

Women's Participation in Co-operatives: Evidence from the British Canadian Co-operative Society

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We had the ladies' auxiliary. They were a bunch of ladies and they used to meet every week. They called themselves the Co-operative Auxiliary ... They used to meet in the little hall, the S.O.B.I. [Sons of the British Isles] hall for their meetings ... They put on a beautiful operetta with beautiful costumes with all these hooped skirts, those shawls they used to wear in the olden days. The ladies did all the work and then they put it on in the theatre in Sydney Mines ... The ladies would have to buy all kinds of materials and threads, and fancy things, patterns so the money went for that ... One lady I remember was a Mrs Winstamer, little short stout lady, she was English, and there was Mrs Scott, and there was Mrs Curuthers, and Mrs Steveson, Mrs Cullen, and Mrs Archer and a Miss Lee and a Briers, Mrs Jackson, quite a few. All old country people.¹

In early twentieth century Britain, the Women's Co-operative Guild enjoyed considerable success in organising working class women. It also supported women's autonomous political and economic struggles from both inside and outside larger co-operative structures. The Guild employed an ideal of women's self-management in co-operatives, while it maintained an enduring social space for working-class women from which women shaped their own larger social worlds. In 1919, the British Canadian Co-operative Society followed the British example and launched its own Women's Co-operative Guild, albeit under the direction of men.

In this article the arguments for women's participation in the British Canadian are situated, first, by describing the commercial setting of the co-operative and then the significance of the British Canadian Co-operative. The approach to

encouraging women's participation in co-operatives is then investigated with reference to the dialogue between George Keen, Secretary of the Co-operative Union of Canada, and Margaret Llewelyn Davies, General Secretary of the British Women's Co-operative Guild. Finally, the fading local remembrances of the Women's Co-operative Guild are contrasted with the documented evidence of Guild activities suggesting that the working-class women, though organised without the benefit of the feminist ideal of self-management, became politically and economically active when and where they could.

The commercial setting at the turn of the century

In industrial Cape Breton in the late 1800s, small company stores were an integral part of the tiny mining operations that littered the rural landscape.² These independent general stores were replaced by larger stores operated, first by the General Mining Association,³ and later by the Dominion Coal and Steel Company, which was granted the exclusive lease for all mineral rights in Cape Breton in 1900.⁴ As a result of the exclusive corporate control over the island's mineral resources, company stores became the symbol of company domination over the local people in Cape Breton.⁵ For mining families in Cape Breton, the conditions of indebtedness inherent in the earlier system of merchant trucking - a system of trading and paying wages with limited exchange of currency⁶ - was reinforced by the creation of "credit only" mine-owned company stores. The co-operative challenge to corporate control over the economics of family life was not immediate. Between 1860 and 1900, local inhabitants in the mining districts of Cape Breton, on at least ten different occasions, had tried to form an enduring co-operative store. Most of these unincorporated co-operatives, however, failed due to a lack of circulation currency for store use, the withdrawal by members of almost all surplus capital from store reserve funds, poor management of funds, lack of discretion in store credit allowances for members, and the dispersal of families accompanying the closure of small mines.⁷ Except for the Sydney Mines Industrial Co-operative Society, which opened in 1863 and closed again in 1905 due to a fire, none of the ten stores created during those early years lasted beyond 1900.⁸

With the passing of the Coal Mines Regulation Act in 1900⁹

miners (who in Canada at that time, by law, could only be men) gained the opportunity to decide whether they and their families should shop at a company-owned credit-based store or a community-owned, cash-based co-operative store. With the passing of the Act, miners acquired, for the first time, the right, to be paid in cash. In 1906, under the rules of the province's joint stock legislation,¹⁰ seven men became charter members of the British Canadian Co-operative.¹¹ Both women and men, who were amongst the influx of the newly arriving British immigrants, were original members and suppliers of the co-operative.¹² In quick succession, branch stores opened in Florence (1908), Cranberry (1917), and North Sydney (1918). In 1916 a bakery was established. All the stores served both male and female members and employed both women and men.

Although there were no prohibitions against membership by local people who were not of recent British origin, and the open membership policy was always made public, the membership retained its immediate British character. This Britishness seemed to allow the co-operative to better understand and therefore resist the destabilising impact of colonial relations on local people, even as the co-operative relied on these relations to build the co-operative's strength. In the 1920s, the BC Co-op, as it was locally known, continued to grow when it annexed the large Glace Bay Co-operative Society which served the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic south side of the mining region. Here, as in other parts of the industrial area, immigrants from Great Britain, Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and the Caribbean lived side by side with local people of French Acadian, highland Scottish, Irish, English, African diasporic and First Nation's Aboriginal descent. As a result, the British Canadian once again expanded its membership, both male and female, this time becoming more heterogeneous in character though still dependent on its inherited British structures and philosophy. At this point the British Canadian was one of the most successful consumer co-operatives in all of North America, in terms of sales, services and products produced. The Women's Guild, though an important building block in co-operatives in Britain, was not an immediate priority in building the new co-operative in Canada though it was discussed for several years before it was organised. In 1919 the Women's Co-operative Guild was formally launched as an

auxiliary organisation.

The significance of the British Canadian Co-operative

As a working-class organisation located in a turn of the century industrial mining environment, the British Canadian Society kept to its course of providing goods and services to its working class members.¹³ It remained overtly critical of the practice of private business and drilled an independent retail passage through the bedrock of corporate capitalism and union communism on which it was built. It became the largest retailer in industrialising Cape Breton. In its local setting, it rivalled Canada's largest national retail organisation, Eaton's, which at that time was expanding across the country.¹⁴ At its zenith in the 1930s and 1940s the Society operated two huge department stores, six smaller branch stores, a milk processing plant, several garages, and an extensive transportation service. It employed over 160 men and women serving over 3,000 member families, and supplied advice to other groups without expansionary intent or charging fees for its assistance.¹⁵

Remaining distant from partisan politics, corporations, and even unions, the British Canadian preferred business alliances with other co-operatives and with producers sympathetic to co-operatives. It also maintained its co-operative and union links to Great Britain through trade. Its largest wholesale supplier was, first, the Co-operative Wholesale Society of England, and later, the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society. The British Canadian became one of Canada's largest co-operative suppliers of British goods, with these goods becoming the trademarks of the stores. Tea purchased directly from the British colony of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and a wide range of British foodstuffs, clothing, shoes and boots, dry goods, linoleum, and pharmaceuticals were sold in addition to livestock, foodstuffs, and dry goods produced locally in Eastern Canada.

