

Women and the Co-operative MovementA REMINISCENCE OF THE GUILD

by

MARY STOTT

Half a century ago I sat at the press table below the platform of the Central Hall, Westminster and, with Tom Mercer and Nora Crossley, reported for the "Co-operative News" the golden jubilee Congress of the Co-operative Women's Guild. It was my introduction to this truly remarkable organisation - I had only had the job of editor of the women's and children's publications of the Co-operative Press for two or three weeks - and I was both nervous and excited.

What impressed me most, I suppose, was the calm way the Congress president piloted the 2,000 or more delegates through a long and complicated agenda. She was Mrs. Emily Beavan, an alderman, then or later, of Manchester City Council. Her son John, probably then still a student, became a journalist (as editor of the Manchester Evening News he appointed me as the first, and I believe, only woman news sub-editor). Later he became the "Manchester Guardian" London editor, then the political editor of the Daily Mirror, and now as Lord Ardwick he sits in the House of Lords.

Trained in the Guild

Mrs. Beavan was a typical product of the long and thorough training that the Women's Co-operative Guild gave its members. Young women today would probably be too impatient to mount

all the steps of its long ladder to the top of the organisation - three years on the branch committee, three years district committee, three years sectional committee before being entitled to stand for election to the central committee. But this long apprenticeship did mean that even women whose education had stopped short at the age of 13, even women whose husbands were unemployed and had to claim travel expenses before they could set off to a conference, were able to stand on the platform of a very large hall and explain to many hundreds of delegates the voting procedure on a complicated series of resolutions and amendments. I cannot remember a single one who made a mess of the job, and I remember with particular affection and admiration Mrs. Ella Bell who as chairman of Standing Orders steered the Congress through a difficult rules amendment session - proposed amendments used then to take up several pages of the Congress agenda. Mrs. Bell was a large lady from Annfield Plain, County Durham, who, if I remember rightly, served on the national Committee of the Maternity and Child Welfare Association. She was delighted when I referred in my "Woman's Outlook" article on the Congress to her "comfortable figure".

Margaret Llewelyn Davies

This system of training began, of course, under the secretaryship of that wonderful woman Margaret Llewelyn Davies, general secretary from 1897 to 1921, though I believe it was her assistant and lifelong friend Lilian Harris who worked out the detailed structure. Miss Llewelyn Davies herself was (in the words of her friend Margaret Bondfield, first woman Cabinet Minister) "our inspiration

and driving force". She inspired in her members both ideas and the enthusiasm and confidence to carry them out. Many a guildswoman told me how she injected them with the courage to stand on their own feet and undertake Guild office.

I met Miss Llewelyn Davies only once, with Miss Harris in their Surrey home near Dorking and the memory is quite clear of a tall, fair woman, still beautiful despite her age, in a dress of blue, her favourite colour. Occasionally she would write to me - I still have a postcard she wrote to me in 1937 saying she enjoyed reading "the special peace number of the Outlook. It all sounded so courageous and sincere".

Others in High Office

A contemporary of Margaret Llewelyn Davies's whom I came to know quite well was Catherine Webb, author of the Guild history "The Woman with the Basket", published in 1927. Few people now remember Miss Webb, which is sad. She was a thoughtful and enterprising woman and actually chaired the Guild's first conference in 1886. She was ardent in pressing for the participation of women on all Co-operative committees. It seems a voice like hers is still needed today, despite the fact that the Co-operative Congress is to have a woman as president, in the Guild's centenary year, Mrs. Norah Willis. In 114 years Mrs. Willis is only the third woman to receive this high honour, the other two being Miss Llewelyn Davies and Mrs. Cottrell, the first and for many years the only woman director of the C.W.S.

During my early years with the Co-operative Press at Long Millgate, Manchester, the general

secretary of the Guild was Eleanor Barton, a forthright Yorkshire woman who was as ardent a pacifist as her predecessors. (She followed Miss Honora Enfield, who in 1925 became secretary of the International Co-operative Women's Guild - a gentle, earnest and steadfast academic type). It was in Mrs. Barton's time that the Guild instituted the sale of a white "peace poppy" - the inspiration, I have been told, of Mrs. Edith Pavitt, mother of Laurie Pavitt M.P.

I had a great admiration for Eleanor Barton's energy and single-mindedness in the cause of Co-operation - those were the days when a speaker might ask her audience how many of the articles of clothing they were wearing were not bought at the shop. "Loyalty" was constantly stressed. I shall never forget the last words of Mrs. Barton's farewell to the Guild, in 1937. (She went to join her daughter in New Zealand on her retirement, and so far as I know never returned.) Spoken with force and fire, these words were "Doing is the thing".

Receiving the Refugees

It was in 1934 we began to receive the refugees from Hitler - one of whom I have specially affectionate memories was Emmy Riedl, who escaped when the Nazis annexed the part of Czechoslovakia they called "Sudeten Germany". Of course the most remarkable was the international president, Emmy Freundlich, who had been Food Minister in Austria's Socialist government and had been imprisoned under the Dollfuss regime. She must have been one of the very few international presidents who never needed an interpreter at conferences, for she was quite fluent in French and English, as well as her native tongue.

One could go on for ever reminiscing about the Co-operative women, though memory is faulty and some significant names would be bound to slip through the net. But let me recall Mrs. Mary Dewsbury, member of the Co-operative Press board when I was appointed - sister of the then editor of the Daily Telegraph and herself remarkably clear-headed and, at first, rather formidable; Mrs. C.S. Ganley, first woman chairman of the London Co-operative Society, member of the London County Council and later Labour and Co-operative M.P.; Mrs. Harriet Slater, an M.P. who became a Labour Whip; Mrs. Mabel Ridealgh, both Guild secretary and a Member of Parliament - who is still happily with us, as is Mrs. Gladys Lloyd of Wellingborough, the 1946-47 national president, who has been of great help to the Fawcett Library (at the City of London Polytechnic) in building up its books and documents on the Co-operative Movement. Women come from all over the world to study the history and activities of women, at this remarkable library. They will not find many more interesting or influential organisations to study than the Co-operative Women's Guild.

Note of the Author MARY STOTT began her journalistic career on the now defunct Leicester Evening Mail and after six years moved to the Bolton Evening News. In 1933 she joined the Co-operative Press (as Mary Waddington) and edited its women's and children's publications until 1945. During this time she wrote a pamphlet "The People in Business" which had a wide circulation. After five years as the first and only woman news sub-editor on the

Manchester Evening News she returned part-time to the Co-operative Press and again edited the "Woman's Outlook" for two or three years before leaving to join the then "Manchester Guardian" in 1957. She edited the Guardian women's page for 15 years. Since her retirement she has published three books ("Forgetting's No Excuse", "Organisation Woman" and "Ageing for Beginners") and is currently working on a book of reminiscences and reflections for Virago Press. In recent years Mary Stott has been very active in the women's movement and recently completed three years in the chair of the campaigning feminist organisation the Fawcett Society.