T W Mercer: the William Morris of the Co-operative Movement
By David Lazell

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Reviewed by Dr John Hammond, formerly of the Co-operative Union Education Department and writer of books on H G Wells, George Orwell, Edgar Allen Poe and R L Stephenson.

This is a stimulating overview of the life, work and thought of Thomas William Mercer (1884-1947), who was a prolific writer, editor, lecturer and tutor in the years between the First and Second World Wars. David Lazell writes with real affection for his subject, tracing Mercer's career as a shop assistant, a trade unionist, an educationalist, a Co-operative College tutor, a writer, speaker and bibliophile. This is no dry academic treatise: the book is written with wit and humour, presenting a rounded portrait of Mercer as a man with human foibles and yet possessing the gift of inspiring others with a vision grounded firmly in co-operative values.

What emerges from this study is a picture of a man who was both practical and visionary: a self-educated man who had first hand experience of Co-operative enterprise and was at the same time an inspirational writer with a genuine love of literature and a deep attachment to the English countryside.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Lazell's book is its examination of the literary influences which shaped Mercer's attitudes and beliefs. These influences included, for example, Edward Carpenter, G K Chesterton, Walt Whitman, A R Orage, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw and William King. Lazell quotes with approval Mercer's observation that "the effective speaker will also be a ruminative reader." Mercer was an enthusiastic reader and book collector, reflecting that "when the devil comes to me in the form of a secondhand bookseller, I never resist him or flee from temptation." In today's world of instant communication do co-operative officials still find the time – as Mercer evident did – to read widely and deeply?

In surveying Mercer's life and times David Lazell vividly recaptures the ethos of co-operative and adult education during the first half of the twentieth century, with its emphasis on weekend schools, summer schools, adult classes, conferences and courses. Mercer was actively associated with numerous educational organisations including the Adult School Movement, the Working Men's College, the Co-operative College and the National Co-operative Men's Guild. He was also the author of many discussion outlines and study guides. These chapters in the book reminded me forcefully of the years I spent at Stanford Hall, first as a student and later as an official in the Education Department under the leadership of Dr R L Marshall, the then College Principal and Chief Education Officer. One is bound to ask oneself the question: what will be T W Mercer's enduring legacy to the British co-operative movement? Or, to put the question in a different way: is there still a role for co-operative adult education in the traditional pattern in the twenty-first century? Mercer was the first Co-operative College tutor, joining the staff in 1919, who just lived long enough to see the movement acquiring Stanford Hall in 1945. What would he have made of trends in co-operative education today?

When meeting fellow students attending adult courses it is tempting to assume that these students are *typical* of one's contemporaries, but of course this is not the case, as Richard Hoggart points out in his seminal study *The Use of Literacy:*

> Some people of this kind have for a long time tended to see every second working-class man as a Felix Holt or a Jude the Obscure. Perhaps this is because most of the working-class people they have known closely have been of an unusual and self-selected kind, and in special circumstances, young men and women at summer schools and the like, exceptional individuals whom the chance of birth has deprived them of their proper intellectual inheritance, and who have made remarkable efforts to gain it.

Of course it could be argued that both David Lazell and myself are members of that same 'self-selected' minority, but the fact remains that

it is that minority – of which Mercer was certainly a member – which has provided the backbone of co-operative education during the past century and more. These are the men and women who were willing to serve on committees, organise classes, speak at conferences, write letters and seek to widen their horizons. Mercer was one of a generation of luminaries including W Henry Brown, Percy Redfern and W P Watkins – and, later on, Arnold Bonner and Harold Bing – who devoted their lives to adult education in its widest sense and inspired others with their commitment and enthusiasm.

David Lazell points out that there is still much to be discovered about Mercer, and that many of his articles and essays are buried in now forgotten co-operative publications. What is needed is a comprehensive bibliography of all Mercer's writings. Is there scope here for a PhD thesis? In the meantime Lazell has published this book at his own expense in the hope that it will find a commercial publisher. He is to be congratulated on this initiative, but it is regrettable that such a worthwhile project has to depend on self publishing. Is this not a project which the College should undertake, perhapsas part of the revival of the excellent series of Co-operative College Papers?

To survey the life and times of Thomas Mercer is at the same time to reflect on the changing fortunes of co-operative and adult education during the twentieth century. A book of this kind inevitably leads one to regret the lost hopes of the movement, and yet simultaneously admire the vision and dedication of the men and women who created the College and built the framework of co-operative education. The abiding question left in the mind is: does the movement produce figures of the calibre of Mercer today?

For many years the British Federation of Young Co-operators – which is specifically mentioned in this book – fulfilled a useful role in helping to equip young activists to serve their local co-operative societies in either a voluntary or professional capacity. Today the BFYC is no more, and as far as I am aware no comparable organisation has taken its place. Where then are the officials and committee members of tomorrow to come from? Let us remember also the vital contribution of Stanford Hall. Of course the College, now based in Manchester, continues to fulfil a vital role in providing leadership, courses and materials but the crucial element of long-term residential adult education – which Mercer understood so well – is no longer present.

During the past twenty years and more David Lazell has ploughed an often lonely furrow in writing and publishing a series of excellent monographs on aspects of co-operative history, education and endeavour. Each of these volumes is enlivened by his sense of humour and his infectious enthusiasm for his subject. This latest work on Mercer is a worthy addition to the series, and will inspire many of his readers to delve more deeply into Mercer's life and milieu.

I warmly commend David Lazell's study as a valuable contribution to co-operative research. The book serves a wider audience. As Lazell himself expresses it:

> The present work has been able to give the merest look at his effervescent output. It hardly needs stating that Tom Mercer deserves far better recognition by the modern co-operative movement – and beyond it.