The British Canadian Co-operative took a moral position on co-operation and advocated social, moral, and economic reform outside the realm of partisan politics. The nature of this working-class call "to do good" was expressed in the co-operative's management practices and phrased in the language of men: "til the great Co-operative Commonwealth shall be ushered in, when

all men shall find in seeking each other's good a common brotherhood."¹⁶ It became the example of Canadian working-class success and resistance to the every-day influence and domination of a foreign owned mining company.¹⁷ Symbolically, its stores represented a sustained challenge to the imposition of a class- and company-controlled economic system for seventy-four years. Sadly, in 1980, after declaring bankruptcy, the British Canadian Co-operative succumbed to its own internal membership and management difficulties and divisions. It became a casualty of changing relationships in the grocery and hardware trade and of Cape Breton's overall economic and political decline.

The arguments for women's participation in co-operatives

George Keen, Secretary of the Ontario-based Co-operative Union of Canada¹⁸ from 1909 to 1945, maintained a reciprocal relationship with members of the British Canadian Co-operative, located in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Keen gained much of his personal, professional and financial support from the industrial working-class co-operative and took an interest in influencing its direction. Financial contributions made by the British Canadian to the Co-operative Union of Canada often exceeded their required membership contributions (which were the largest in the country).¹⁹ W.C. Stewart, Manager of the British Canadian, regularly corresponded with Keen from 1910 until 1931.²⁰ As the national advocate for co-operatives, Keen argued that women's participation was an important means of strengthening the co-operative movement. He suggested to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, the influential General Secretary of the British Women's Co-operative Guild, that "as to women taking a comprehensive interest in our movement, it only reflects the difficulty we have experienced." It was women's lack of initiative and an attitude of parochialism, according to Keen, that limited women's participation in co-operative activities and handicapped individual societies and the movement as a whole.²¹ What Keen failed to communicate to Davies was that it was more than just women's inability and lack of initiative that restricted their interest in co-operatives, rather, it was a complex of factors inside and outside co-operatives like the British Canadian, which limited

their ability in organising women's organisations. For instance, in Cape Breton the absence of women in the mining industry, and their consequent ability to organise, created very different conditions for women compared to Britain.²² It was also easier for women to make inroads into economic organisations when women had some claim to doing related paid work as they did in other industries in Cape Breton²³ Nova Scotia, Canada and the United States.²⁴

While Keen did not appear to appreciate the differential experiences in employment patterns between men and women in mining and other industrial communities in Canada or the role this had to play in women's ability to organise and participate in male-dominated organisations, Keen still regularly promoted the need to involve women in co-operatives. He specifically recognised the female membership in the British Canadian and praised its adherence to the principles of co-operation, which included the ideal of democratic equality for both women and men. In Keen's correspondence and lectures, he regularly held up the British Canadian Co-operative as a model to be emulated by the rest of the country. In 1915 he reminded them of their obligation to promote co-operation.

Your society owing to the class consciousness of its members, owing to them being engaged in one staple trade, is able to pay the largest dividend of any society in Canada. Surely it is in a better position to do its share toward bringing about the co-operative commonwealth than any of the societies west of you.²⁵

Even earlier, in 1910, Keen had urged the men of the British Canadian Co-operative "to get the women to work - they have more time for opportunities than men and also by nature they are more sentimental which is a valuable asset in Co-operative populism."²⁶

Whether or not life in the surrounding mining town created conditions of time, opportunity and sentimentalism toward co-operatives for women mattered less for Keen than the promotion of co-operatives. The growth of the co-operative movement was Keen's paramount concern and the model the women and men of the British Canadian could provide for other

co-operators was meant to enhance that priority.

Changes in defining women as consumers

The definition of woman as 'consumer'²⁷ was emphasised regularly in *The Canadian Co-operator* which Keen edited and copies of which the British Canadian members regularly received. The definition of women as consumers - was central to Keen's agenda of maintaining co-operative 'loyalty' and 'thrift,' which would support growth in existing co-operatives and help create new ones. From the point of view of male directors of the co-operative, it was a definition which could be used to support the first goal of the British Canadian Co-operative: "to lessen the inequalities that exist and to diffuse more evenly and more humanely the luxuries and wealth of the world."²⁸

How women's work as consumers was defined and organised required a decision that women were first and foremost consumers rather than producers, recipients rather than providers of service as employees. In the pages of *The Canadian Co-operator* Keen printed many accounts of the accomplishments of the British Women's Co-operative Guild, as an organisation of female consumers.²⁹ He also regularly offered his own views and outlined the importance of women in strengthening individual co-operatives as well as the movement as a whole, of their definition as consumers, and the method he preferred for organising women. Keen declared that women, in their role as loyal co-operative consumers, had a practical understanding of the essential co-operative values of thrift and loyalty. They could best serve the movement by assisting in co-operative education and propaganda, by encouraging children to become future co-operators, and by making use of the services of co-operatives. These activities, he argued, would almost always increase the distributive business of the co-operative store, and could best be organised through an organisation that federated Women's Co-operative Guilds under the umbrella of the Canadian Union of Co-operatives.

