

Archives National and International

by Rita Rhodes

This article has been prompted by that written by Brian Dyson on the Co-operative collections within the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull, which appeared in Journal No. 69, September 1990. At the Society's annual conference which took place shortly afterwards, I urged that Co-operative archives were a legitimate concern of the Society. Identifying those which exist and giving some idea of the range of their contents, could be one way in which the Society informs students and academics of the range of research possibilities within the movement. As a contribution to this, I should like to talk about my experiences in Co-operative archives, particularly those of the International Co-operative Alliance. In doing so, I am likely to be more anecdotal than is my usual wont but I think that the reasons will become clear when I come to draw lessons.

Experience in Scotland

My first association with Co-operative archives occurred in Scotland in the late 1970s. I was completing a Bachelor of Arts Degree and, in my Honours year, took as the subject for my dissertation, the Directors of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society 1880-1890, examining how far they had represented an elite among Scottish Co-operators of that period. The subject had been prompted by the cornerstone of a Co-operative building about to be demolished. Some members of the Society for Co-operative Studies will recall Morrison Street, Glasgow, and its three massive 19th century Co-operative buildings - with their nearby kith and kin the Gusset Building, Centenary House, the Co-operative Memorial Building in Kingston Street and the Co-operative Dining Rooms in Wallace Street. The whole area was a notable Co-operative complex but was at that time in a period of change.

In 1973 the Bank of the Scottish Co-operative Society, formerly the S.C.W.S. had run into difficulties. As a result, the Society was transferred to the CWS and various degrees of rationalisation followed. The largest and grandest of the old massive buildings became a hypermarket while the other two were demolished. It was one of these, immediately opposite my office in Centenary House, that contained the cornerstone whose inscription indicated that it had been laid in 1889. The significance of this for me was that this was only 21 years after the establishment of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society and I marvelled at how quickly the federal society of Scottish retail societies had grown and what confidence its directors must have had to have built so

hugely and magnificently. I was interested in who had been the Directors of the Wholesale during this take-off period and what had been their backgrounds.

It seems to have been my fate to have become involved with Co-operative archives when they were on the move. Rationalisation within the CWS meant that the SCS archives were being transferred to Manchester but in the process of their being prepared for the move, I was given access to complete my research. This was helped by the fact that the archivists assembling the documents, readily found everything which I wished to follow up.

I.C.A. Archives

Shortly afterwards I was speaking to Anne Lamming, who was then Librarian of the International Co-operative Alliance in London. It was she who gave me the idea for my next research, examining how and why the ICA managed to survive the two World Wars and the Cold War when other international working class movements split under the pressures of total war and divisions of doctrine. There were various reasons why it was some time before I began this, one being that I joined the ICA in 1982 and six months later moved with it to Geneva. However, Anne Lamming had been made redundant almost two years earlier which meant that the ICA had no Librarian or qualified person in charge of its Library when the move to Geneva was made. Tragically, between 8,000-9,000 items out of some 27,000 items went missing during the move. Sometime later I was put in charge of trying to trace the missing items. A question which had naturally arisen was whether part of the archives had also been lost.

Perhaps we will never know because no catalogue or inventory could be found on which an assessment could be made. The archive materials themselves emerged from numerous brown paper parcels and were obviously quite unusable in that state. It soon became apparent, though, that they contained rich sources on the I.C.A., its relations with its member movements and its role in international relations for almost a century. And, what was more, they deserved to be studied.

Organising the Material

Aline Pawlowska, the ICA's current Documentalist, was appointed to undertake the mammoth task of reassembling, classifying and cataloguing the materials. These were divided into main groups such as correspondence, minutes, reports etc., and placed in chronological order. It was a massive job. One large room was set aside for reassembling the materials, and for the hundreds of new archive boxes purchased to house them.

The long and painstaking process was enlivened by exciting finds. One

example was Sir William Maxwell's "Golden Book". Maxwell had been the Alliance's President between 1907 and 1921 and had also been President of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society during the 1890s, the period of my earlier research. An indication of the international esteem in which he was held was provided by the Testimonial Fund set up to honour him. It raised £1,415 and was presented to him in 1922 together with the "Golden Book" consisting of tributes from ICA member organisations. This was as beautifully illuminated as a medieval bible, and brought gasps of admiration from ICA staff in Geneva when it saw the light of day again in 1985.

For me it reawakened ideas of my research particularly as I read the tributes from member movements in Lithuania and Estonia. For a short while in the 1920s these had been independent countries whose Co-operative Movements had been separate members of the ICA. Maxwell's "Golden Book" therefore reflected international, as well as Co-operative history.

The Inventory Achieved

It was, however, the inventory of the ICA archives that Aline Pawlowska produced which really spurred me on. Simple yet comprehensive, it was divided into columns indicating the Box Number, Date, Place, Language and Subject of Document. Minutes had the subjects considered listed. To provide an example and picking at an inventory page at random, we can find that, at its meeting in Antwerp in October 1924, the ICA Executive considered:

- The treatment of Hungarian Societies in Czechoslovakia.
- International film, flag and badge.
- The Co-operative situation in Germany.
- The Co-operative situation in Bulgaria.
- Report of the General Secretary on his attendance at the Russian and Polish Congresses.
- ICA Congress at Ghent: amendments to Rules.
- Joint conference with the Executive of the International Federation of Trade Unions.
- League of Nation's refusal to recognise the I.C.A.
- Night work in bakeries.
- The position of Co-operation in Italy.
- Juridical enquiry.
- Finance.
- Russian Famine Relief Fund.
- Statistics of the central organisations in the various countries.

Such a list indicates matters that could be of interest to researchers in international relations, the wider Labour movement, national Cooperative

movements, as well as the internal administration of the ICA. Since 1988 I have made extensive use of the ICA archives, finding that the system introduced by Aline Pawlowska works well.

Security and Access

Hopefully, more extensive use will be made of the archives in the future. However, some problems remain. For example, the earlier losses from the ICA Library have meant that the Alliance now has only one copy in each of the official languages of most of its past Congress Reports. There must be the danger that these could be lost through fire or other mishap. But the problem could perhaps be offset if ICA member movements passed on any spare copies that they might have or donations were made which would allow the Alliance to preserve the surviving Congress Reports on microfilm.

In a short article such as this it has not been possible to do much more than hint at the rich historical source material which exists in the ICA archives, but I am sure that Aline Pawlowska would welcome further enquiries. More than anything, I hope that this article serves to underline the importance of the positive preservation of records. They can so easily be lost or destroyed, sometimes because of a lack of appreciation of their significance. Deciding what should be preserved involves professional judgement. After that comes the installing of systems which ensures security but encourages access.

Happily all these features apply once more to the ICA Library and Archives. They guarantee the survival of a valuable collection of documents which show the role of Co-operation in the international sphere over the last one hundred years.

The Author

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