

Book Reviews

The Workings of Co-operation - A comparative study of consumer co-operative organisation in Britain and Sweden 1860 to 1970

By Katarina Friberg

Växjö University Press Acta Wexionensia No7/2005 ISSN: 1404-4307 ISBN: 91-7636-470-4. Copies are Available from the Co-operative College at £12 including UK postage.

Reviewed by Lloyd Wilkinson, former Chief Executive Officer, Co-operative Union Ltd

This substantial book - some 500 pages – explores the working of Co-operation, and was the basis of the writer's thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the Växjö University, Sweden. This should not deter anyone with an interest in co-operatives and co-operation from reading what is a detailed, down to earth and fascinating account of the development of consumer co-operatives in Britain and Sweden, both countries having been leaders in the co-operative world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The work is a two-case comparative study, the comparison being between the local consumer co-operatives of Newcastle-upon-Tyne Co-operative Society Ltd, situated in the north-east of England and Konsumentforeningen Solidar in Malmo, in the south-west of Sweden. The societies are explored through minutes of members' meetings, and several other data sources from their beginnings to 1970, looking at the organisational structures, decision making, and interaction between the different factors within each Society.

The manner in which the work is presented goes a long way in maintaining the interest of the reader in the wealth of detail. The book is arranged in five parts – an Introduction, Retail Services and Shopping, Members' Meetings etc, Economic participation and internal politics, and finally "the workings of co-operation" being the results of the comparative study. Whilst the introduction is largely about the organisation of the work, it includes much interesting factual material from both countries – eg the formation of the Co-operative Party in Britain, and relations with KF, the national co-operative Union in Sweden. Considerable efforts were made to ascertain the validity of the source materials which are commented upon in some detail, and which included impressions gained from

conversations with co-operative members when the writer attended their meetings. This first part concludes with two valuable sub-sections in terms of research materials – the first concerned with members' meetings and the minutes of those meetings, and the second with the legislative framework within which the Societies had to operate. This latter aspect is dealt in the context of national legislation, and also of regional and local factors. The last eighteen pages of this part are headed "Newcastle and Malmo – from trading towns to industrial cities", and serve to emphasise the importance of understanding all the varying factors that have had an influence on co-operative developments in the two cities.

Part 2, headed "Co-operative retail services and Shopping at the Co-op" records the developments over some 80 years, of the Newcastle Society and then of the Solidar Society in considerable detail, and seeking to show how shopping at the Co-op. was a different experience for different generations of members. In addition to details of the establishment of branches by both organisations, their practices in relations to their Members' rights and duties are dealt with at some length, as are their practices of credit trading and of dividend payment. It is interesting to learn of the emphasis placed on member loyalty by the Solidar Society, and of its actions to have members understand the need for loyalty. How the Societies dealt with credit trading is given detailed attention, and includes the establishment and operation of "Mutuality Clubs".

These detailed comparisons continue in Part 3 with a look at Members' meetings, the records of those meetings through the Minutes, and at the various forums that operated in each Society. Attention is drawn to the practice of quarterly meetings in Newcastle, whereas in the Solidar Society

members only had the opportunity of an annual District meeting. An interesting aspect of this section of the book relates to “who is the Member”? it being questioned in the case of dual membership of husband and wife! The thrust of this part, however, is concerned with Member influence on decision-making, both before a routine was established and after, when some consistency of practice was in place. Anyone interested in the formalities of meeting procedure there is much to be gained from a reading of this segment of the book. The establishment of rules and standing orders and their relationship to legislative requirements are dealt with in a clear and understandable way. A final segment of this Part deals with the co-operative Forums that existed in Newcastle and Malmo – to quote from the book, “Forums are: places where members of Co-operative societies learned the workings of co-operation, its rules and culture, places where members could discuss and quarrel, mobilise or be mobilised, particular group interests, or just have a good time”. Consequently, there are references to the Guilds, British Federation of Young Co-operators, Co-operative Party, Education etc. in Newcastle etc. and similar bodies in Malmo, and to their influence.

The members’ economic involvement with their Society is dealt with in Part 4, which on the one hand is concerned with the raising of capital and on the other with the distribution of surplus. Clear differences of approach

between the two Societies are documented; funds and schemes made available to members are explained (death benefits, loans advanced against property), as is the differing approach to the funding of Education and politics. A major portion of this Part deals with the influence that members can have upon Society policy concerned with, for example, the provision of new services, shop modernisation programmes, dealing with complaints and in particular on dividend and pricing policy. It includes some well-documented examples, which illustrate the different approach taken by each Society, and make interesting reading.

The fifth and final Part of this highly readable book, entitled “The Workings of Co-operation”, begins with a series of questions, which the writer seeks to answer by reference to the outcome of the comparative study. The differences in the development of consumer co-operation in Newcastle and Malmo are explained by way of summing up and some analytical reflections follow. What is very apparent is that issues that are seen as being important in one Society are neglected in the other, and vice-versa.

The publication includes some six pages of historic photographs – England and Sweden; graphs are used throughout to illustrate points in the text, and sources are annotated on a page-by-page basis. An extensive Bibliography records both published and unpublished references.