In Margaret Llewelyn Davies' correspondence to George Keen, she argued for a much broader role for women than Keen would have dared. Defining women as active **working-class** consumers, she suggested that they should undertake educational

and political work in co-operatives as well as in Co-operative Women's Guilds. Beyond propagandising for the movement and creating effective businesses from which women could reap benefits as consumers, women, Davies argued, would benefit from co-operative organisation in other ways. In a self-managed organisation, she argued, women would also begin working "in the spirit of true co-operation ... in all questions of local and national importance." Thus, the direct activities of co-operatives - "the collective use of profits, high and low dividends, hours and wages of employees, co-operative productions, cash trading" - were, in Davies' estimation, as important to women's definition as consumers as were "child labour and education, the work of women in local government, wages, unemployment, woman suffrage, etc."³⁰

While Keen had a narrow vision of what women's participation might mean for co-operatives, he did not publicly disagree with Davies. He simply did not actively support her stance toward women's participation or report on the different task-allocation, job segregation, or differential treatment of male and female employees in the employ of the British Canadian. The marriage bar for women as employees in co-operatives was never discussed.³¹ Keen worked hard, though with only limited success, to organise women as consumers into Women's Guilds in as many co-operatives as he could, in the organisational form he recommended, using the definition of their work as consumers as he understood it. He stayed current with many of the changes affecting women in co-operatives and was supportive of women's efforts under his direction. Keen's definition of women as consumers, which he promoted across the country, was not static, although at its base the idea remained the same: consumption by women was part of their familial responsibilities. What did change was his rationale for women's participation. At first, he tried to cultivate women's "comprehensive interest in the movement" in order to counter attitudinal barriers to co-operative growth. Later he expanded his argument to encourage what he saw as women's natural roles in promoting thrift and loyalty in co-operative development.

Between 1915 and 1930 Keen noted that the shift in co-operative employment included more women. Participation of women in co-operatives was on the rise. By 1933, he realized

that the potential usefulness of women to co-operatives as employees and consumers was so important that

the success of consumer societies depended a great deal more upon the interest and support of women than of men ... the men generally have the power to pledge the family resources to subscribing for shares in co-operative societies but the women decided where the family purchases should be made. In consequence, initial estimates of business based upon membership of men in co-operative societies had frequently proved erroneous; so much so that in some cases the initial volume had fallen so short of expectations that the gross revenue it produced was not sufficient to pay expenses, and the venture did not get off to a fair start.³²

Women, originally defined as consumers who needed to become more involved in co-operatives, had become the backbone of consumer co-operatives.

Organising women for participation

Women were important members whose participation as consumers was deemed essential. How best to organise their participation, however, was a regular topic of discussion in the ongoing dialogue between Keen and Davies, as was the actual form of organisation that developed. Keen's early proposal was to operate Women's Guilds as auxiliaries of local co-operatives and to federate different branches of the Canadian Co-operative Women's Guild under the auspices of the Co-operative Union of Canada. In Davies' comments to Keen she contrasted his suggested form of organisation with the British Guild system of autonomous organisation. For Davies the relationship of women to consumer co-operatives was explicitly political, and she noted the importance of women's self-management in any co-operative endeavour; unity of work amongst self-managed Women's Guilds created the only way women could "obtain the experience and self reliance which is necessary for really effective work."³³ Her point of view was not just British in origin but one that had been expressed in Canada in the early 1900s by organised groups of women, who saw the importance of women's organisation as

a political act, and co-operatives as "societies which would be of special interest to women."³⁴

Although an enthusiast for the work of women like Davies,³⁵ Keen's understanding of what women's lives were like in industrial towns, how women's organisations within co-operatives might be organised, and what groups of self-managed women co-operators might accomplish, were different. Keen understood these views. He adapted them, however, through his male vantage point for the benefit of the men of the organisation. Only in the Prairies were women able to contest this male monopoly. Here in the 1920s, co-operatives were swayed less by British Canadian influences than other parts of the country. Women also participated overtly through their guilds in struggles for suffrage and labour and political reform.³⁶ Keen believed he was the person who was in the best position to manage national definitions of women as consumers and the creation of Women's Guilds as national co-operative organisations. With the frequent secretarial assistance of his daughter, Keen managed, from afar, the work of the men and women charged under the authority of the national co-operative body with the work of organising women. To what extent these efforts actually resulted in real assistance is not known.

Ultimately, it was Keen's approach that set the framework in the British Canadian Co-operative Women's Guild. Keen was interested in building an organisation that would first and foremost enhance co-operative financial success rather than create the kind of working-class feminism that the British women had worked to secure.³⁷ The British Canadian Co-operative, perhaps the most British of all the consumer co-operatives in Canada, discussed creating a Women's Guild. When the Co-operative finally launched a Guild in 1919, it used Keen's model. In Sydney Mines, the Guild was alternatively called the Ladies Guild, the Ladies Auxiliary Guild, and the Women's Guild. Keen, however, regularly revised Sydney Mines' use of "Ladies' Guild" changing it to the "Women's Guild" in his publication of reports in *The Canadian Co-operator*.

The Women's Guild

The Women's Guild of the British Canadian Co-operative Society

lasted 32 years. The 1920s and 1930s were its most active years in terms of numbers and activities. During these years the Guild's primary activities of supporting women's education as consumers were often redirected by events in the community. Especially during the 1920s when work in the mines was increasingly intermittent, wages were depressed, strikes proliferated, and military intervention was overtly evident, women from the Guild were needed on the front lines of soup kitchens and demonstrations to ensure the survival of their families and community as well as the survival of their store from the threats of looting and burning.

In 1923 the British Canadian Co-operative Women's Guild became part of the Canadian federated Women's Guilds group, which remained a separate organisation affiliated with the male-dominated sectional councils of the Co-operative Union of Canada.³⁸ As an affiliate member of the CUC, the British Canadian Guild was not structured to support autonomous political expression for women. It was accorded no official power, and in Sydney Mines its leadership and work were often conducted under the formal auspices of the Education Committee, whose male members had official voting status at the Board of Directors. Self-management was further undermined by a limited national organisational structure that associated only those guilds connected to the CUC with each other and not with the other active Co-operative Women's Guilds in the country.

