

The Co-operative Movement

The Co-operative Movement has been the Cinderella of the British Labour Movement both in terms of political weight and in attention given to it by historians. While being a Labour and Co-operative MP has been an attractive political route for many non-trade union aspiring Labour politicians, otherwise the most ambitious in the Labour movement have been in the trade unions or the Labour Party, rather than focusing on the co-op movement. Yet the co-op movement has had the loyalty of thousands and its ideology has often had a powerful appeal in the twentieth century as well as earlier, especially in the era of the co-op pioneers of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Much of the older writing on the history of co-operation in Britain succeeded in being remarkably turgid. There was a revitalisation co-operative history associated with a renaissance in social history in the 1960s and 1970s, associated with Marxist and socialist historians and with those reacting against their premises. The co-operative movement became a substantial player in studies examining working class conservatism or reformism after the Chartist era and also in the related discussions of whether the notion of a labour aristocracy in the late nineteenth century had any validity.¹ The best studies offered a more realistic and more complex understanding of working class communities, and co-operation's place within them, than simply a search for evidence of co-operation as a pathway to 'embourgeoisement'. The co-operative movement was also one of many voluntary organisations in Stephen Yeo's study of religion and society in Reading, 1890–1914.² This period was also marked by a classic study of Robert Owen and Owenism by J.F.C. Harrison and by one of the few detailed studies of mid-late Victorian co-operation, Philip Backstrom's study of E.V. Neale (1810–1892), founder and general secretary of the British Co-operative Union.³

Stephen Yeo's edited *New Views of Co-operation* (London, 1988), dedicated to J.F.C. Harrison, marked the end of a fruitful phase of writing about co-operation and related areas and the beginning of further explorations of themes highlighted by this collection and by other publications of 1983–1988. Not only were these essays linked to Harrison, Stephen Yeo and Sussex University but several of the better 1970s books (Backstrom, Tholfsen, Crossick and Yeo) had been in a series edited by Harrison and Yeo. *New Visions Of Co-operation* offered a range of perspectives on the British co-operative movement, including co-operation and

1 See, for instance, Tryge Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (London, 1976), Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society And Politics* (Brighton, 1980), Neville Kirk, *The Growth of Working Class Reformism in Mid-Victorian England* (London, 1985), Robert Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford, 1976) and Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite In Victorian Society* (London, 1978).

2 Stephen Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis* (London, 1976).

3 J.F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (London, 1969). Philip N. Backstrom, *Christian Socialism and Co-operation in Victorian England* (London, 1974).

women, co-operation and religion, co-operation and Ireland, the national co-operative festivals held at the Crystal Palace 1888–1910 and a discussion of the concept of ‘community’ in co-operative history.

The increased interest in women and co-operation was not only part of wider concerns to engender history. It was also heightened by the centenary of the Women’s Co-operative Guild in 1983. The centenary was also marked by the publication of an excellent official history by Jean Gaffin and David Thoms, *Caring And Sharing*, and a valuable volume of recollections.⁴ In addition, interest in Women’s Co-operative Guild banners was enhanced by the travelling exhibition ‘100 Years of Women’s banners’, 1984–1991, which included co-operative banners alongside women’s suffrage and other banners.⁵

The mid-1980s also saw other notable additions to the history of the co-operative movement. Barbara Taylor included a study of women and the Owenite communities in her influential *Eve And The New Jerusalem* (London, 1983). Further insights into women’s experiences were provided in a very different style of book, Linda McCullough Thew’s autobiography concerning a patriarchal Northumberland mining community and its co-operative store, the Ashington Industrial Co-operative Society (1893–1970). This provides a family of members’ views of the co-op store, its place in their lives as well as Linda’s reminiscences of working in the co-op store. It adds to the literature on the important role of the divided and also the half year sales in family finances, the giving of credit and the supplying of clothes on approval to try on at home. It recounts how the storeman who visited homes for orders was used to transmit messages in the days before widespread telephone ownership. It also provides testimony of the value to many working class children of the store classes run by the co-op education committees.⁶ Bill Lancaster published in 1987 one of the finest studies of urban working class life which gave due consideration to the co-op movement, *Radicalism, Co-operation and Socialism: Leicester Working-Class Politics 1860–1906* (Leicester, 1987).

Turning to the past ten years, the focus of this essay, two major collections of essays were published to mark the 150th anniversary of the Rochdale Pioneers setting up their co-operative shop in Toad Lane in 1844. *Towards the Co-operative Commonwealth* stemmed from a large and enthusiastic Co-operative History Workshop held at the Co-operative College, then located at Stanford Hall, near Loughborough, in July 1994.⁷ A notable feature of the collection is the well-researched studies of the spread of co-operative societies in various parts of Britain: Lancashire (John Walton), Liverpool (Julia de Forges), Cumbria (John Marshall and Jean Turnbull), the North-East (Joan Hugman), Colchester and Essex (Douglas Baker) and Battersea and London (Sean Creighton and Stan Newens). John Walton made good use of

⁴ Jean Gaffin and David Thoms, *Caring And Sharing: The Centenary History of the Women’s Co-operative Guild* (Manchester, 1983). Crystal Salt, P. Schweitzer and M. Wilson, *Of Whole Heart Cometh Hope: Centenary Memories of the Co-operative Women’s Guild* (London, 1983).

