

## Some Editorial Comment

### AS IT SEEMS

We - the editorial we, Dr. Carbery and I, in turn or in concert - are trying out this feature of comment on the general and Co-operative scene: possibly brief, probably self-indulgent in the sense of following our own fancies and faiths in selecting items from the passing pageant and certainly enjoyable - for us. Let's see how it goes!

### Farewell - and Hail

In the exchanges with T. R. Edmondson about his article in this Bulletin he confirmed his retirement in Spring of this year. I shall welcome him with confidence across the great divide and in the meantime offer him warm appreciation, touched with a little sadness both personal and professional.

Somewhere within the dusty recesses of my memory there lurks a simple framework of reference which someone advocated, not too seriously, for the judgement of managers. There were only two standards: intellectual analysis and sensible practical action. The author of this easy guide to discrimination among executives put, of course, at the top the person who combined both faculties. Next in merit came the manager with the gift of practical response to the necessities of the situation, even where he might not be capable of analysing conceptually what that situation was. Then came the practitioner who had capacity neither of mind nor of practice. But argued the author, lower still and lower, most dangerous to one and all was the manager who had no sense of practical action but did exhibit a highly cultivated intellectual ability: his errors would be the greater, his impact the more menacing because his ineptitude in practice would be driven far by his self-confident and merciless logic.

Well - it was an interesting fancy - and it may be an agreeable speculation to allot the managers you know to these four categories. Clearly any Co-operative colleagues will go to the first two and equally clearly the last two would be populated exclusively by candidates from the outer world. But my present purpose is simply to acknowledge Mr. Edmondson very high indeed in the first category. He thinks analytically and he acts constructively - and both thought and action are guided by a clear vision of the Co-operative purpose and role in society. And that is a very distinguished identity to attribute to any man.

Of course, I know that he has an intensity of thrust and a power of invective that can be abrasive and even wounding. Perhaps I can say that without now drawing his i. of t. and his p. of i. upon myself because in the past, when he was a student and an education secretary I occasionally staggered under my share of both. In passing, I can tell him now that the most mortifying feature for me in these engagements was that T. R. Edmondson was always right, at least partially! More generally, however, these characteristics of his are an expression of his romanticism which resents the world's refusal to live up to his hopes and of his perfectionism which is frustrated by human untidiness and inconsistency.

He has done great work and gained high reputation in Co-operative education and trade and on all levels of the Movement. Yet I doubt if in the past that Movement has really made the fullest use of his rather special qualities. I fear also - to return to a favourite theme of mine - that it will fail in future in the same respect. Surely, somehow, the Movement's institutions and mechanisms should be so devised as to draw on the experiences and capacities of such a man, especially when he is relieved of the multitudinous pressures of day-to-day administration.

However, that may be, he deserves the gratitude and respect of the Movement and I am glad of the chance to add my voice to a chorus of thanksgiving.

### Deeper Still and Deeper

One of the areas which people like Mr. Edmondson could help to cultivate is Co-operative research - in the sense of investigation in depth of experience and argument that is relevant to the problems facing the Movement today and tomorrow. Such people have not only the capacities of mind to plan and carry out systematic analysis: they have the knowledge and understanding of the Movement to guide their explorations towards positive and practicable suggestions. And I know from my own limited efforts towards finding research workers for Co-operative projects in the past that the combination is rare. Quite often the choice was between young graduates, on the one hand who had neither experience in the Movement nor skill in the techniques of research and who indeed were hoping to learn these skills from the project; and on the other hand, seasoned research workers who, whether or not they were experienced in the Movement, were so committed to other interests and investigations that the Co-operative project drew from them only superficial though orderly attention.

