

The Role of The College: Students ReportFROM PROFESSIONAL STUDIES1. John Gallacher

The Co-operative College at Stanford Hall during the years 1946-48 attracted nearly one hundred full-time students. In modern parlance these would doubtless be called 'mature' as they were mostly in their mid to late twenties. Their common bond was that nearly all had just completed 5-6 years war-time service in H.M. Forces. Most ranks and all three Services were represented. Prior to war-service almost all had been clerks or shop assistants with either retail or the two wholesale societies. Most were employed by the Movement on leaving school in the 1930's when a job with a Co-operative society was keenly sought and a highly selective recruitment policy was pursued. As a group they were intelligent, articulate, and keen to equip themselves for service and promotion within the Movement. In a sense H.M. Forces had been their university and they were now post-graduates. Stanford Hall, even at seven to a room, was a nice billet.

Notes of the Author Secretarial student 1946-48. Assistant Education Secretary Royal Arsenal Society and Education Secretary Enfield Highway Society. Southern Sectional Secretary with the Co-operative Union and Administrative Secretary to the International Co-operative Alliance. From 1974 to date, Parliamentary Secretary to the Co-operative Union. President of Enfield Highway Society 1954-68.

There were three groups of students - secretarial, managerial and social science - following traditional diploma courses of the Co-operative Union. The common content of these courses meant that they encountered each other in class as well as socially. For example, Co-operation Stage III was a class comprising eighty students - more of a public meeting than a seminar - but the tutors rose magnificently to these and other challenges. They were helped by the highly developed capacity of the student body to know when self-imposed discipline was necessary and when it was not. The loss of this facility is one of the minuses, in my view, which grew with the rapid expansion of university education.

The College - Then

By having a marked social content in business studies and vice-versa, the Co-operative Union anticipated a development which has to come much later in other academic fields. One beneficial spin-off was educational self-help whereby the social student, who lived in the realm of opinions was enabled to come to grips with matter of fact subjects like Co-operative Law in the dormitory or common room. Similarly the budding departmental manager was aided by his social fellows to discuss pros and cons in the mysterious world of Economics.

Self-education was a major feature. We knew the strengths and weaknesses of a score or more societies without ever having been near them. A few intellectual giants could discuss the details of buying and selling while engaging in a cut-throat evening of solo-whist. Many students were hard-up, but post-war austerity meant that

personal financial standing had little relevance. While some students had a pre-war record of study by Co-operative Union correspondence courses, many, including the writer, had not, so the whole range of courses was being taught. On the other hand, several who lacked certificates had a fair track record either in politics or in technical attainment in the Forces. This was a balancing factor and gave vitality to communal life.

Academic results were excellent with few examination surprises. In my second year, "colonial" students arrived in strength and a fourth faculty began. This could have given rise to problems as many British students had recently seen service overseas and were less enlightened in their relationships than is now both normal and legally required. It was a wise administrative decision not to segregate overseas students. They soon became part of the family and must have derived much enlightenment from dormitory discourses. They were adept at most things, especially sport, but dealing from a pack of cards was beyond them.

Benefits Gained - and Lost

My training as a secretary both then and since has been of considerable help. I had the disadvantage of not working for a retail society so I knew nothing of the sectionalisation or general routine of a retail Co-operative office. Even to-day, I only know the theory of the set-up. On the other hand the technical expertise gained in law, taxation and accountancy has been of inestimable value throughout my working life and especially in recent years as few civil servants and even fewer MP's or Ministers of the

Crown have any detailed acquaintance with business subjects. Given the degree of economic management for which post-war government is responsible, this training gap on the part of the administrators and legislators borders on the incredible.

With a stable community whose members were all following sessional courses, the College also had the air of a hall of residence. This meant a well developed communal existence with few external intrusions. Female society was conspicuously lacking and indeed the establishment, especially in the private study period, assumed the character of a seminary. After supper it was a different story with debates, music or dramatic endeavour rending the stillness of the country evening. There was a cultural gain here which was to serve me well in subsequent activity in the Movement's educational work.

In retrospect my main regret is that the slow decline of the Movement's trading endeavours, which began as soon as food rationing and other commodity shortages ended, meant that so much of the trained and enthusiastic ability I met at the College was slowly lost for lack of opportunity.

Changes in Distribution and the Movement

The decade from 1950 saw the main period of retail development by take-over bids for departmental stores and multiple chains. High Streets in Britain were dominated in a few years by a handful of powerful retailers who acquired the vital sites simply by issuing shares in their companies for the assets of lesser firms. The

Co-operative Movement, which had the liquid cash resources, but not the organisational structure, to do the same, watched and discussed these developments while its 3 per cent Government savings bonds declined with steady dignity. We had the young men and the money, but by a policy of cautious default chose to deploy neither. All that has happened since is merely consequential. The one spark of hope is the current revival of interest in the Co-operative idea. It should surprise nobody that this mostly relates to types of Co-operative other than consumer.

Thus it seems to me that the Co-operative College will serve its ideals best if it develops as a centre for the training of Co-operative leaders for societies irrespective of type.

The Co-operative Union is still representative of consumer societies and I doubt whether its character can be changed so that it becomes the spokesman for Co-operatives in general. Other forms of Co-operatives already have national federations serving their advisory needs and while some of these are not yet strong they will become more powerful secondary bodies if the primary societies they represent are more numerous and prosperous.

