

Editorial

In this issue we continue to explore the theme of co-operation in Japan with a descriptive article on the Japanese agricultural co-operative sector. To call it merely 'descriptive' is to understate its value, because it describes an impressive set of interlocking institutions that have both width - in serving nearly all Japanese farmers - and depth - in providing almost everything that they need. To call it merely a 'sector' is also to understate its significance; while other much more loosely organised co-operative sectors are perhaps over-generously referred to as a co-operative 'movement' this 'sector' must surely deserve the term, catering as it does for the diverse needs of the entire rural population. The change of focus to the next article is as abrupt as one can get; it is a micro-historical study of tokens, a kind of co-operative currency invented by the British co-operative movement in order to pay dividend to members of consumer co-operatives. Alan Judd provides a definitive survey of the subject on two levels: for the avid collectors of co-operative memorabilia he describes the types of tokens, what they were made of and how they were used, and for the historian he describes just how co-operative societies managed to pay a dividend despite having only hand-written accounts and primitive adding machines. Today it is all so much easier because co-operatives can use electronic dividend cards that record every purchase and add up entitlement to dividend instantly. However, the article raises an important question about the meaning of dividend; it is a cost-price mechanism that restores to co-op members the difference between what they paid for the goods and what it cost to provide and distribute them. It is a unique invention for achieving fairness and the elimination of profit. Electronic 'dividend' cards are, in contrast, really just a trade discount. This is a theme we may enlarge on in a future issue.

The refereed section represents good value, because we manage to squeeze in three articles (at the expense of the book review section, which we will save to the next issue). The first is a report on a Canadian research project into how the members of worker co-ops learn about their roles and their place in the democratic running of the co-operative. They find that informal

processes of experience, discussions and questioning are more important than formal learning methods, a point that will not be lost on all those whose job it is to train and educate co-op members. Akira Kurimoto analyses three failed consumer co-operatives, and asks what were the reasons for failure. A traditional academic answer would probably point to the tensions between the business and the association as two aspects of the co-operative form of organisation that are difficult to reconcile. Kurimoto's answer is much more interesting, and potentially more fruitful for the resolution of these tensions. He finds that it is because they neglect the membership base when they undertake business expansion that co-ops fail. He points to the role of the member not only as a participant in the democratic running of the co-op, but as a user of its products and services, and as an investor of capital. In other words, promoting an active membership base is not an addition to an effective business strategy but an integral and indispensable part of it. Finally, Rita Rhodes provides a historical account of the contribution the British consumer co-operative movement has made to adult education, showing how it went through three phases: it helped to meet the need for basic literacy, then complemented and to some extent duplicated provision by local authorities, and then narrowed into the more specialised study of co-operative principles and practices. We will continue to explore the theme of co-operative learning and education in the next few issues.

The next issue of the Journal will also begin a new theme. During the past decade the international co-operative movement has been absorbed with the redefining and reinterpreting of co-operative values and principles. Now the time has come for some analysis of how these are being put into practice, and we hope to publish articles on this theme, some commissioned, some coming out of the annual conference of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, at which Professor Ian MacPherson will be the keynote speaker.