



Reviews *By Jonathan Hill*

The Geography of Co-operation

This study of the Lega Nazionale delle Cooperative e Mutue by John Earle **The Italian Co-operative Movement**, investigates Co-operatives in three of Italy's most advanced regions, and in three less developed ones and illustrates their relationship with the culture and geography of each area. Published by Allen and Unwin this travelogue is priced at £25.00 for 225 informative pages. Although the Lega is the main focus of attention the distinctions between the other arms of the Italian Co-operative Movement are carefully described. The most delightful feature of the account is the contrast between various Co-operatives in different regions of the country: Lombardy and Sardinia, Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, Sicily and Latium. The author shows how regional characteristics, human and physical, shaped the growth of Co-operatives in the past, and continue their influence into the future.

According to an official of the Co-operative Movement in Florence:

"The Tuscan has always been an individualist, an artisan, a craftsman, a sharecropper. He is a do-it-yourself person. He has learnt to put up with relatively little in life, but what he has he wants to manage himself. It is in keeping with his character not to associate to do things together or to make things together as in Emilia Romagna, but to associate to share services or consume together".

These are stereotypes, perhaps, but well-meant and friendly ones. Co-operators planning to holiday in Italy might find Earle's beautifully written book an ideal travelling companion.

From much further afield comes an account of Co-operation in Australia. **The Co-operative Way** is a report by a Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operation and concerns principally the Victorian Co-operative Movement. A book written by a committee might raise fears of close type and heavy prose. This 151 page publication is the exception which proves the rule. Although detailed and thorough it is clearly laid out, the typeface is easy on the eyes, and there is a small but evocative selection of photographs in colour. Specific recommendations by the Committee to the Victorian government include those which address the legislative machinery, finance, and specific sector requirements including those relating to Aboriginal Co-operatives.

As far as legislation is concerned, the existing framework is criticised on the grounds of its failure to establish a clear and distinct identity for Co-operative organisation. At the same time it is acknowledged that legislation alone does not make Co-operation or Co-operators. A new Act is proposed which should be a "de-regulatory and enabling instrument."

From Brazil, Indonesia and Thailand Koenraad Verhagen has drawn together considerable experience in the task of developing viable "self-help organisations". His account of a series of action research studies appears in a 152 page book entitled **"Self Help Promotion: a challenge to the NGO Community"**. (NGO stands for Non Governmental Organisations). The publishers are the Royal Tropical Institute, and CEBEMO a Catholic development organisation, both of which are Netherlands based. Grassroots development in rural areas is the theme which is used to bind the findings from the countries involved. An important aim was to discover how NGO's can encourage self-reliance without smothering with bureaucracy, paternalism or indeed "kindness".

Verhagen attempts to distinguish between registered Co-operatives and informal self-help groups, though he locates both within the associative sector of the economy. He has many hard messages about failed attempts to improve rural economies. Efforts to increase the standard of living often seem to achieve the opposite effect. Even in a relatively benign area of intervention such as education and training some appalling mistakes have been made. The author quotes with approval a Brazilian source condemning the role of the mass media in promoting development: their methods "flagrantly disregard people's knowledge and experience." Classroom methods of teaching are also heavily criticised.

Yet the book has some optimistic passages - provided NGO staff are willing to live very closely with people in rural areas, they can begin to provide effective support services to both federations and self-help groups.

Returning to Britain, but with due acknowledgements to the relevant experience of many other countries, Johnston Birchall's new book **"Building Communities: the Co-operative Way"** is an intellectually stimulating analysis of housing policy and practice. The title of this book, published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, 223 pages price £14.95, is perhaps too concrete to do full justice to the range of concepts encompassed in the text. But for once the idea of "community" is used more seriously than as a mere slogan or brand name. "Human nature and Co-operative values"; and "Democracy, the State and Co-operative welfare," are essays which scale philosophical heights.

The author claims that Co-operative housing has already "burst the bubble of a few long-held myths". These myths are that:

- owner occupation is the only way to consumer control;
- Council housing is the only way for disadvantaged people to attain decent standards;
- philanthropic housing associations are the only way to achieve small-scale housing management.

The six case histories provided by Johnston Birchall are, maybe, the most accessible feature of this impressive volume which should be read by everyone concerned with housing policy - whether politically, professionally, academically or indeed from an administrative point of view.

The question remains: in this age of the motor car, the motor-way and out-of-town shopping how can our environment be improved? At what level can housing Co-operatives begin to influence the landscape?

The Author

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