

Co-operation - and Universities and CollegesA NOTE ON ONE JOB UNDONE

by

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All too many years have slipped away since, in the wake of the proselytising visit to Britain of Professor Lambert of CIRIEC, the Society for Co-op Studies came into being. During that time there has been a great deal of confusion as to the purpose of the Society and this notwithstanding the fact that those who attended the inaugural meetings were clear and lucid as to what they wanted the Society to achieve - or at least strive to achieve.

That said, one has to concede that whatever the original aims these could have been changed either deliberately or inadvertently. As Raymond Donnelly has been exploring and arguing recently Goal Displacement is not unknown in the British Co-operative Movement.

Nonetheless the basic aim was clear: in essence it was that the Society would be a source of inexpensive, albeit by inference modest, research into Co-operative topics and would be a bridge between the world of education and the Movement. The benefits to the Movement of the former were in no small measure deemed to be self-evident. A shopping survey such as that which Esther Quinn and I did in the early seventies (Bulletin No. 23) was clearly of some use even though of some dismay: research by an Economic Historian into say, some short-lived, pre-Rochdale society would probably be of less import but still of some interest.

In the case of the second objective, it was always recognised, indeed hoped, that the main beneficiaries would be those in education. It was known that there were in the country many, many teachers, particularly in non-University tertiary education who were given classes in which they had to teach on Co-operative matters and who, however good their academic qualifications and/or their experience, were ill-equipped and ill-prepared to embark on such teaching. Such an observation may give rise to some eyebrow raising but equally let it be said that however remarkable it may be deemed to be, such situations are not unknown in Polytechnics, Colleges of Higher Education, Teacher Training Colleges and other institutions. One could go further: the phenomenon has been known to occur in Universities as well. It was, then, hoped that the Society would be a channel of assistance to such teachers. And so it has come to pass! But although it has happened it has not happened anything like frequently enough. Indeed it is even more distressing than that because looking back over the years a cynic may be forgiven for observing that those who have availed themselves of the Society facilities are those who would have obtained the information from other Co-operative sources anyway and that the Society has not really been used by the ill-informed largely because being ill-informed they did not know of the Society's existence.

An Area of Need - and Failure

In short, we have failed.

There is, however, a further aspect to this in that the failure is seen by some as being even greater than that already suggested. Active Co-operators not only want Co-operation and Co-operative matters to be taught in tertiary and possibly even secondary and primary education, but they unconsciously want it to be taught well, preferably by the sympathetic if not the zealous and they want

it taught as they themselves would teach it - and that certainly does not mean "warts and all".

This is a real recurring issue.

Those of us who have over the years taken an interest in such matters know that many Co-operative agencies and conferences have called from time to time for broadcaster to devote more programmes to Co-operative topics. They never got as many as they wished but, more, they were invariably far from happy about the programmes that were made. The Millom debacle was the celebrated case but there were others including the STV programme on the Centenary of the SCWS and the BBC Scotland programme on the 150th anniversary of the Lennoxton Society. One could go on. The disappointment was that the Director and Producer and the script writer did not deal with the subject as the Co-op. activists would have liked. Such reservation was perfectly fair when applied to Nationwide's disgraceful handling of the Millom affair but was markedly less fair when directed at the SCWS Centenary handled by STV.

Not dissimilar considerations apply to the teaching of Co-op topics. Here too the Co-op. folk would like the teaching done in a way that they would regard as "fair" but experience suggests there is a void between what the Co-op. activists see as "fair" and what the teachers of Commerce, Marketing, Distribution, Economic History et. al. see as "fair".

And so we are back to where we were! There are two problems here. The first is the lack of the awareness on the part of the teachers of the existence of the Society and the other is the need for markedly greater dialogue between the teachers who are aware and the activist Co-operators in the hope of diminishing the void which has hitherto existed.