

REVIEWS

by

JONATHAN HILL

It would be cruel to judge a book by its introductory sentences. But the opening paragraph sets the associations racing through the mind, and plants expectations as markers against which the ensuing chapters may be measured.

Revolution from Within by Michael Young and Marianne Rigge (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, £6.95 in paperback) begins Chapter 1 with these words: "To begin with, the manager was ill-at-ease behind his desk. He did not look as if his powerful frame was meant to be covered by a suit. But his eyes lit up as he told us how delighted the shop stewards were by the profit the Co-operative was making".

This latter-day Ancient Mariner is not, however, the central figure in the book. A varied company of characters is set in a representative sample of ideas concerning the new Co-operatives, the role of the state, trade unions, financial institutions and new technology.

The thesis is familiar enough to Co-operators: that the times are ripe for a renewed interest and growth in "workers Co-operatives", and the signs are already there in the form of the "new Co-operative statistics" culled from the CDA Director. The antithesis, too, is recognisable: that the state is not likely to exercise positive discrimination in favour of Co-operatives, and that most of the other potential

sources of finance have no special sympathy for, nor understanding of, their problems.

The synthesis evolves in the shape of a new Bank for Co-operative Development with £20 million to invest in the first year and a staff of 70 consultants and bankers.

From a storybook beginning through some history, philosophy and visits to France, Italy and Mondragon - Revolution from Within progresses to a review of banking services, and other "Check-points for would-be Co-operators". A useful and readable account emerges from an unpromising start. The conclusion is little short of inspirational: Co-operatives should "elevate the dignity of labour" and "make paid work more fun". There must be many a Co-operative employee who would drink to that!

The Co-operative Opportunity is the Report of the Co-operative Party Commission on Employment (price £1 excluding postage). "Voluntary, versatile and viable are the watchwords for the development of workers' co-operatives". The opening sentence is just too long for a slogan, but the sentiment expressed is in tune with the optimistic tone of the document. There is no illusion, it should hastily be added, that workers Co-operatives will make a major contribution to job creation. However, those jobs which are created in Co-ops. will give a "new sense of job satisfaction". This is reassuring, but not necessarily borne out either by experience or indeed, research findings. Whilst acknowledging that the Co-operative Bank has advised against a new Co-operative Development Bank, the

Commission's report recommends that the CDA takes "positive initiatives" to bring about the creation of just such an institution "owned and controlled by the Co-operative Movement as a whole".

Meanwhile, representatives of the Co-operative Movement as a whole might do well to weigh the finding of Judy Wajcman in her book Women in Control (Open University Press, price £4.95). The field research was undertaken in 1975 with women working in Fakenham Enterprises, a Norfolk shoe factory which had been set up in 1972 when the workforce was faced with redundancy. The results of the field work are carefully set against an account of the formation of the Co-operative, and the lives of the women as wives and mothers, as well as workers. There is also a brief Postscript: "Co-operatives in the 1980s". The introductory passage is as harshly down-to-earth as the rest of the book: "Women have conventionally been seen only in the home, and heard not at all". Most of the Fakenham women always ironed, cleaned the house, cooked, shopped (for general items) and, if they had children, fed them. In November 1972, six months after the Co-operative was established, the women were driven to make plastic postal bags, an unprofitable undertaking. The Co-operative went from crisis to crisis and by March 1976 ceased, as a self-managed enterprise, to exist.

The anxieties concerning financial responsibilities were considerable, and the job satisfaction minimal. Moreover, "the ultimate demise left the women embittered and pessimistic about the possibilities for change". Generalisations based on this kind of experience are

not the building blocks of a Co-operative political philosophy, either for the women concerned or for the sympathetic supporter. The fieldwork for the book may no longer make headlines, but its publication is a timely antidote to unduly high expectations about the satisfactions of Co-operation.

This brings us to Caring and Sharing, by Jean Gaffin and David Thoms - the Centenary History of the Co-operative Women's Guild. Published in 1983 (as are the other items in this review), the price for this volume is £3.50, and the publisher is the Co-operative Union Ltd. The opening lines explain that "The foundation of the Women's Co-operative Guild was a major landmark in the history of the women's movement, and a remarkable achievement in a strongly male dominated society". The ideological aspects, however, are at times submerged in the minutiae of meetings, dates, places, names and reports. This, however, is mainly a history book, and if the wood cannot always be seen for the trees, there are some remarkably interesting trees. These take the form of personalities and campaigns. As long as there are issues that "only women know how to fight for", there may, indeed, be a role for the Guild. In contrast, the authors suggest: "would it not be more realistic to look at the totality of family life than the position of women?". Single parents, of whom the vast majority are women, may wish to disagree.

What evidence, though, might prove the validity of the title of the book: "Caring and Sharing"? One answer is simply that year

after year Guild projects for charities attracted more money than the Guild's own funds. In 1967, for example, over £7,000 was raised for the Co-op/OXFAM Botswana project. Many years earlier £5,000 had been raised for the Aid to Russia Fund. One of the important sub-themes is that of the difficulties of 'getting organised' of maintaining a public presence, sponsorship, launching campaigns, managing the head office, coping with internal conflicts and cementing the relationships between Branches, Districts and Sections. These difficulties confront all voluntary movements, and become most visible in those with a hierarchal structure. The Centenary History is, perhaps, not only a history but also a case study in the organisational practice of voluntarism.

As such it may be read with satisfaction by women volunteers and campaigners, and also, with humility, by men.

Note of the Author

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