Although the cultural influence of the Women's Guild was very significant in sustaining the British Canadian Co-operative, the connections between women's self-management in the Guild, trade unionism, and co-operation, were far less obvious than they were among the British Women's Guilds. In industrial Cape Breton, where miners' unions and co-operatives were only sometimes supportive of each other's goals, the Women's Guild was not integrated into the organisational structures of either the larger co-operative or the women's group within the larger social milieu. The Guild was expected to contribute financially to both the local co-operative and the larger Co-operative Union of Canada through honorary subscription fees to the Union. This it did, though like other Women's Guilds in Eastern Canada, it received few benefits from belonging. It was without external financing from the larger organisation and without official

institutional power in the Union. Women's organisations in Cape Breton, at least according to local oral historians,³⁹ tended to be associated with churches and social and education services, rather than within the workplace unions or co-operatives.⁴⁰ Thus, co-operative struggles were not as overtly feminist as they were in Britain, but were subsumed under social and moral reform work. The British Canadian Co-operative sacrificed the British model of women's self-management for a model which followed the pattern of male dominance in the larger co-operative institution.⁴¹

The work women did in the British Canadian Co-operative represented the kind of work that Keen was interested in, one which met the needs of the organisation. The Guild did not function as an autonomous voice for speaking about the lives of working class women as it had in England. Instead, it explicitly depended on a male-defined normative ideal of women as consumers in male-headed households. Between 1910 and 1940 two different national drives were initiated in Canada to organise Women's Co-operative Guilds.⁴² The British Canadian Co-operative Society created a Guild which lasted from 1919 until 1951 and which made enough of a social contribution, in terms of community networking and social support for the women within the Guild that there is still some local memory of it. The argument that women could facilitate the growth of co-operatives, whatever the internal form of organisation, retained its strength over the years, along with the growth of a consumer society.⁴³ The understanding that women are consumers with a special role in society has retained currency even into the 1990s, even though women have struggled to create larger and less culturally limiting definitions of their place in the world.⁴⁴

Remembering the Women's Guild

The limited formal power of women within the British Canadian does not suggest that they were entirely disregarded within the organisation, or that they were passive members or employees. On the contrary, there was a contradictory discourse and practice as in the British Canadian that, while it may have varied among individual co-operators, also had a collective expression on the part of the board and the working men and women. In 1992 the

men and women who were interviewed for an oral history of the British Canadian Co-operative remembered the work of the Women's Guild. They reconstructed their memories in different ways often according to gender. The women were more likely to remember the Guild than were the men, even though its activities included participation of women, men and children. Women remembered that "there weren't any women's rights, they [women] just knew what their rights were" and that "women seemed to have as great a part as men in the store."⁴⁵ As one man put it, women's participation in management of the co-operative was simply a non-issue. "There was always a group of men that was the Board of Directors. There was never any discussion of having women on the Board, at least none that I could tell."⁴⁶ The women confirm the view that men had managerial control in the co-operative. They link this control to the power dynamics of patriarchal culture in home and family. Some women described the power of women in the home and pointed out the interrelationship between home and co-operative and the different power dynamics between women and men in different households. Some of the men remembered the arguments about women as consumers. Those people holding the view that women are best defined by the label of consumer remembered the Women's Guild as an ineffective organisation. These were the same people who were disparaging of the value of the work of women as consumers and who fit their current stereotypes of women's character to the reconstruction of this history.⁴⁷ Some of the women, by contrast, were less dismissive of women's work in Guilds, constrained as it was, and suggested that the social networking role of the Guild met some very real needs of the women involved and of the larger community.⁴⁸

While individuals remembering the Women's Co-operative Guild did not remember its political activities,⁴⁹ at least two recorded events, currently not available to local people, indicate that the Women's Guild supported overtly political projects. The existence of these records also indicates that a local understanding of one's own history changes over time. In spite of organisational limitations, women in the Guild may not have been as politically passive or as socially focused as some contemporary co-operators think.⁵⁰ In 1922, the Guild called for the participation of co-operators in the Sydney Mines municipal elections in order

to contest the general political orientation of the local council. Mrs J. Wolstenholme, then president of the Guild, is on record calling for action "in municipal and parliamentary affairs, making out in a clear manner that our Society had ran a Co-operative store to a successful issue, and why could we not do the same for our town and country".⁵¹ Not only did women as members of the Women's Guild involve themselves in electoral politics in the community, they "directly criticised the management practices of the Board of Directors" in 1926 and 1927 from the point of view of women.⁵² The extent and nature of these criticisms, however, because they were few in number or because they didn't fit within the underlying conservative ideology and organisation of women as consumers have been lost in the individual and collective memory of most co-operative members still alive today.

On at least several occasions, the male Board of Directors of the British Canadian Co-operative expressed opinions and took actions on behalf on improving women's working conditions. In attempting to "practice what we preach and show we are model employers of labour leading in the reduction of the hours of work,"⁵³ the Board of Directors in 1926 criticised Williard's Chocolate's hiring practices in relation to girls and women, and they took action on unfair hiring practices for women.⁵⁴ The Co-operative also participated in the 1930 Canadian Fair Wage Hearings suggesting that women do well in the employ of co-operatives and that they ought to be paid fairly everywhere else in the labour market. They spoke of "the advantages enjoyed by co-operative workers compared with those of workers in private enterprises",⁵⁵ and claimed a moral stake in promoting themselves as "model employers of labour". In increasing its numbers of female staff over time (from at least one in 1906, to more than a third of its 135 staff by 1928) the British Canadian promoted the right of unmarried women to paid work in the co-operative store. It promoted welfare schemes among employees in the form of a co-operative-approved Welfare Club; it created the Death Benefit Fund to which employees were entitled as members,⁵⁶ and it worked toward improving management-labour relations in the practice of a shorter work week by promoting Wednesday afternoon store closing. Careful store-management practices in the areas of dividends, stocking,

departmentalisation, and more accurate accounting methods were instituted so that the store would reap greater financial success, which could be transmitted to all its members. In the 1940s the British Canadian promoted a woman to department store management.⁵⁷

While the actions of the co-operative were laudable in relation to its female employees, throughout the co-operative's history men always outnumbered women as employees (although at least one woman was among the first store workers).⁵⁸ Paid and unpaid labour in the organisation was almost always divided on the basis of sex, wages were also paid on the basis of sex. As employees, men were labourers, clerks, store workers, delivery men, and administrators. Women were store administrative and service workers. The wage differentials in the store among employees, which began as informal agreements between the Board of Directors and individuals, were quickly encoded in labour-management agreements, the first of which was printed in 1915.⁵⁹ (The terms of the agreement, at least as relates to wages, were seemingly reworked in 1922⁶⁰ and at least once again in the 1930s.⁶¹) There was a slow but constant increase in wages over the years with a corresponding differential between men and women. In some cases men and women were paid the same wages to start, but men's wages always increased at a greater rate and went to a greater maximum than women's. Both women and men were members but only men ever became members of the Board of Directors, the governing body, at the British Canadian Co-operative.

