

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

"Dear Will — in appreciation of W.P.W.": Bulletin 49

From Dr. S.K. Saxena, formerly Director of the I.C.A. and now
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Dear Dr. Marshall,

I am privileged to have been asked to write a short note on the occasion of Will Watkins's 90th birthday. For this purpose, I have chosen only one aspect of Will's work, his efforts to internationalize the movement and to make the Alliance more responsive to the problems of the developing countries.

Until 1945 the ICA had only fleeting contacts with the movements of countries which we now call the Third World countries. These contacts stemmed more from the power relationships which existed between the "mother countries" and their overseas possessions (Great Britain/India/Ceylon/Malaysia; the Netherlands/Indonesia; France and its Far Eastern and West African possessions), rather than from a conscious recognition on the part of the Alliance that the concerns of Co-operators were global and inter-dependent. The termination of the Second World War saw a new spirit of internationalism sweeping the world. New institutions had begun to take shape; the United Nations and, later on, its specialised agencies came to be established; the Bretton-Woods Agreement under the influence of Lord Keynes began to view financial relations in a global perspective leading to the establishment of the IMF and the World Bank.

The moment was thus propitious for international action and the Alliance, under Will's leadership, responded to this new challenge. It was in 1954 at ICA's 19th Congress in Paris that Will presented his paper on "Co-operative Development in Under-Developed Countries" thus initiating a debate which continues to rage in the Alliance, the most recent instance being the Central Committee's Prague discussions in August this year on the document "ICA Policy for Co-operative Development". After defining "under-developed" as the countries which had not gone through the Industrial Revolution with resulting far-reaching social and economic

changes that now characterize the affluent societies, Will pleaded for individually tailored approaches suited to Co-operative development in different countries, — an advice which despite our forty years of work in the field of overseas assistance we continue to forget with serious consequences. Over-all generalized solutions suit administrators and are, in the short run, economic. But the history of Co-operative development in the Third World is replete with failures and costly mistakes which could have been avoided if we had recognized the uniqueness of different situations. He said: "The very diversity of these regions is itself a warning against carrying generalizations too far. Within each of them there is a further diversity of conditions and therefore of needs between the various countries. Apart from the general fact that these countries are all backward in economic development, and in need of vast financial, technical and educational resources if they are to keep pace with, to say nothing of overtaking, the more developed countries, they have each to be studied separately. Each needs to work out its own programmes and to follow its own line of economic progress."

Let me quote one passage from Will's introduction to the paper since it so pertinently underlines the danger to which any socio-economic Movement, including the Co-operative Movement, is exposed: "When the Co-operative Movement ceases to have a propagandist, missionary spirit it will be fit to be put on the scrap-heap. It has to face the danger that it may become set in its ways with age. Movements in that way are like the men who compose them, and the women, too. We have to resist that, because it is important for the Movement and for this long-range task which lies before it which is going to last for generations, beyond the time of anyone here and now, that it should keep alive the missionary spirit and renew it by renewing the youth of its personnel."

Obviously, large scale changes in the attitudes of an international organization cannot be ascribed to one individual alone. But Will initiated a debate in 1954 which, over the course of time, has led to ICA's deep involvement in the promotion of Co-operation in the Third World. From 1954 to 1957, — the year the Swedish Co-operators raised the fund under the banner "Utan gränser" (Without Boundaries) at ICA's 20th Congress in Stockholm, — to the Lausanne Congress in 1960 when the ICA adopted the Long-Term Programme of Technical Assistance, — to the setting up of ICA's Regional Office for S.E. Asia in the same year thereby creating a trend (the office for East and Central Africa was set up in 1968 and the one for West Africa in 1979) — these developments are now generally known and need not be described here.

I have briefly touched upon only one aspect of Will's work with which I came into close contact and which led to such a profound transformation of ICA's orientation. The selection is obviously inadequate — what about Will's contribution to Co-operative education from the time he taught at the Co-operative College in England; his numerous publications which have

enriched Co-operative literature over the years starting with his, now classic, "Co-operation" written with Professor Hall and his most recent, the history of the International Co-operative Alliance, which is much more than the story of an organization (the last time I met him at his charming home in Long Compton, Will was planning to write a treatise on "Co-operative Principles"); his role in the reconstruction of the Co-operative Movement in the Federal Republic of Germany when, at the invitation of the British Authorities of the Allied Control Commission, he advised, after the War, on the organizational and structural shape of the movement with such lasting results that he has since occupied a permanent place in the hearts of the German Co-operators; the thoroughly competent way in which he acted as the Rapporteur of ICA's Commission on Co-operative Principles in 1966. The list is endless and I must leave it to others to write on other aspects of Will's contribution to the international Co-operative Movement.

May he continue to live long to give his gentle and persuasive advice to generations of Co-operators!

S.K. Saxena

**"Co-operative Independent Commission -- Revisited":
Bulletin 49**

1. From Dr. James B. Jefferys, a member of the C.I.C. and now
Director-General of the International Association of Department Stores

75008 Paris.

Dear Dr. Marshall,

I have really nothing to add to the thoughtful articles concerning the 25th anniversary of the publication of the Report of the Independent Commission.

