

III. W.P.W. LOOKS BACK

Co-operative Education in Retrospect

My Co-operative membership extends over seventy-three of my ninety years. That is to say, I joined the Plymouth Co-operative Society within a month of my sixteenth birthday. If it had been legally possible to join sooner, I would have done so, for I had been attending classes in Co-operation for three years already.

A Family Pursuit

Co-operative education was a spare-time pursuit in our family before I was born. My father began his Co-operative studies in a kind of correspondence course conducted by Edward Vansittart Neale through "The Co-operative News" in 1890. My father successfully sat the examination at the end of the course. The Plymouth Society had an education committee which became aware of the course only when my father applied for one of its members to invigilate while he wrote his paper.

However, the committee atoned for its negligence by inviting him to take a class in History and Principles of Co-operation the next winter.

My father continued to take the advanced class in Co-operation until 1902 when he went on the Management Committee, and was succeeded as teacher by one of his brothers. Neither of them was a teacher by profession, but they had a natural talent which they informed with experience. My own first teacher of Co-operation was my father's younger sister, a trained

professional teacher.

Programmes in Plymouth - and other societies

Courses in Co-operation led naturally into courses in Industrial History and Economics. By the end of the 1890's Plymouth Society had a sufficiently wide range of studies to offer its members to be called by M. Price, the Co-operative Union's examiner of those days "the Mecca of Co-operative Education".

Of course, there were other societies developing in similar directions, notably Bolton and other societies in Lancashire and the North, besides the Royal Arsenal in the South of England. In Scotland Glasgow and Edinburgh were active in education.

Education in the Movement

In the British Co-operative Movement educational development seems to have come in waves. There was one such in the 1880's after Arnold Toynbee's celebrated address, another in the 1890's after the Woolwich Congress and another in the 1900's in which I was caught up myself, partly because my father had been elected to the Central Board and served on the Central Education Committee, along with W.R. Rae, Wilson Clayton, and, of course, numerous others, who also worked closely with Albert Mansbridge in developing his Workers' Educational Association.

The crucial date was 1909 when the first Easter meeting of Co-operative students and teachers was held at the convalescent home at Otley. I did not attend it with my father but

I was present at the second, which was held in Oxford at Oriel College.

The Easter Meetings

These early Easter meetings were seminal, with about two score or fifty participants and few formal meetings, but plenty of conversational discussion and cross-fertilisation of ideas. Out of them came, for example, the College Herald Circle, which campaigned for the Co-operative College for ten years until the Congress of 1919 decided on its foundation. I met Fred Hall there, and the Davises, a married couple who for years did wonderful work amongst juniors at Woolwich.

The desire for contact between the Easter meetings gave rise to the Co-operative Students' Fellowship, of which my father and C.E. Wood became joint secretaries. The infant Men's Guild, with Charles Potter of Stratford as secretary and my father as chairman also derived membership and encouragement from these meetings. Bliss was it in that dawn, until from 1914 onward the blight of war and demands of war time industries monopolised the spare time and energies of so many promising, and especially younger, students.

Fred Hall and the College

Nevertheless, the appointment of Fred Hall as Adviser of Studies in the middle of the war years meant a step towards the College. He lost no time after the Carlisle Congress in starting regular teaching at Holyoake House under the auspices of the College. However, why, oh why! did the Central Education Committee of those days not appeal at once

for the £50,000 which Congress had authorised the Union to spend? In 1919, under the war-time price controls, the societies had funds to spare. In 1921, when the appeal was made, prices fell with such rapidity that surpluses were replaced by losses, and there was no money for local educational work (on the classical $2\frac{1}{2}\%$ system), let alone for a subscription to the College fund. By 1924 they had collected about one third of the target sum, which was, however, enough to purchase and furnish the hostel at Kersal and give the students a taste of the community life they had not previously enjoyed.

Improvement in the general economic situation brought more scholarships (funded by the Wholesales and societies), as well as more students from abroad (particularly Denmark and India) and the total number of students rose from a mere handful to nearly 30.

Early Days at the College

One had, however, the constant feeling that we were still in the stone age of the College. Holyoake House was not built or altered to suit its needs. The text-book for Co-operation was out of date. For Economics of Co-operation there was none at all. The local class work which had flourished before 1914 revived only here and there after the post-war depression and too many students came to us with no grounding on which we could build, until we supplied it for them.

Methods and Concepts

I am thankful that Fred Hall did not interfere with my subjects or my methods in the College, for I was at odds with his general educational concepts, as well as those prevailing in the Movement at large.

Herbert Twigg was given a research project to survey the Movement's educational expenditure. He did a thorough job and revealed how high a proportion of the educational funds voted according to rule were spent on activities not worthy of being called educational at all! There was no system, no general theory of Co-operative education to guide committees or the slowly increasing number of full-time education secretaries.

Service with I.C.A. Secretariat

When in the spring of 1929 Henry May invited me to join the Secretariat of the I.C.A. in London I gladly accepted. I had been building up my course in International Co-operation at the College and meeting Co-operators from other lands at Congresses and other occasions, but I had much to learn about the International Co-operative Movement from the inside view that one gets from the I.C.A.

The International School

The year through, my work was mainly journalistic, but once a year I took charge for a fortnight of the International Co-operative School (now called Seminar).

The early 1920's had seen the establishment of several training schools by the Central Unions of Consumers' Co-operatives in Europe e.g. Germany, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland. It was of absorbing interest to compare the different types of participant these Unions sent to the International School. One feature was obvious. A goodly proportion, though by no means all, were young Co-operative officials selected because of their promising performance on their home ground. I was to meet them again, in my second period of service with the I.C.A. in leading positions in the Unions, Wholesales, Banks and Insurance Societies of their respective countries - but too few from the U.K.

Work with Harald Elldin

My most memorable experience in Co-operative education was to work with Harald Elldin. As the head of Kooperativa Förbundet's School when the I.C.A. school was held there in 1936, Elldin was at work on a pamphlet descriptive of his school's aims and methods. He wanted me to polish up his English. Whatever help I gave him in that way was more than repaid by the insight I obtained by reading what he had written.

The starting point of Elldin's system was the educational needs of the young Swedish Co-operative employee. What he or she required to learn, they had to learn as much as possible by practice and by group research and discussion at Var Gard, the school's familiar name. Elldin had no place in his system for lectures, which he regarded as narcotics.

The Swedish System

The trainees spent only short periods at Var Gard, but they had to take correspondence courses before they came and take others before they came again. From the best of them he chose assistants, who helped and did research at Var Gard before taking up management posts in the Societies or Kooperativa Forbundet.

Elldin was the most original thinker on Co-operative education I have ever met. It is significant how far training methods in the general business world have moved in recent years along similar lines to those he just tried out for himself.

The Complementary Elements of Co-operative Education

I can take no more space here to describe the evolution of my own educational ideas during my service with the I.C.A. I must conclude by saying that for me Co-operative education comprises two distinct elements which complement each other: knowledge about Co-operation and knowing how to co-operate.

The first I could gain at the college from books and other literature; the second I could gain only by experience in solving practical problems in collaboration with my colleagues and fellow Co-operators, wherever they came from. For how a man or women learns is at least as important as what he or she learns.

In other words, to learn Co-operation, we must co-operate in learning. Unless a

sufficient number of Co-operators are willing to learn and keep on learning, the Movement is no more mobile than a one-legged man, as recent history has proved only too well.