What the majority of co-operators who took part in the 1992 interviews collectively remember, and what the documents confirm, is that the Women's Guild was more than, as some would suggest, an ineffective social club providing women only the opportunities to "knit and talk." In reality, the women in the Guild were an active success in many terms. They raised money for the local co-operative;⁶² contributed financially to the Co-operative Congress of Canada,⁶³ held educational and social events, including a variety of public lectures. They coordinated theatrical, choral and entertainment events as well as massive parades and picnics;⁶⁴ encouraged children's participation in co-operatives through a children's stamp scheme;⁶⁵ and provided much labour for the co-operative relief efforts and soup kitchens

during the devastating strikes and economic famines of the 1920s. In the 1930s they also supported the work of study clubs promoted by the Antigonish Movement. And through their participation in the Guild they were also active supporters and consumers in the co-operative store supporting the "the law" of co-operation. "If you wanted anything you bought it at the store. It didn't matter what it cost, you had to get it at the store."⁶⁶

Given the variety of activities the organisation sustained, it can be argued that the Women's Guild played a significant, if primarily non-radical, social and cultural role in industrial Cape Breton. The women in the Guild, along with male and female employees and co-operative members, actively supported, participated in and created diverse social and cultural community events - from picnics to parades and even operettas and theatrical events. Most of the women who did this work were the wives of men active in directing and managing the organisation. Most had children towards whom they directed some of their activities as members of their community. The Women's Guild is often remembered as an organisation that seemed more like an auxiliary with genteel women at its helm, than a place where women actively resisted gender norms. While the women of the Guild knew what the limits of acceptability were on a daily basis, women employees of the co-operative also knew these same limits, but still engaged in practices the men of the organisation did not sanction.⁶⁷

While there is still an active memory of the activities of women as shoppers and employees in the British Canadian Co-operative Society, the role of the Women's Guild has faded beyond remembrance for most co-operators. This loss has occurred in spite of the remembered obvious and direct connections between the British Canadian Co-operative and the British co-operative movement, its Women's Guild organisations, and members,⁶⁸ the social and cultural work of women organised as consumers and store supporters; the few recorded instances of political agitation within the organisation; and the individual acts of women resisting normative and management directions. Women's allegiance to co-operatives in both Canada and Great Britain was maintained by ideas about class equality as a means of redistribution of wealth to the working class. This allegiance in the British Canadian Co-operative was primarily encouraged

by the social importance women were accorded for the work they did in the Guild and the Co-operative in meeting the needs of the larger organisation rather than through creating autonomous women's organisations overtly pushing for larger organisational change.

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Notes

- 1 Interview with Emma Aubrecht Farr, Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, 1992.
- 2 Richard Brown, **The Coal Fields and Coal Trade of the Island of Cape Breton** (Stellarton: Maritime Mining Office, 1899); C. Ochiltree MacDonald, **The Coal and Iron Industries of Nova Scotia** (Halifax: Chronicle Publishing Company, 1909).
- 3 D.A. Muise, "The General Mining Association and Nova Scotia Coal," **Bulletin of Canadian Studies** 6/7 (1983); Marilyn Gerriets, "The Impact of the General Mining Association on the Nova Scotia Coal Industry 1826-1850," **Acadiensis** 21 (1) (1991), 54-84.
- 4 Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS) Government of Nova Scotia, **Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of the Province of Nova Scotia** (1900). Granting of ninety-nine year lease to Dominion Coal Company and protest by George Forrest, MPP.
- 5 For a composite oral history of the company stores created from interviews with Archie MacIntyre, Billy Pittman, Thomas Day and Gordon MacGregor, see "The 'Pluck me' Life and Death of the Company Store," **Cape Breton Magazine** 3 (3) (nd). Merle Travis wrote perhaps one of the most popular songs, "Sixteen Tons," depicting the company store. "You load sixteen tons and what do you get, another day older and deeper in debt. Saint Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go. I owe my soul to the company store." Published with other songs on the same subject in John C. O'Donnell, **"And Now the Fields are Green": A Collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada** (Sydney: University College of Cape Breton, 1992). For the best local accounts see John Mellor, **The Company Store: James Bryson McLachlan and the Cape Breton Coal Miners 1900-1925** (Toronto: Formac 1984); and Beaton Institute Archives

