

The Role of the College: Students Report

FROM SOCIAL AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

1. R. D. DONNELLY

In responding to the invitation to contribute to this symposium on the Co-operative College, I have to be careful not to allow personal feeling to influence academic opinion. I have been involved in a love affair with the College since the day in October 1965 when, after going to Nottingham races, I first entered its portals. That affair has stood the test of time. After Stanford Hall, University was a complete non-event. The conversations in the common room at the College were far superior to those in the students union of my University.

However love should not always be blind. The College is not perfect, no institution is, and in reviewing its history I will try very hard to subdue my personal feelings.

The history of the College divides neatly into three phases, each one associated with the era of a Principal. The first era, that of Fred Hall ran from 1919 to 1939. The second era from 1946 to 1977 was dominated by the figure of R. L. Marshall, and the latest phase, post-Marshall, seems to be very much the creation of Dr Houlton.

Notes of the Author: Student at the College 1965-1967; at present a teacher in a school in Edinburgh and is a director of Clydebank Co-operative Society.

These three phases have very different characteristics, but nevertheless certain themes run through the history of the College, without regard to the leading figure. These will be dealt with later on. First, consideration is given to the differences, as these chart the changes that have occurred in the role of the College over the years.

The Early Years

The first ten years of the College were typified by three things. First the number of students attending the college was small, averaging under 20. Second, the bulk of subjects offered for study were in the field of the social sciences with the different aspects of Co-operation featuring prominently - courses included the Social Philosophy of Co-operation, Recent Co-operative History, The General Survey of the Co-operative Movement and Economics of Co-operation. The third hall mark of the College at this time was the fact that few students stayed the whole year. Most students came for periods ranging from one week to two terms.

These practices began to fade in the 1930's, the number of students rose slowly, more stayed for longer periods and the provision of technical education increased.

1946-1977

Greater changes came in 1945-46 with the move to Stanford Hall and the appointment of R. L. Marshall as Principal. It was at this time that the College developed into the staff

training College of the Movement. The number of students increased to over 100 per session, the students in general stayed for the whole academic year, and students took pre-determined courses organized into three faculties Management, Secretaryship and Social Studies. The bulk of students were involved in the professional management of the Movement and came to the College in pursuit of qualifications which they hoped would improve their chances of promotion within the Movement.

It was during this period that three new ventures at the College came into being. The development of the Co-operative College into the International Co-operative Training Centre reflects great credit on the British Movement and its educational effort for third world countries. The College has turned out many prominent officials of Co-operative Movements in these countries, and it is perhaps in this area that the College has made its greatest contribution towards reaching the Co-operative Commonwealth to come.

A second development of value to the College was the development in 1953 of the social studies Diploma in conjunction with the University of Nottingham. This Diploma which is still in existence has brought academic recognition to the College through the external moderation by the University of College social science teaching. It can be argued that more use could have been made of the social science students by the Movement, in terms of recruitment to the ranks of Co-operative educationalists in full time employment, but this was not done. The College

preferred to see the course as a contribution to the general pool of adult education available throughout the country.

The third development was the introduction in 1963 of the highly successful Management Development Scheme. This scheme provided for the first time a direct entry programme for graduates wishing to enter Co-operative service. The M.D.S. has proved such a success that the number of places at the College available for M.D.S. students was doubled in 1979. It is pleasing to note that the rate of retention of M.D.S. students by the Movement is about 75%, a very high rate for schemes of this kind.

Post 1977

The third phase in College history dates from 1977. It is, of course, too early to reach any definite opinions about the performance of the College as it evolves but already some developments have occurred which can be commented on.

The first development is a review of the courses provided at the College. No institution can avoid such a review and the desire to re-evaluate and if necessary change course augurs well for the future. There is some evidence to suggest that the College is making an attempt to give more attention to the provision of short term courses rather than long term ones. This seems to apply both to management and lay courses. Secondly the range of courses is being increased including a new College diploma in Policy Studies, and thirdly more emphasis is being placed on research, with the establishment of the

Co-operative Liaison Education and Research (CLEAR) unit. In some ways these developments are similar to the original idea that Fred Hall developed for the College, but which never was realised. At present it is far too early to say whether or not this is a fair comparison.

Common Features -

There are however certain features common to the three phases in College history. The first thing that has to be said is that these common features happen to be problems, problems which have not, as yet, been solved despite the fact that they are as old as the College itself. The two most glaring of these problems are the shortage of finance and the shortage of applicants for courses.