All I would like to say is that — apart from many detailed suggestions — the underlying theme of the Report (and the discussions in the Commission itself) was the urgent need to harness together the good-will and ideals of the active Co-operators on the one hand with professional management on the other. You will find the phrase "professional management or managers" used time and time again in the report. And the Retail Development Society, unhappily the most contested recommendation of the Commission, was intended to spearhead this encouragement of professional management and thinking with its Operational Services Division, Organisa-

tion and Methods Division, Retail Development Division and an Economic Planning Division.

Unfortunately, this harness of ideals with professionalism takes place — if at all — slowly and often, as implied by your contributors, on an unequal basis. There are many reasons for this. One, which perhaps deserves mention, is the attitude, and this still exists, that professional management or managers in the wider labour movement is a “dirty word”. That it is a betrayal of class to send bright working class boys and girls to “Business Schools”; better study sociology! But in retailing the Co-op is in the same game as Sainsbury, Tesco and Marks & Spencer, and they have no hesitation in using business school graduates.

I gather, however, that things are changing in the Co-operative Movement in this respect. After 25 years a bit late perhaps. But while the Movement has certainly lost a battle, it has not yet lost a war.

Yours sincerely,

James B. Jefferys

2. From L.O'Connor, Chief Executive Officer and Secretary,
Ipswich Co-operative Society

Ipswich

Dear Sir,

Your concept to give a renewed exposure to the Report of the Independent Commission is timely and refreshing, and the views of your invited contributors made provocative and stimulating reading. So much so that I am moved to break the habit of a lifetime and seek your indulgence to enable me to make some brief comment on one or two issues which appear to have been overlooked by all of your contributors with the exception of Dr. Alex Wilson.

First, why none of them commented on the dismal failure of the Movement to progress the development of national chains is surprising to say the least. The Commission quite clearly identified the establishment of such national structures as of paramount importance to the retention and development of the Movement's share of the market and the experience of the intervening years has amply demonstrated the validity of the Commission's recommendations. The failure of the Movement to respond to this particular recommendation is astounding, given the fact that year by

year the evidence of the increasing dominance of the Retail scene by the multiple organisations has been enumerated with the utmost clarity by the Economic and Research Department of the Co-operative Union.

The opportunities are still there to be exploited, either by acquisition or innovation, and I suspect that the retail societies' response now to positive moves of this nature by the Central Federation would not be discouraging. In fact the reverse.

Secondly, how the minority report by Col. Hardie failed to draw unanimous comment is inexplicable. For my money his solution to the Movement's problems is as relevant today as it was then, the only difference being that subsequent events have provided conclusively the correctness of his report.

Who can deny that the merger of the Scottish Co-operative Society and the CWS would still be a debating issue had not financial circumstances compelled the fusion of these two mammoth organisations within a matter of weeks. It has always seemed to me that scant recognition has been paid to the organisational competence of those responsible for the smoothness and sheer speed of that operation, and indicates clearly, to me at any rate, that the obstacles to the realisation of Col. Hardie's proposals are mental rather than physical.

Who can deny that the enforced marriage of the two has proved successful, and that, given the opportunity, they would hesitate to advocate the dissolution.

On this basis alone the promulgation of the remainder of Col. Hardie's proposals commands our attention. The fact of the matter is that the subject will not go away, as evidenced by Howard Perrow's Presidential Address to Congress in 1979.

What is lacking at the present time is a detailed and precise report updating Col. Hardie's suggested structures, and setting out clearly how each organisation and society would be affected in trading and democratic terms, so that the debate could be in the particular and not the abstract.

Finally, what all the members of the Commission, and your recent commentators, appear to overlook is the seductiveness of power, and the pervasive influence it exerts on the minds of men, and having overlooked it, failed to contemplate its effect on their proposals, or what steps to take to counter its influence.

In this connection, I ask myself how was reorganisation of local government implemented in the '70s with so little controversy and opposition, and the conclusion I came to was that those who remained in the organisation were not disadvantaged and that those who were excluded were more than generously treated, so that the abdication of power, no matter at what level, was amply compensated. (Whether the concept itself was justified is another matter).

Last year the members of the CWS accepted a 50 per cent reduction in dividend to secure the base of the Federal organisation. It is my opinion that had that 50 per cent reduction been applied to the procreation of mergers leading to the achievement of 25 Regional Societies the position today would be much nearer that figure than it currently is. I would like to see a position whereby Societies could be approached and offered very generous conditions associated with a transfer of engagements if accomplished within a limited time, but also warned that failure to conclude an agreement, within that time would disenfranchise the Society from participation in the scheme.

There is no doubting the ability of failing societies to stave off the terminal rites for a far longer period than seems possible, and many of them have perfected the art of obtaining resuscitation just before the onset of the death rattle, and the present situation positively encourages such activities.

I am not aware of any merger discussion that failed when one of the parties offered to relinquish all power, so the art must be in finding what is required to achieve that state.

I live in hope.

Yours sincerely,

L. O'Connor