- (BIA), File: Beaton Institute Reports: Coal: Connie MacDougall "Life and Death of the Company Stores in Cape Breton," (nd).
- 6 For a description of trucking in the Canadian Maritimes see Rosemary E. Omner, ed, **Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective** (Fredericton: Acadiensis, 1990).
- 7 H. Mitchell, **The Co-operative Store in Canada** (Kingston: Bulletin of the Departments of History and Political and Economic Science in Queen's University, 1916); Roderick Grant Bain "Consumer Co-operatives in Nova Scotia," (MA thesis, Acadia University, 1940), 36.
- 8 A handwritten account of the fire is lodged at the Beaton Institute Archives. It was found among other unrelated documents and has since been refiled in the Sydney Mines File.
- 9 Government of Nova Scotia, **Revised Statutes**. Chapter Nineteen, "Coal Mines Regulation Act," (1900).
- 10 PANS RG 67 394 (286/34). Letter of registration from the British Canadian Co-operative Society Limited to the Provincial Secretary of Nova Scotia, 28 January, 1907; Government of Nova Scotia Joint Stock Companies Act, Chapter 79, **Revised Statutes** Fifth Series. The separate Act establishing the British Canadian: Government of Nova Scotia, **Revised Statutes**. Chapter 198, "An Act to Incorporate the British Canadian Society," (28 April, 1906).
- 11 These seven men from Sydney Mines, John McLatchey, William Stewart, Robert Naylor, Peter J. Meek, James Robertson, Alexander Kerr and John Hunter, all of Sydney Mines, were also charter members of the Sons of the British Isles, a social organisation of British immigrants organised as a fraternal society.
- 12 Beaton Institute Archives (BIA) 185-6-2066 MG 14, 1. a General Ledger 1906-1908. For a descriptive account of the rural lives of the Scottish Catholic Highlanders who settled in Cape Breton in the 1800s and whose lives provided models of sexual division of labour, in production, that were less rigid than those associated with the industrial regions of Cape Breton, see Malcolm MacLellan, **The Glen: An Gleann's an Rogh mi Og** (Antigonish: Casket Publishing, 1982).
- 13 The goal of the British Canadian was "to place capital in their [the people's] hands, and in doing so to moralise trade, moderate competition, educate men as citizens, and unite them in brotherly sympathy," BIA MG 28, 1, 15, (6), 1910, "The British Canadian Notice to Members".
- 14 T. Eaton Co, **Golden Jubilee, 1869-1919: A Book to**

- Commemorate the Fiftieth Anniversary of the t. Eaton Co. Limited** (Toronto: T. Eaton Co, 1919); William Stephenson, **The Store that Timothy Built** (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart c.1969); Mark Starowicz, "Eaton's: An Irreverent History," in Wallace Clement, ed, **Corporate Canada** (Toronto: James, Lewis and Samuels, 1972).
- 15 The British Canadian Co-operative Society Limited, **Souvenir: History of the British Canadian Co-operative Society and its Branches during its 25 Years Activities in Cape Breton** (Sackville: The Tribune Press, 1931). A copy is available in the Beaton Institute Archives, (BIA), Sydney, Nova Scotia.
- 16 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15 (6), "British Canadian Co-operative Notice to Members."
- 17 One of the most persuasive personal testimonials of the benefits of the co-operative store versus the private store is from a letter by George Troicuk. This letter outlines the benefits of co-operative membership in the British Canadian from 1923-1936. NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 15, (167) George Troicuk, 27 February, 1936.
- 18 For an outline of the main developments in the history of the Co-operative Union of Canada and the important role George Keen played, see Ian MacPherson, **Building and Protecting the Co-operative Movement: A Brief History of the Co-operative Union of Canada** (Ottawa: The Co-operative Union of Canada, 1984).
- 19 They are recorded in NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15 (209-216). Membership fees for honorary membership in the Co-operative Union of Canada are also recorded for the Women's Guild of the British Canadian Co-operative.
- 20 The correspondence between W.C. Stewart and G. Keen from 1910 to 1931 is of particular value because of the regular sharing of information and advice between the two men. NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15.
- 21 "As to women taking a comprehensive interest in our movement, it only reflects the difficulty we have experienced during the many years I have been secretary of this Union [Co-operative Union of Canada] as to men. Large areas and small population contribute to a purely parochial attitude of mind. The individual societies suffer through failure to appreciate that by fostering the movement as a whole each individual unit is strengthened." NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28 1, 15 (25), letter from G. Keen to L. Davies, October, 1920.

- 22 Angela V. John, **By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers in Victorian Coal Mines** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); Angela V. John, **Coalmining Women: Victorian Lives and Campaigns** (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- 23 In Cape Breton women were excluded from employment in the mines but found work in lobster and fish canneries and the woollen factory at Glyn Dwyr. Mary K. MacLeod, "Cape Breton Economy is Especially Hostile to Women," **Forerunner** 4 (10) (Spring, 1991), 22-26. The most descriptive accounts of women's employment in lobster factories are to be found in the oral histories "Lobster Factories Around Cape Breton" in **Cape Breton Magazine** 20 (1978). For an examination of women's paid labour force participation in three Nova Scotian industrial towns (Amherst, Yarmouth and Sydney Mines) see D.A. Muise, "The Industrial Context of Inequality: Female Participation in Nova Scotia's Paid Labour Force, 1871-1921," **Acadiensis** 20 (2) (Spring 1991), 3-131.
- 24 Studies of women's industrial labour in Canada indicate a rich history of women's participation and struggle in paid industrial work in Canada. Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "Weaving It Together: Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950," **Labour/Le Travail** 7 (Spring 1981), 113-126; Joan Sangster, "Canadian Working Women in the Twentieth Century," in W.J.C. Cherninski and Gregory S. Kealey, eds, **Lectures in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History** (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1985), 59-78; Joy Parr, "Women Workers in the Twentieth Century," in W.C.J. Cherninski and Gregory S. Kealey, eds, **Lectures in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History** (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1985), 79-88; Bettina Bradbury, "Women's History and Working-Class History," **Labour/Le Travail** 19 (Spring 1987), 9-46; Marjorie Griffin Cohen, **Women's Work, Markets and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ontario** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); Margaret MacCallum, "Separate Spheres: The organisation of Work in a Confectionary Factory: Ganong Bros., St. Stephen, New Brunswick," **Labour/Le Travail** 24 (Fall 1989), 69-90; Joy Parr, **The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns: 1880-1950** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Susan Trofimenkoff, "One Hundred and Two Muffled Voices: Canada's Industrial Women in the 1880s," in Laurel Sefton MacDowell and Ian Radforth, eds, **Canadian Working Class History** (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1992), 191-203.