More Money Needed -

The first signs of financial problems for the College occurred in the early 1920's when the C.W.S. declined to give £10,000 to the College which it had earlier agreed to do. The excuse given was the adverse trading situation of that time, but the effect was very bad. It provided many smaller societies with a God-sent opportunity to renege on any financial commitment they had made, or were thinking of making, to the College. Thus the College appeal fund got stuck at around £17,000, far short of the hoped-for £50,000. This problem lasted throughout the first half of this century and also into the second half. It was reflected in the increasing number of social studies students attending the College in the late sixties and early seventies. The reason

these students increased in number, was that they enjoyed government financial support. They did not cost the Movement as much to send to College as did Management students, and places which otherwise might have remained empty were filled.

And More Applicants?

This leads to the second on-going problem. The number of students applying to study at Stanford Hall, has never been great. Thus those people entrusted with the problem of selecting the students have never had the pool of ability they would have wished for, from which to make their choice. The unfortunate truth which follows from that is some students have been admitted to the College not because they had the necessary ability to benefit from College study, but rather because they were the only ones who bothered to apply.

There are many reasons for the lack of applications - the length of time away from family, the drop in salary, lack of confidence etc. However, by far the greatest deterrent was the lack of any planned manpower development structure. In many cases people who had been to the College were passed over for promotion and those appointed had not attended the College. This had two effects. First people questioned the value of attending the College and many did not bother to apply. Second, those who did come, were not guaranteed that they would be better employed on return to their societies and many left Co-operative service taking their education to the private trade. It would be nice to record that these problems had been solved but as yet this

is not the case. This is one of the great weaknesses of the Movement.

Well there it is. What the future holds for the College only time will tell. I would say in conclusion that the greatest triumph for the College and its staff and students over the years is that it still exists and some of its alumni are reaching by positions in the Movement throughout the world. It is up to them to keep the College in mind when producing and training their successors.

P.S.

On a different level. This piece was typed for me by a young girl who obviously couldn't read my writing. I had written "few students stayed all year". She interpreted it as "fun students stayed all year". I couldn't have put it better myself.

The Role of the College: Students' Report

FROM SOCIAL AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

2. DOUGLAS HALEY

Through the wet mists of a grey forbidding October day I got my first glimpse of the Co-operative College.

I came with only vaguely-formulated ideas of what I expected of it in terms of my future; predominant was the hope that I would be able to fit myself for employment within the Movement as an Education Secretary. I had long been active in both the education and political wings of the Movement and thought that I might be able to make a more effective contribution if I were employed full-time in that sphere where I felt more at home. Alas, at the completion of my course there were no opportunities for such employment so I drifted into the political field outside the Movement - an activity which was not as satisfying as I had expected it to be. Realising my mistake I returned to the field of education where I have been ever since.

Notes of the Author 1949-1951 Co-operative College and Diploma in political, economic and social studies; 1952-1954 Westminster College and Teacher's Certificate; 1954-1956 Teaching; 1956-1958 Hughes-Neale Scholar at Oriel College, Oxford and M.A. in Modern History; 1958-1963 Teaching; 1963-1967 Lecturer then Senior Lecturer in Teachers' Training College; 1967-present Senior Lecturer then Principal Lecturer in History and finally 1972 Head of the Humanities Faculty in Teachers' Training College; currently also Vice President Co-operative College ex-Students' Association and Tutor in Arts for The Open University.

My College experience was fruitful both in ways I had expected and in others I could not have anticipated before my arrival. In terms of community life I found myself in close contact with fellow-students from various parts of the world with strange, exotic backgrounds and totally different experiences of life. Among the "home" students were many from areas little known to me with similarly unfamiliar backgrounds and ways of living. This strangely-assorted company, united in a common belief in the Co-operative way of life, fused itself together into a recognisable community with its own way of life, its own customs, attitudes and mores. Within that community each of us found his own place.

Experience and Discipline

In terms of that creative activity we call education my horizons were widened. I was introduced to areas of study outside yet impinging, often considerably, on that I knew as social science. Breadth of community was matched with breadth of study. I know I benefited enormously. It was a salutary experience for many of us to have put to the test of question and discussion our often half-baked theories and prejudices. We learnt the discipline of systematic study and, for many of us, the often painful experience of writing essays. Outside College very few of us could have enjoyed with so many people with so many different interest and backgrounds the tutorial sessions, group discussions and community leisure interests and activities that formed such a great part of our life in Stanford Hall.