For example one of the most important and relevant of topics for research at the present time would be relation between Co-operatives and Government: preferably a comparative study drawing on the experience of other countries and providing a background and possible guidelines for the relations of the Consumer's Movement (and indeed of other Co-operative Movements) with the State and particularly with the Co-operative Department Agency. The C.D.A. will rest on and will develop assumptions about what Co-operative/State relations should be and it is essential to formulate these consciously and consistently rather than to stumble into

them without knowing what we are doing until it is too late. The Co-operative Party has done some excellent work in this respect and it is important to extend and elaborate this. Indeed as I prepared to retire after so many mercilessly bureaucratic years I proposed for myself a share in undertaking that kind of investigation. That now looks unlikely - but the research still needs doing.

Perhaps the way forward will be illumined by the response to the motion I proposed for the Education Executive at Congress 1977. In brief this requested that Executive and the Central Executive to review the resources for Co-operative research and to make recommendations for some strategy of development. We look forward - and so does the Society for Co-operative Studies - to the outcome.

### The Case for Unco-operative Consumers?

Sometimes the footnotes of history are almost as significant as the headlines and I came across an example the other day. It was from the account of the charge and fine against British Rail catering services for various offences in buffet cars against health and hygiene. The element that took my eye was in the plea of counsel that while the complaints were justified, yet as he said "the public had not complained".

From that familiar exercise of defence, I draw the argument first that consumers should complain more often, should in that sense be unco-operative where standards of quality, of service, or hygiene fall sadly below what can be seriously expected. I am not advocating loud aggressiveness which can be as offensive as the conditions that provoke it. Nor am I speaking here of the valuable work of the organised cohorts of consumers when the Association speaks or the Federation thunders or the Council urges. I think rather of the individual prepared to take the trouble and

even the embarrassment to say out loud to those responsible for public services that the food is intolerable or the noise excessive or the cutlery dirty. Or the railway platform deserving of more care.

I mention the platform as a small illustration of useful achievement and you must forgive me that I figure in it: at least, it is not too heroic a part. I have an unsurpassed capacity for inertia, an inclination to exploit an early discovery that it is usually easier and more comfortable to do nothing than to do something. Once, however, I broke out of this habit. The up-platform of Loughborough station had a patch that was still recognisable as a shrubbery but was strewn with bottles, scattered with cans and scrawled with paper. After due deliberation (say about three years) I raised it with the local station staff: "lack of labour and the litter habits of the British public" said the station officer, truly enough. So onwards and upwards went my query to higher levels and in the event there came an assurance that they were considering what could be done. In fact - there was a partial clearance of the shrubbery - but it remained partial with, for months every sign of arrested development, including the tools which lay idle and disappointed beside the shrubbery.

Then two agencies took up the task effectively. For their celebration of the Jubilee year, the station staff completed the clearance and began the planting; and secondly Loughborough Civic Trust have continued the contribution, drawing on both the subscriptions and the labour of the members. Now the up-platform is already looking much more self-respecting and attractive and, come the spring, the desert will be made to blossom.

So, I ask myself portentiously, what do I make of all that? Well, let me confess that selfishly and temporarily and unjustifiably I take a personal satisfaction from it.

We all want to leave at least one small memorial and as they almost said of Sir Christopher Wren and St. Paul's so I say to myself when I wait shivering beside the shrubbery for the O719 to London: "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice" More generally there is the happy evidence from the station staff and the Civic Trust that the Co-operative virtue of self-help is still alive. And there is the reminder that consumers sometimes do a bit of good by being unco-operative. I, at least, ought to remember it more often.

### Conference and A.G.M. of the Society

By the time you have this Bulletin information of the Conference and A.G.M. at Stanford Hall on 17-18 March will have reached you separately. In general, it has been a happy and interesting occasion: and if, as may be, I have to miss this one I shall be sorry - but, anyhow, warm greetings to all. In particular, the 1978 programme will be based on the Special Feature of this Bulletin "Developing the Co-operative Non-Food Trade". Now read on and book up, if you have not already done so - full information from the Secretary/Treasurer.

February 1978

R.L.M.