

John Morley OBE: A Profile

Lily Howe

John Morley was a broad man of quality who gave of his talents in many places and in diverse fields. Most notable was the outstanding intellectual and realistic leadership he gave to agricultural co-operatives over many years. A president of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies for 10 years until he died last October, he carved a life exceptionally rich in experience and interests, moving from one environment to another with easy grace. John's talents and open, inquiring mind quickly absorbed him into different spheres, his personality - he had a fine sense of humour - attracting firm friends.

In his middle years he could have been found totally at home in London's Athenaeum, quizzically quoting Proust in asides when debating with colleagues how best to move forward in seemingly intractable situations. His later life centred on his retirement village where his cultural interests continued when he entered into the community through his writing and artistic skills.

John succeeded in two professional careers: the first overseas in the Colonial Service; the second in the UK where his major role was in agricultural co-operative development. His earlier student years indicated the breadth of his talent, for even as a student he was broader than a scholar. Achieving first class honours in Classics and an upper second in History at Corpus Christi, Cambridge, his lifelong practical skills helped him also to qualify as a pilot in the University Air Squadron.

Then followed 20 years of overseas service, his last four year assignment in the Gold Coast, now Ghana, where he was Special Commissioner for Development Corporations and Marketing Boards, stimulating his interest in co-operatives and forging the link for his second career in the UK. The scope of his exotic background in times before the world became a much smaller place would have surprised many co-operative colleagues in later life.

His Colonial Service career began as a District Officer in Northern Nigeria. But with the outbreak of war, John born in

1914, was commissioned in the West African Frontier Force and posted to Eritrea. There he assisted in setting up a British Military Administration for the former Italian colony and was awarded the MBE. Next came two years of similar service in the newly liberated colony of Singapore where he was demobilised as a Lieutenant Colonel in 1946. He stayed on in Singapore in the Colonial Secretariat and then moved to Kuala Lumpur in the Malayan Federal Secretariat. There he was appointed Deputy Economic Secretary and was for a time a member of the Executive and Legislative Assemblies.

His last assignment to the Gold Coast came when the Colonial Service was rapidly contracting as colonies and protectorates became independent. At 42 in 1956, with a wealth of executive experience together with first hand knowledge of developing countries in Africa and of future tiger economies further East, he returned to England to join his family and to seek a new job.

John's agricultural co-operative career began the same year when he was appointed chief executive of the Agricultural Central Co-operative Association, soon becoming recognised as an expert in his new field. As Britain prepared to join the European Community the Central Council for Agricultural and Horticultural Co-operation, later to form the basis for the national food promotion agency Food from Britain, was established. John was appointed planning officer helping to develop agricultural marketing structures. Later he became vice-chairman of the European Agricultural Confederation. In 1983 he was appointed OBE for services to agricultural co-operation. Earlier, in 1975, his book "British Agricultural Co-operatives" was published, soon to be regarded as a standard reference book. He loved to write and colleagues recall the elegance of long sentences beautifully constructed.

John expanded his interest in other co-operative sectors when in 1978 he was appointed to the first board of the Co-operative Development Agency. Originally set up by parliament with considerable advisory and promotional powers to assist broad co-operative development the CDA became over the years, after an early change of government and reduced funding, mainly concerned with facilitating the growth of employment generating worker owned co-operatives. John was one who held to the original broader view. He was a firm advocate of co-operation between co-operatives: between sectors and between individual

organisations. He drafted a constitution for an organisation he envisaged could bring together all forms of co-operatives in the UK. Following the demise of the CDA in 1990 this draft was used as the basis for the UK Co-operative Council, set up by the co-operative movement, which happily is fulfilling the original vision of the CDA without being subject to outside control.

Parallel with his professional life was John's long, dedicated voluntary service to the Plunkett Foundation. This began in 1959 when he became a trustee, going on to chair the Foundation with style and impeccable courtesy from 1979 to 1984. Like the distinguished chairmen before him he gave the Foundation authority, time and thought, his overseas experience contributing to the expansion and quality of its world wide development work.

When he retired from active involvement in Plunkett he maintained a lively interest becoming an honorary trustee and in 1996 the Foundation's first Fellow. Early that year he quietly deposited with Plunkett a gift with which the Foundation proposes to establish an International Leadership Programme, inviting other donations.

In retirement, their three children having left home, John and his wife Pat moved from Surrey to Langstone, Havant, where in his seventieth year he took up sailing - "in a very small boat" he used to say. In his later years John was assailed by Parkinson's disease. But he was not a man to allow this to diminish him. His gardening he had to forego. Then his creative skills turned to family and local history and to restoring chairs with caning, rushing and tapestry covers. John's skills were matched by those of Pat with her painting, glass engraving and writing. Together they put on exhibitions of their work one of which he was planning in the days before he died.

Men of John Morley's quality and breadth are rare. That he chose to give so generously of his talent and his time to the co-operative concept is a stimulus for future development.

Lily Howe served with John Morley as a Plunkett Foundation trustee and as a CDA board member.