In the short term, living, working and achieving together was for each of us an enriching and often exhilarating experience; in the long term, many ex-students of my years in their various capacities have served well and faithfully the Co-operative Movement. Time and the cautious conservatism of the Movement have dulled the rapier edge of our student exuberance but have not eradicated the pervasive influence of our college studies. If I were to be asked, in terms of my post-college experience, what was the most valuable lesson I learnt in the Social Science Faculty at college I would say, unhesitatingly, it was that of disciplined inquiry. I had to learn it the hard way so deeply ingrained was the habit of easy generalisations and slipshod conclusions. For many others like me, only the continuous tutorial supervision and guidance within a College environment can provide the best circumstances for the development of really effective study skills. Knowing how to think is an essential counter to being told what to think.

A short time after leaving college I started my teaching career; increasing involvement in higher education and geographical remoteness from a Co-operative Society - I live in a Co-operative "desert" - have increasingly isolated me from the Movement's day-to-day affairs so that nowadays I tend to stand on the touchline as an interested, highly-sympathetic but largely inactive supporter. It is in this context, and with the greatest diffidence, that I consider the role of the college in the continuing development of co-operation and the Co-operative Movement.

No doubt it is trite to observe that the College is the centre of the most advanced forms

of training for Co-operative service; its excellence in this area is too well-established to be called into question. Because it is better able than any other part of the Movement to take an overall, indeed a global, view of trends and needs and to provide the tutorial expertise and resources essential for the appropriate training programmes it is right that it should continue to be that focal point. On particular aspects of those programmes I am not competent to pass judgement; that assessment I must leave to the experts.

Co-operative Democracy - Importance and Frailty

My particular interest is in the contribution the college can make to a resurgence of members' democratic involvement in the affairs of their local societies - and I use deliberately the term "involvement" because it means much more than participation. Some experience of members' meetings in the past has emphasised to me that participation usually means little more than rubber-stamping the recommendations of the Board. Involvement as I mean it is positive critical activity of a kind not always possible within the kinds of framework within which some, perhaps many, local societies still operate. Members' meetings are sometimes regarded as warts on the body rather than its life-blood and where this attitude prevails it is an ominous pointer to what is happening in that Society. He would be a rash person indeed who would claim that we should not be unduly concerned for the serious long-term decline of members' interest. To some extent this falling-away had to be expected; rising standards of living bring changing interests and a movement away from the preoccupations

of less affluent days. Those who continued their active interest did so because of deep conviction.

Times change. The present major slump is expected to worsen considerably in the western world for much of the 80's at least. Already in some areas there appear the kinds of conditions reminiscent of the 30's - the kinds of conditions in which there flourished widespread active Co-operative membership. People change too. It is questionable whether we could expect a resurgence of the same kind of involvement within the kinds of framework that exist today. It is possible that society structures, hierarchies, trading practices and entrenched attitudes all militate against - perhaps quite unintentionally - the active involvement and curiosity of members.

A College Commission of Inquiry?

Democracy is a frail plant; it needs constraint nourishment and attention if it is to flourish. It does not exist simply because an institutional framework provides for the apparatus of democracy; it can exist when those who are entitled to participate do so actively and constructively within its own terms and within an effective provision for its exercise. The democratic influence should permeate every aspect of a Society's operation; too frequently it does not! Those who are responsible for informing and educating members are often low in the hierarchy and low in esteem; they are too often tolerated but not considered of any real importance to the "real job" of the Society of "attracting customers and making profit". The present time appears to be particularly suitable for an extensive inquiry

to be made into the myth and reality of democracy within the Co-operative Movement and the function and status of those concerned in any way with member education and activities. I can think of no institution better fitted than the Co-operative College to undertake this exercise; it has access to all the necessary skills and expertise and to all the sources and resources necessary to make this inquiry wide-ranging, probing and comprehensive. It could be envisaged as an investment in the future. It is not only the totality of the individual society's operation that has to be scrutinised: it is also the totality of the whole Movement's function that needs to be examined rigorously and perceptively.

A necessary and important sequel to the analytical element would be a section devoted to confirming what was good and efficient about existing provisions and what was needed to remedy unsatisfactory situations and practices.

Once its work was finished the commission need not be disbanded; with suitable membership it might be set to work to analyse other aspects of the Movement's activities. In some respects it can be compared with a select committee of the House of Commons. The commission goes on but its membership changes to reflect its different pre-occupations.

From the foregoing it must be obvious that I regard the role of the College in the future as no less vital and essential than that of the past. Its record of service may not be quantifiable but there is no doubt whatsoever that every part of the Co-operative Movement has been and

continues to be served well, faithfully and competently by its students and ex-students. As the mainspring of the British Movement and a source of inspiration and encouragement to co-operators in other countries I am certain that its future will be no less distinguished than its past.