

REVIEWS

by

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There are two kinds of dissertation, I was once told by my professor: long ones and short ones. The impact of the shorter ones tends to be greater - they are more frequently read from cover to cover, and they are more popular with the external examiners! On that basis alone three of the four specimens for this review may be recommended, for none is much longer than forty pages.

"Second Thoughts on Marketing Co-operatives in Tanzania", by Deborah Bryceson (Plunkett Foundation, price £1.98 including postage) updates the story of Tanzania's struggle for economic and social development. In 1976 the government suddenly announced the dissolution of the Co-operative Unions which had held responsibilities for crop marketing. But a few years later, in 1980, a government-appointed 22-man commission investigated their revival. By mid-1982 the U-turn was complete, and a Co-operative Bill passed to achieve the reinstatement of Co-operatives within a three-tiered system.

The primary societies were to be multi-purpose Co-operatives, in membership of regional or district Co-operative Unions. These, in turn, were to form federations with responsibilities for education, employment terms and conditions and the standardisation of accounting procedures.

Why the change of heart? The answer, explains Deborah Bryceson, is not necessarily to be found in the innate superiority of Co-operatives over the "para-statal" organisations which had replaced them. Rather, there was a need for change in fiscal policies away from taxation embedded in State controlled prices, to direct taxation. And a "sober scaling down of government aspirations to systematise ... the whole marketing network". Moreover, Co-operatives had been popular in many quarters.

More than a closely worded account of the problems of agricultural marketing and credit, "Second Thoughts" is a study of some of the political strengths and limitations of Co-operatives, in a poor country. They represent, perhaps, an intermediate political technology which sometimes makes the best of the fundamentally unplayable economic hand dealt to many poor countries.

"Lippen on Angus", (meaning, Trust Angus), is by R.L. Marshall and is published by the North Angus Co-operative Society Ltd., price £1.90. The life cycle of the North Angus Society is recounted from its origins in the Brechin and Montrose societies, to its recent pioneering efforts to stimulate the amalgamation of about "15 to 17" strong societies in Scotland.

The account is charmingly illustrated by Tony Lallo, and the story progresses, seamlessly, from chapter to chapter. Nevertheless this salutation of a Co-operative which is successful in business terms strikes some

minor chords. For example:

- 'the range and provocation ... of the Annual Report's contents ... might be developed a bit.
- the identification of the Society with its locality may be under erosion.
- the "idealist part" has not the power of attraction for anything like the participation which the "democratic part" could accommodate!

Fortunately, such laments as these do not detract from the appreciation of the Society's finer points, not least of which is that it is forward looking.

The Mini Co Kit, published by Longmans, is also forward looking and has its origins in Scotland, (a land where the imagination to start something new is, more often than not, matched by the persistence to see it through to completion!).

The author, Elizabeth Bray, has produced a useful and appealingly illustrated package of materials for setting up a "miniature" Co-op or company, "in the classroom" - with a group of school leavers, or further education students, as Worker Directors.

Piloted in Strathclyde and developed with EEC finance the kit comprises fund raising booklets, Mini-Co forms, Advisers' Manuals, and Directors' Handbooks. The last item is in two forms, one for the "start up" phase and the other for the "maintenance phase".

Even at £18 the kit is good value and contains many valuable ideas. One challenge in using the kit would be to choose the approach for its introduction. An option would be to encourage the participants to jump in at the deep end and begin the immediate formation of a classroom Co-operative. An alternative might be to lead up to the formative stage more gradually - perhaps through a "team development" module.

It has been said that the "social and life skills" element of the Youth Opportunities Programme bore as much resemblance to "real life" as painting by numbers does to art. Such a criticism could not be fairly levelled at the Mini Co Kit. There are sufficient risks, albeit shared ones, and sufficient samples of "reality", in the form of meetings, and handling money, to make it authentic.

Finally, "Worker Co-operatives" by Alan Taylor, published by ICOM price £2, is a guide to help councillors and local authority officers appreciate and encourage the formation of such enterprises. The advice given is wise in many respects, not least in the cautionary tone it adopts, and in the recommendation that a "local Co-operative movement" is important for mutual financial and trading supports.

However, it is a preliminary guide, and is by no means packed with legal detail or comprehensive guidance on funding or business planning. Perhaps the basic level at which the author has chosen to write reflects just how little is yet known about Co-operatives in the Town Hall.

Note of the Author

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An industrial psychologist by profession, he spent 10 years in Zambia working in the Mining Industry, and in the Ministry of Labour, on the replacement of the expatriate workforce with Zambians. More recently he was employed in the CLEAR Unit at the Co-operative College, helping to establish a research and consultancy service, and worked on a Co-operative training and marketing project in Thailand. His interests are in the behavioural and developmental aspects of Co-operation, management learning, adult education and banjos.