



New Views of Co-operation

The past eighteen years, since the flurry of works celebrating the bicentenary of Robert Owen's birth, has been a thin time for students of Co-operative history. There have been a few milestones, notably Kinloch and Butt's *History of the SCWS*, Jill Liddington and Jill Norris's *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, and, recently, Pearson's *Architectural and Social History of Co-operative Living*.

There have been some disappointments too. Two recent Co-operative society histories, Brighton, and Portsea Island, show little sign that Co-operative historiography has moved since the days of W.C. Brown, and for all the value for feminists, Co-operators could find little to arouse them in the Women's Guild histories, *Caring and Sharing*, and *Of Whole Heart Cometh Hope*.

New Work - New Look

For most purposes, the working tools of today's Co-operative historians are the products of a lost world, written when retail Co-operatives and their federal bodies were still essentially unchanged from their nineteenth century form. Housing Co-operatives were still in the slumber they had entered during the First World War, yet to be awakened by Harold Campbell and Reg Freeson, while worker Co-operation meant the etiolated remnant of the CPF, plus a sprinkling of Christian Socialist anomalies like the John Lewis Partnership and Scott Bader. In this impoverished world, a new book is an event - *New Views or Co-operation*: ed. Stephen Yeo; Routledge 1988; £30.

Stephen Yeo has been one of the central figures in the revival of Co-operative history in the past decade. He was influential in the decision to dedicate the Society for the Study of Labour History meeting in the late 1970s to Co-operative history in which some radically new work was deployed. (I particularly remember Robin Thornes' paper which has reappeared in this work). Since then, the enthusiasm of Stephen Yeo and Mervyn Wilson has lain behind the two Co-operative History Workshops which have done much to symbolise the revival of interest in Co-operative history. In addition he is a member of a highly productive school at

The University of Sussex, which has come under the influence of two great scholars of working-class culture and ideology, W.H.G. Armytage and J.F.C. Harrison.

Variety - and Coherence

When so many books turn out to be nothing more than collections or assemblages of essays, *New Views of Co-operation* as a self-confessed collection of essays, is, inevitably, an object of suspicion. The reader is quickly reassured by Stephen Yeo's linking text and the final, synthesising essay, and discovers with pleasure that this book has coherence and an overriding intention to reassert the distinct nature of Co-operatives as associative rather than collective institutions, and as essentially working-class groupings which rejected, or at least minimised, patronage and leadership from above.

The essays, roughly chronological in sequence, look again at figures like King and Holyoake, depressing King's overblown reputation as the Godfather of Brighton Co-operation, and reclaiming Holyoake the radical agitator from the condescension of the simplistic goodie/baddie dichotomy of socialism v Liberalism. A particular pleasure is Robin Thornes' handling of the 1827-44 period, showing that the blanket categorisation of the Co-operatives of this period as "Owenite" is misleading, and disputing the mythic position of the Rochdale Pioneers Society as the "new model" Co-operative.

Most of the essays live up to the claim of the book's title as "new views of co-operation", including a study of the origins of the Co-operative Party's link with the Labour Party which draws upon Cabinet papers and a range of Government sources to demonstrate an official perception of the Co-operative movement as at least a potentially revolutionary force. Other new insights include a vignette of the Crystal Palace Festivals, which throws a valuable sidelight on the producer-consumer debate; a piece on the "Dependents", a religious community who employed retail and productive Co-operation to provide employment and support for members and a service to rural villages; and a profile of a Bristol working-class auto-didact, John Wall, whose affiliations, like those of so many of his working-class contemporaries, included uneasy loyalty to the Baptist persuasion, to socialist groupings, and to more than one emerging retail Co-operative.

Uneven Quality

Inevitably, perhaps, in a *feldtschrift*, the papers are of uneven quality. That some do not represent the sharpest and most original work in their particular

fields is, perhaps, less surprising than that so many of them do succeed in presenting the reader with a new and startling perception. A study of James Larkin's "Co-operative Commonwealth" is of some interest, but its relevance to Co-operatives or Co-operation is slight. Other chapters, like that on the Women's Guild and the Divorce Law Campaign are so far from a new view that they add little in interpretation to G.D.H. Cole's 1944 account.

One disappointment to the reviewer is Neil Killingback's paper subtitled *Economic and political attacks on Co-operation during the 1920s and '30s* which seems to fall into the Statist fallacy, so pervasive in labour history, of perceiving labour organisations as locked in conflict with the State, with other agencies holding the ring. The inter-wars period is the high point of conflict between the capitalist retail trade and consumer goods manufacturers, and the spearhead of the attack was the extension and enforcement of retail price maintenance, deployed in an attempt to prevent Co-operatives from establishing an effective presence in the non-food trade. Neil Killingback's paper devotes half a page to this problem, while his focus is the struggle about taxation. However, this reservation aside, Killingback's paper has the great merit that its focus is squarely upon Co-operatives as trading organisations, acknowledging that Co-operatives are distinctive within the whole range of working-class organisational forms in that they provided an economic service through trading.

The Relevance of Co-operation

One problem for many writers who pay attention to Co-operative history is the apparent need to devise a justification for such odd behaviour. Often this seems to involve saying that Co-operation is important for its (failed) contribution to world peace, its (failed) contribution to the women's movement, or its role (alas, again failed) in the development of working-class consciousness. One comes to expect any day a work on "Co-operative history" centred upon the Co-operative movement's contributions (failed I expect) to the spread of AIDS, the pollution of the Antarctic, computer literacy, or whatever concerns the next echelon of history graduates.

This quest for relevance is exasperating. Co-operatives made a distinct contribution to working class feeding, clothing, and saving, and created the environment which nurtured a group of working men and women who possessed a hard-won consciousness of how an increasingly complex economic system worked, the sort of demands this system made upon working people, and the sort of opportunities it offered them. These men and women certainly

processed on May Day, carried a Rainbow flag, sent food to the Dublin strikers and milk to Basque babies. In addition, week by week they studied the papers for Grocery No. 2 sub-committee or the Education Committee, or presided over the Women's Guild branch, dealt with members' complaints about the price of bacon, and interviewed applicants for provisions - first hand at No. 23 branch. Who will write the story of these people?

The Author

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