- 25 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15 (14), 1914,
G. Keen to W. Stewart, 22 November, 1915.
- 26 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15 (6),
G. Keen to J. Pilkington 22 October, 1910.
- 27 Three historical works which challenge the narrowness of the
dominant ideology of women as consumers and describe the
work of women as consumers in retail organisations include
Susan Porter Benson **Counter Cultures: Saleswomen,
Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores,
1890-1940** (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Ellen
Furlough **Consumer Participation in France: The Politics of
Consumption, 1834-1930** (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1991);
Cynthia Wright "Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance": Writing
Gender into the History of Consumption" in **Gender Conflicts:
New Essays in Women's History** ed, Franca Iacovetta and
Mariana Valverde, 229-260, (Toronto; University of Toronto
Press, 1992);
- 28 From the letterhead of the British Canadian Co-operative, used
from its inception until the 1930s.
- 29 Keen edited the articles on Women's Guilds in **The Canadian
Co-operator**. The only complete series of this journal is located
at the Canadian Agricultural Library, Sir John Carling Building,
Ottawa. The newspaper describes the activities of the British
Guild and some local Canadian Guilds often including Sydney
Mines. Articles about the more publicly activist Prairies
Women's Guilds are contained in **The Grain Growers' Guide**.
A partial history of these guilds is published by Saskatchewan
Women's Co-operative Guild **History of the Saskatchewan
Women's Co-operative Guild, 1905-1955** (Regina:
Saskatchewan Women's Co-operative Guild, 1955).
- 30 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15 (6), L. Davies
to G. Keen, 21 June, 1910.
- 31 The marriage bar for women is not stated in the jointly worked-
out British Canadian Co-operative management/labour
document of 1915. It does not appear in any of the retrievable
documents of the Co-operative but was patently clear to
everyone who work at or wanted to work in the employ of the
British Canadian.
The bar was also not revoked even after provincial legislation
on the subject changed to include marital status in 1977 in the
Human Rights Act. Government of Nova Scotia, **Revised
Statutes**, "Chapter 18," Section 16, "An Act to Amend the
Statute Law Respecting Women. This Act purged some of the
most obvious cases of sexism in legislation such as the
"Metalliferous Mines and Quarries Regulation Act" which

explicitly prohibited the employment of women underground in the mines. "The Consumer Protection Act" prohibited discrimination against women as consumers in the practices of borrowing and extending credit.

Originally the list of prohibitions or discrimination in employment only included race, religion, creed, colour, ethnic or national origin. Government of Nova Scotia, **Revised Statutes**, "Chapter 11," 1969. Sex was added as a prohibition in 1972. Government of Nova Scotia, **Revised Statutes**, "Chapter 65," 1972 and marital status was added in 1977. For a review of the substantive issues in relation to employment law and women and the procedural issues in processing complaints to the Human Rights Commission see Elizabeth Shilton Lemmon, "Sex Discrimination in Employment: The Nova Scotia Human Rights Act" **Dalhousie Law Journal** 2 (3) (July 1976), 593-632.

32 G. Keen, "Women's Co-operative Guilds Meeting in Toronto: The Power of Women as Purchasers," **The Canadian Co-operator** (April 1933), 11.

33 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15 (25), L. Davies to G. Keen, October, 1920.

34 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15 (14), E.W. Weaver to G. Keen, 27 May, 1914. The following volumes contain papers presented at the International Congress of Women in Toronto in 1909 that refer to the role of co-operatives in allowing women to enhance their occupational possibilities, especially in agriculture: National Council of Women, **The International Congress of Women** (1 and 2) (Ottawa: The National Congress of Women, 1909).

35 Keen's tribute to M. Llewelyn Davies, on the occasion of her resignation as General Secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild and acceptance of the position of president of the British Co-operative Congress, appears in **The Canadian Co-operator** (July 1922), 11-12.

36 Lou Hammond-Ketilson, "The Saskatchewan Women's Co-operative Guild" (Saskatoon: The Centre for Co-operative Studies, 1992).

37 Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed, **Life as We Have Known It: By Co-operative Working Women** (1931; reprint, London: Virago, 1977). Barbara Drake. **Women in Trade Unions** (London: Virago, 1984).

38 "National Convention of Women's Guilds: organisation Completed - An Important Step Forward," **The Canadian Co-operator** (May 1923), 10-12.

- 39 **The Cape Breton Magazine** began publication of Cape Breton local oral history in 1972 and is still published providing a ready supply of oral histories.
- 40 Joan Sangster has begun the task of identifying women who worked with the Canadian Left in Canada, including women who lived in Nova Scotia. Joan Sangster, **Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950** (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989). Unfortunately for the sake of women's history she focuses almost entirely on two regions of Canada, Ontario and the West. She leaves "the tale of socialist women in Quebec and the Maritimes to regional historians already working on similar projects" (p10).
- 41 In many of the nineteenth century reform organisations that laid the groundwork for twentieth century organisations, especially women's organisations, three organisational options were likely to arise. Women could have complete administrative control, they could have enough control to run the institutions with an advisory body of men, or they could share control with men. Wendy Mitchinson, "Early Women's organisations and Social Reform: Prelude to the Welfare State," in A. Moscovitch and J. Albert, eds, **The Benevolent State: the Growth of Welfare in Canada** (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1987), 77-92.
- 42 Various attempts to organize and sustain Women's Guilds are recorded in letters by George Keen to various co-operatives. This correspondence is located in the NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada General Correspondence Files MG 28, 1, 15 (6-186) for 1910-1932; and the Society's Correspondence Files, MG 28, 1, 15 (132-187) from for 1913-1940.
- 43 Margaret Hobbs and Ruth Roach Pierson assess the gender and class implications of government-sponsored improvements in relation to housing in "A Kitchen that Wastes No Steps ... Gender, Class and the Home Improvement Plan, 1936-40", in **Social History** 21 (41) (May 1988), 9-37. They focus on advertisements that encouraged women to become active consumers as part of their domestic responsibilities. Women's leadership in the fledgling consumer movement that accompanied the growth of consumerism is noted in Verónica Strong-Boag, **The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939** (Markham: Penguin Books, 1988), 118-119.
- 44 The series of advertisements placed in **The Canadian Co-operator** by the Co-operative Wholesale Society highlighted the renewed role of women in co-operatives during and after

World War II. These were the same advertisements which appeared in the English national daily newspapers.

