

# Lord Jacques of Portsea Island – An Appreciation

**Robert Marshall**

JACQUES, Baron *cr* 1968 (Life Peer), of Portsea Island: John Henry Jacques; Chairman of the Co-operative Union Ltd, 1964-70; *b* 11 Jan. 1905; *m* 1st, 1929, Constance White (*d* 1987); two *s* one *d*; 2nd, 1989, Violet Jacques. *Educ*: Victoria Univ., Manchester: (BA(Com)); Co-operative Coll. Sec-Man., Moorsley Co-operative Society Ltd, 1925-29; Tutor, Co-operative Coll., 1929-42; Accountant, Plymouth Co-operative Soc. Ltd. 1942-45; Chief Executive, Portsea Island Co-operative Soc, Ltd, Portsmouth, 1945-65; Pres., Co-operative Congress, 1961. Pres., Retail Trades Education Council, 1971-75. A Lord in Waiting (Govt Whip), 1974-77 and 1979; a Dep. Chm. of Cttees, 1977-85. JP Portsmouth, 1951-75. *Publications*: Book-Keeping I, II and III. 1940: Management Accounting, 1966; Manual on Co-operative Management, 1969. *Recreations*: walking, snooker, gardening, West-Highland terriers. *Club*: Co-operative (Portsmouth). (Extract from 'Who's Who', 1995.)

Whatever be the nature and outcome of any final reckoning awaiting us, come the day when we have "had to go hence" (and John Jacques was a devout and tolerant agnostic about this and related matters), he would have been quietly and quizzically grateful for the obituary judgements from his contemporaries following his death on 20 December 1995. Family, friends and associates have paid the high tribute he deserved, culminating in the relaxed and yet moving commemoration and thanksgiving within the impressively self-confident setting of the Guildhall in Portsmouth. They presented eloquently his qualities as a father, as a friend and as a colleague in Co-operative and public service.

In this brief further note in the Journal of the Society for Co-operative Studies, which he served as a President from its foundation in 1967, I pursue the question of what made him such an outstanding leader in the movement - and the pursuit leads me to some unusual conjunctions of characteristics which John exhibited and in each of which either element reinforced the other.

## **Intellect and Action**

The first conjunction is that he was a man of intellect but also of action. No one could fail to be impressed by his capacity for analysis - and he always paid ready testimony to the share of the movement and, in particular of the College in the development of this. Apparently complex problems were rendered into the significant and ordered questions they raised and the available options precisely set out. And, of course, he went further - into recommendations on the options to be chosen and the sequence of action to put them into effect.

## **Practice and Principles**

Secondly, he was a man of Co-operative practice but also of unswerving commitment to Co-operative principles. In this connection (and, indeed, in many other connections) read his Presidential address to the 1961 Scarborough Congress. As he says, he served a movement "which is, at one and the same time, big business and an agency of social reform". As a practising manager of "big business" one of his constant preoccupations was with the efficiency of societies and he was an outstanding exemplar. In his twenty years as, first, secretary and then chief executive officer of Portsea Island he saw or, to be more precise, was the main begetter of development which trebled the society's membership and multiplied its trade ninefold.

In conjunction with that, his belief in the principles of Co-operation, of mutuality, was firm. In a conversation not long before his death, he accepted my proposition that the objective of the movement was to show that societies in which we exhibit our principles can achieve economic and social leadership in their communities and by that effectiveness encourage the extension of the principles to other areas of community life. I regret we do not have on record more of his definition of the principles and of his prescription for extending the practice of them.

## **Local and National**

Thirdly, his capacities were tested and proved not only on the national level but also within the rigours of demanding pressures and competition upon the local society. The experience on each

level added to his competence and credibility in the other - and what he advocated in Manchester gained in authority from the recognition of his success in Portsea. No one was less vulnerable to the old gibe that a visiting expert can be merely 'a damn fool' a long way from home!

## **Present and Future**

Finally, he was a man of the present but also of the future - in the sense of responding not only to conditions now but also to the inevitable changes of the future. As he says in the Presidential address our future "depends upon foresight and flexibility, upon the ability to anticipate changes and to adapt our methods to the new circumstances". And he then proceeds to set out in very specific and practical terms the changes he expects and the adaptations he advocates.

These four conjunctions underlie the career which make him such a notable representative of a time when entrants to Co-operative service on completion of the minimum schooling could find within it wide opportunity for further education and when the movement would find among such recruits resources of great leadership. He recognised that such history was not repeating itself: again from the Presidential address -

"We have lost sight of the fact that part of the (university) population comes from working class homes and their entry into the Co-operative movement is barred because of an out-of-date recruitment policy".

We may the more readily, within that perspective, give thanks for what we owe to him and to the company he so powerfully exemplifies. He enhanced the quality of the movement's operations in many areas of activity and on different levels. We should also acknowledge a particular achievement with its own distinctive importance in a people's movement: that he strengthened its morale and self-confidence, giving to many of its members, even in difficult times and even to those who could not match all his arguments, the reassurance that any organisation capable of engaging the whole-hearted commitment of such a man as John Jacques was also worthy of their support.

**Dr. Robert Marshall is past editor of this Journal, and former Principal of the Co-operative College.**