Future Service from the College

The Co-operative Union owns and controls the College and meets the net cost of running it. In developing countries, the Registrar of Co-operatives is sometimes also responsible for running colleges. The Co-operative Development Agency, provided it has a permanent future, could rent and operate the College and might also base

itself there. The hope was expressed by Government, when establishing the CDA, that eventually its work and operational cost might be taken over by the apex organisations who were consulted prior to setting it up. In the existing economic climate, the present Government is likely to seek this solution.

If any such scheme came about it would be necessary to protect those activities and interests which were basic to the needs of consumer Co-operatives. The loss of sessional courses in the secretarial and managerial faculties has deprived Stanford Hall of one of its most important areas of activity. The fact that the College's only real link with agricultural co-operation is via its courses for overseas students also seems an opportunity lost.

Government funded bodies, such as the Central Council for Agricultural and Horticultural Co-operation and the Housing Corporation, ought to be identified with the College in a positive way. Perhaps if the existing apex organisations assume the functions of the CDA in a few years time something akin to a board of governors might be established to run the Co-operative College which would offer both long and short courses. The Government could reasonably contribute to such an arrangement by meeting the operating costs or part of these.

I believe there is a need for an intensive sessional diploma course aimed at middle management and post-graduate students. This would be open to employees and prospective employees of Co-operatives irrespective of type. I envisage

an 'in-depth' coverage of a limited range of topics such as: Economic Principles of Co-operation; Co-operative Law and Administration; Co-operative Accounts and Taxation; Co-operative Specialist Subject (e.g. Retailing, Agriculture, Housing, Workers, or Credit Unions).

A similar approach could be followed in short course provisions for serving and prospective directors of Co-operatives. This cross fertilisation of experience might inhibit training achievement, but the potential gain for students, staff and College justifies the experiment. Thus 'co-operation among Co-operators' should begin early if it is to realise the hopes of its advocates. The obstacles to practical accomplishment are significant as the International Co-operative Alliance will testify.

I would also encourage the tutorial staff to engage in part-time consultancy work. The pace of change, even in Co-operative circles, is now so rapid that to-day's paragon is tomorrow's old woman. Broader horizons and the opportunity presented by these seems the right policy for Stanford Hall in what remains of this century.

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Harold McMillan had just won a General Election, largely on the basis of the slogan 'You've never had it so good'. Britain lulled into complacency by washing machines and television sets, hadn't recognised, or didn't want to recognise, that it was in decline and soon to be overtaken in the international prosperity stakes. We were sowing the seeds of the successive economic crises of the 60's and 70's.

Men wore hats and separate collar shirts. Sainsbury was experimenting with a few self-service stores. 889 Retail Societies had a turnover of just over £1,000 M. and the Movement as a whole employed 389,000 people.

Notes of the Author: 1956 to 1961 - Clerk, Alloa Society; 1959 to 1960 - Co-operative College; 1961 to 1962 - Chief Clerk, Markinch Society; 1962 to 1966 - Accountant, Brechin Society; 1966 to 1969 - Managing Secretary, Kirriemuir Society; 1969 to 1973 - Various positions within S.C.W.S. Retail Division, ultimately becoming Retail Divisional Manager and Food Controller; 1973 to 1975 - Group General Manager, C.W.S. Retail Operations Group; 1975 to date - Chief Executive Officer, Leicestershire Society.

The College and its Courses

It was 1959, only 20 short years ago when I became a student at Stanford Hall. It is difficult to be wholly objective about College experience in the sense that I could not analyse the specific contribution it made to career development, apart from the obvious one of providing paper qualifications. Stanford Hall, however, combining as it did students of varying ages, races and areas of study, stimulated the intellect and encouraged self-confidence, self-reliance and perhaps at times, even self-denial. As one of the youngest students, this was of particular value to me, and I look back now and marvel at the tolerance extended by tutors and fellow students, to say nothing of the influence of the awesome and austere R. L. Marshall. Closer association with R.L.M. in recent years, has only slightly diminished the awe, but, I am glad to record, totally banished the impression of austerity.

The College, until the mid 1960's, concentrated its domestic management training on C.M.D. and C.S.D. Courses, with, in addition, a few stalwarts undertaking the B.I.M. Intermediate Certificate. There can be no doubt that these courses served the Movement well, but were with hindsight somewhat insular. I recall being bored and ultimately confused with the intricacies of boot repairing cost accounts, and the attractions of the pool, the debating society and assorted local hostelries ensured that my efforts were confined to the subjects which I found interesting. I enjoyed the nine months stint intellectually and socially, and am glad to have had the experience.

How to Service the Large Societies?

But what of the future? At a time when it is more important than ever for the Movement to recruit and retain good management, the College should assume even greater significance than before. But is a more significant role reconcilable with the understandable desire of some large Societies to train their potential managers in their own way? There is a parallel here with C.W.S. and its value to the Movement. Small Societies derive much greater benefit from C.W.S. than Regional Societies, because large Societies can, and often do, procure independently or in groups.

But we are on dangerous ground here, let's confine the remarks to Stanford Hall.

The College has rendered sterling service in the provision of courses for lay directors, and that is a role which it should develop and expand. Perhaps though the emphasis ought to be on assessment of the individual's common sense and judgment, because these qualities above all others, are required of lay directors.

I have indulged in nostalgia, usually a sign of advancing years, commented briefly on the difficulty an educational institution has in catering for the diverse and ever changing needs of a Movement like ours, and in the process raised questions without providing solutions.

I conclude with a quotation: 'the great end of education is to discipline rather than to furnish the mind; to train it to use of its own

powers rather than fill it with the accumulations of others'. I hope and in all modesty believe, that the College succeeded with me to the extent which my own limitations would permit.