45 Interview with Moira Briers Singer, Sydney Mines, 1992. It is interesting that in spite of documented evidence of wage differentials, job segregation, and the marriage bar, local people did not initially want to admit to the legacy of inequality (in spite of drawing out its parameters in later parts of interviews). The different jobs men and women did ... No such a thing." Interview with Tommy Gordon, Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, 1992. "Were there certain jobs reserved for young men or young women? No it didn't work that way. They just put you in a job and that was it." Interview with Emma Aubrecht Farr, Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, 1992. "Women seemed to have as great a part in the store. I don't think there was any idea that women couldn't do this or couldn't do that." Interview with Moira Briers Singer, Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, 1992.

46 Interview with Harold Pennington, Coxheath, Nova Scotia, 1992.

47 In 1992 I conducted a series of interviews with former members, board members, and employees of the British Canadian Co-operative. Those who agreed to have their memories tape recorded included John Bailey, Jack Davies, Emma Aubrecht Farr, Tommy and Hazel Gordon, Ralph Hill, Eileen MacDonald, Beverly MacLeod Mitchelitis, Harold Pennington, Moira Briers Singer, Wilfred Stevens, Walter Stewart, George Sturgess, Angela Taylor and Mary Vickers. I thank all of these former British Canadian Co-operative members in sharing their memories with me.

Other important contributors who were not audio-recorded but whose interviews informed this work were conducted in the spring of 1992. These contributors include Ida Gallant Delaney and Isabelle Strong of Glace Bay; Nora Blinkhorn Greenwald of North Sydney; Ann West, Wes Stewart, Ethel Caldwell and Bessie Toms of Sydney Mines; Mrs. Don Murdock Patterson of Big Bras D'Or, and Doris Boyle of Sydney.

Kate Currie of the Beaton Institute and John Currie of the Sydney Mines local historical society laid much of the initial groundwork for this project with earlier attempts to collect documents so as to create local interest in the history of the co-operative. Betty Young and Judi Dipersio, librarians at the Martha Hollet Memorial Library in Sydney Mines, provided the social milieu and support to sustain local interest in my 1992 project in local history.

48 "I know they did have a very active guild and I remember my

- parents being invited to different [activities]". Interview with Moira Briers Singer, Sydney Mines, 1992.
- 49 Harold Pennington recalls that women's political participation was a non-issue: "There was always a group of men that was the board of directors. There was never any discussion of having women on the board at least none that I could tell." Interview with Harold Pennington, Coxheath, 1992. Angela Taylor and Eileen MacDonald confirmed this from a different point of view: "No, there were never any women, board members, no God help us ... The men were always the leaders at that time. No, women wouldn't have the power. Its a good thing we didn't, we got into enough trouble. (Laughter)" Interview with Angela Taylor and Eileen MacDonald, Sydney Mines, 1992.
- 50 The women I interviewed were more likely to remember the activities of the Guild than were the men, even though the Guild's activities included the participation of women, men and children.
- 51 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15, (138), Submission to G. Keen by British Canadian Education Committee, 27 February, 1922.
- 52 Mr W.C. Stewart, General Manager of the British Canadian Co-operative, noted the Guild's criticism at the Annual Congress Meeting of the Co-operative Union of Canada. A summary of Stewart's comments, although not evident in the CUC Congress correspondence files are contained in the subsection "The Value of a Women's Guild" in the 1927 Congress Reports published in *The Canadian Co-operator* (Sept. 1927), 12.
- 53 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15, (6), G. Keen to W. Stewart 14 October, 1910.
- 54 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15, (144), G. Keen to W. Stewart 6 January, 1926.
- 55 British Canadian Co-operative Society Limited, **Souvenir: The British Canadian Co-operative Society and its Branches During it 25 Years Activities in Cape Breton** (Sackville: Tribune Press, 1931).
- 56 BIA, MG 14, 2, (e) Box 10, "Death Benefit Scheme," contains policy, death certificates and claims.
- 57 Miss Margaret MacLeod was promoted to the position of manager of dry goods and ladies wear in 1942. Recorded in the 1956 souvenir edition of the British Canadian Co-operative published in *The Sydney Post*.
- 58 BIA, 85-6-2066, MG 14, British Canadian Co-operative, 1 a. General Ledger 1906-1908 (containing an inventory).

- 59 National Archives of Canada (NAC), MG 28, 1, 15, (1), British Canadian Co-operative Society Limited, Sydney Mines - Nova Scotia - Rules and General Conditions to apply to, and to be observed by Persons Employed by the Society, 1915, printed at the Stratton Printery, Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia.
- 60 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15, (138), Wage Agreement, November 1922.
- 61 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15, (172), List of Wages, 22 November, 1937.
- 62 NAC, Canadian Co-operative Union, MG 28, 1, 15 (138), Mrs. W. Burchell to G. Keen 7 December 1922.
- 63 NAC, Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15, (209-211).
- 64 Descriptions of these events are vividly recorded in a number of letters and documents in the General Correspondence and Societies Correspondence files of Co-operative Union of Canada, MG 28, 1, 15; in the photographic collection of the National Archive of Canada in Co-operative Union of Canada, 1956-029; in **The Canadian Co-operator**. The events were referred to in several of the interviews. On several occasions in the 1920s the Women's Guild organised local parades containing up to three thousand children and sponsored huge Victorian-style picnics for the entire town and surrounding geographic region.
- 65 BIA 85-6-2006, MG 14, 141, 2 (d), 36 cards of Thrift Stamps.
- 66 Interview with Tommy Gordon, Sydney Mines, 1992.
- 67 In spite of some suggestions by some men that women might not have managerial abilities, the story of Phyllis Bond shows how very well one woman understood the store's accounting systems. Between 1931 and 1947 this store clerk actively undermined the store's inventory and record keeping system by stealing many of the goods associated with women's work in the home. She was convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to three years in the regional federal prison. P.A.N.S. Cape Breton Supreme Court. Criminal Minute Book 7 [1936-1949]. p. 524-526, 531
- 68 The only person I interviewed who was able to remember the Women's Guild as an activist group of women was Nora Blinkhorn Greenwald who, at the time of the interview, was in her nineties and confined to a bed. Unfortunately her descriptive interview was unrecorded.