

REVIEWS

by

STEPHEN DRODGE

I hope that Jenny Thornley's new book Workers' Co-operatives will become more important than it is now. That may seem a strange thing to say, so let me explain. I think it a good book and, in particular, a book which is well suited to explaining workers' Co-operatives to the interested, but, hitherto at least, uninvolved reader. I don't know if that was Jenny Thornley's intention, but it is the role that seems to me appropriate for this book. Unfortunately, published by Heinemann at £14.50, the present edition seems most unlikely to achieve the circulation required to perform it: paperback please!

Workers' Co-operatives starts with an outline history, and proceeds with chapters on the main institutions currently involved in the support and development of Co-operatives; finance; management; the economic and business context; the relationship with central and local government; workers' Co-operatives in France and in Italy; and proposed ways forward. Throughout, the case studies which formed the basis of Jenny Thornley's research for the book are drawn upon for information and illustration.

This use of a good deal of case material is one of the strengths of the book. The histories of many abortive Co-ops. make fairly depressing reading - but it is useful to convey the fact that many of the problems encountered are

part neither of the nature of Co-operation, nor of the system within which they have occurred, but arise from sheer errors and misjudgments. This is in no sense a training manual, but setting out some examples of practice is a useful thing to have done.

The various support organisations - or hindrance organisations, as the case may be - are dealt with in a chapter to themselves. They are compared and contrasted in a most illuminating way. This is a chart which should help all navigators in the difficult waters of advice, information and fund-seeking. For those who make it through to the actual formation of a Co-operative enterprise, the chapters on practice and performance describe and assess the main problems acutely. The need for realism and efficiency as well as ideals is stressed, and the case made for Co-operatives operating in the economy at large rather than relying totally on the inevitably restricted custom offered by sympathetic bodies - "Co-operatives", says Jenny Thornley, "need to experience the discipline of the market place".

The "discipline of the market place", however, is not the Thatcherite concept it might sound, but merely a reminder that Co-operatives are commercial enterprises and have to function as such. The author's view of their alignment is most un-Thatcherite, for she sees their successful development as contingent upon their taking up a positive role within the labour movement, acting as instruments of worker participation and showing that worker-based enterprise can operate effectively in the economy with the support of the wider labour movement.

Overall, then, a valuable book. There are one or two quibbles - the historical section, for instance, is rather confusing to read; and the difference in efficiency between French and British workers' Co-operatives which the chapter on France raises could do with more explanation. But perhaps a work of this sort should raise as many questions as it answers, and it answers a good many. I do wish it were cheaper though.

Some Briefer Notices

I felt that Workers' Co-operatives required treatment at relative length. There is space, though, for one or two briefer notices, so here goes.

The case study series published by the Co-operatives Research Unit of the Open University now runs to five titles, Milkwood Co-operative Ltd., by Rosemary Rhoades, and The Garment Co-operative : an experiment in industrial democracy and business creation, by Chris Cornforth, having recently - late last year and early this, respectively - been added to the three earlier titles by Eirlys Tynan, Unit 58, Little Women and Sunderlandia.

The studies examine differing co-operatives in reasonable depth, but not at exhaustive length. They are generally quite readable and non-technical, the analyses useful but not over-complex. Clearly detailed studies of this sort are of interest to anyone working on Co-operatives, but I should like to suggest that even as they stand, or certainly in extract form in packs, they are probably more suitable for use in schools than practically anything else currently available on new Co-operatives. They seem to me ideal for project work at 'O' level plus - and their relative cheapness (£2.00 for the latest ones)

should put them in reach even in authorities with badly mangled education budgets.

A listeners' co-operative - a rather intangible entity, but an interesting one - is proposed by Simon Partridge in a brief paper Community Radio : towards appropriate supervisory arrangements at local and state level and suggested as a possible model by Partridge and his co-authors of A Community Radio Station for the Hounslow Area (a feasibility study). Community projects come in a good many forms, including Co-operatives, but media projects, at least, tend to concentrate, understandable, on the worker Co-operative structure. In the paper especially, Partridge argues that a modified consumers' Co-operative will be workable and produce a more community-orientated result. Both the paper and the feasibility study are available from Simon Partridge, 92 Huddleston Road, London N7 OEG, priced at £0.40 and £3.00 respectively.

David Owen and the Social Democrats are still very much centre stage at present, so it should perhaps be noted that his volume Face the Future (Cape, £12.50) includes a chapter on Co-operatives. Owen covers a good deal of ground in twenty-two pages, which is no doubt why the result is rather breathless and not all that informative. Nevertheless, it would be progress indeed if all politicians followed his example and considered Co-operation in their books. Owen sees Co-operatives as instruments of decentralised people's ownership, free of the state, but with encouragement from it. He favours a gradualist approach to building the Co-operative sector, and lays special emphasis on voluntary conversions of existing firms.

Once again, may I remind Bulletin readers that I should be pleased to receive details of new publications which they consider important.

I am very conscious that in our field much significant information appears in quiet and unpublicised places.

Note on the Author

STEPHEN DRODGE: is Librarian of the Co-operative College, member of I.C.A. Librarians' Working Party and editor of a short guide to the literature of Workers' Co-operatives due to appear later in the year. Previously spent four years in public library service.