time-scale. An interesting Co-operative history concept is that developed by the Israeli Co-operative writer, Yair Levi, who speaks of co-operative 'embedddness'. By this he means the extent to which a co-operative becomes part of its community. Up until the 1960s, British consumer co-operatives as vibrant mass membership organisations were deeply embedded in their communities, and thus provide a good illustration of this concept. The

Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society with its ubiquitous shops, extensive cultural and recreational activities, educational courses, youth groups, and services from 'cradle to grave', was a particularly good example. Michael Collins's failure to note such a prominent feature of the area in which his family lived is puzzling. It also seriously detracts from the credibility of his book.

Although his book is a good read do not

expect too much of co-operative value from it. Indeed, one might feel pique that the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society that brought so much trade, employment and service to the south east London working classes has been so disregarded. Co-operative historians have much work to do to redress this imbalance and restore co-operatives as an integral part of working class history and culture.