⁵ Thalia Campbell (ed.), *Women’s Banners* (Borth, 1985).

⁶ Linda McCullough Thew, *The Pit Village And The Store*, (London, 1985).

⁷ Bill Lancaster and Paddy Maguire (eds), *Towards The Co-operative Commonwealth: Essays In The History Of Co-operation*, (Loughborough, Leicestershire, 1996).

the Parliamentary Papers, 1901 and 1912–1913, for information on the foundation dates of co-operatives in Lancashire. In analysing membership of the societies he found the strength of the movement was where cotton was a major employer and that by 1909 nearly half of the membership was in fourteen societies. For Cumbria, Marshall and Turnbull found the most successful societies were in the larger towns, notably Carlisle, Barrow and Kendal. Walton confirms the view that the dominant group of members were ‘the better off and more secure groups’ among the working class, but suggests that by the start of the twentieth the co-op movement was encompassing more of the working class, at least where the co-ops were strong.

Walton was also notable for not dividing co-op history into an early golden age of idealism and a later era of mindless divi collecting. He wrote,

Aspirations towards the ‘Co-operative commonwealth’ were never lost, though they mutated from their Owenite origins; and most co-operatives sustained educational and trade union support activities, while the growth of the Women’s Co-operative Guild coincided with the most rapid and across-the-board gains in membership numbers. Even the ‘dividend’ nurtured a sense of fairness and collective responsibility and enterprise, challenging the premises of competitive individualism, although such a perspective has to take account of the fierce internecine competition which could develop between local societies.⁸

In spite of the heavy-handed patriarchy depicted in her memoirs, Linda Thew also displays much of the co-op movement’s idealism in her memoirs. For instance, she wrote of the Women’s Guild,

They saw the Co-operative movement not simply as a form of trading for mutual benefit but as a principle to be applied to all human affairs and relationships, in order to achieve a decent and improved standard of life for everyone – not only in Britain, but all the world over ... Peace and prosperity at home and abroad would follow in the wake of Co-operation properly practised.⁹

The second 150th anniversary collection was published by the North West Labour History Group.¹⁰ This is a collection containing many high quality essays. John Walton wrote more on Lancashire, again questioning the caricature of a severe contrast between early ‘community-building’ and late shopkeeping, in which he commented that from early on many co-op societies were notable for ‘allocating funds to education, libraries, festivals, excursions, strikers and, in times of stress more generally, offering acceptable forms of practical assistance to the impoverished’.¹¹ Jayne Southern provided a substantial regional study of the interwar period in which one of her themes was a growing tension between the needs of efficient man-

8 John K. Walton, ‘The Making of a Mass Movement: The Growth of Co-operative Society Membership in Lancashire 1870–1914’, in *ibid*, pp. 17–28 (quotation, pp. 27–28).

9 Thew, pp. 104–105.

10 *North West Labour History: Journal of the North West Labour History Group*, 19 (1994–1995). The cover is entitled ‘Co-operation: A Way Of Life’.

11 John Walton, ‘Co-operation in Lancashire, 1844–1914’, *ibid*, pp. 115–125.

agement of the much expanded movement and 'the different mentality' of many of the active members.¹²

As part of her essay on co-operation in Liverpool and the Rhondda Julie des Forges provided an analysis of the occupations of new members of the Liverpool Co-operative Society in 1889–1891 and 1911–1912. For the earlier period she used census data, identifying nearly three quarters, and for 1911–1912 she drew on street directories. By 1911–1912 the Liverpool Society was attracting substantial numbers of casual workers, enabling her to conclude that it is 'necessary to reject any simplistic associations between casualism and thrift which conclude that the two are problematic'.¹³

A third notable publication marking the 150 anniversary of the Rochdale Pioneers was Thalia Campbell and Mervyn Wilson (eds), *Each For All And All For Each: A Celebration of Co-operative Banners* published by the National Co-operative Education Association. This beautifully produced large booklet reproduces many of the banners which had been located by a project to find and preserve surviving banners. The short texts accompanying the illustrations deal with the English and the Scottish Women's Guild as well as the Woodcraft Folk in England and Wales, with a range of authors including Malcolm Hornsby, John Gorman, Dorothy Thompson, Tony Billingham and John Gurr. Malcolm Hornsby observes of the many banners which were not professionally made that they were 'a women's public art' and of those of the Women's Co-operative Guild, that 'one message comes through – a love of home, security, warmth and love'.¹⁴ Thalia Campbell, commenting on Women's Co-operative Guild banners, observed 'As women were and are the buyers, women with baskets and baskets of groceries ... can be seen on many Guild banners' as 'they believed that they could change the world if they lived co-operatively at home, shopped at the co-op shop where working conditions were safe and fair, with a dividend paid to shoppers and where the products sold were produced in co-operative factories'.¹⁵ Contrary to the standard stereotype of shoppers devoid of wider visions, Campbell made claims of much idealism among co-operators.

Johnson Birchall, *Co-op: The People's Business* (1994) was another publication marking the 150th centenary of the Rochdale Pioneers. This provided a solid account of the co-op movement, which was more 'celebration' (as the author put it) than reassessment, but which was enhanced by impressive illustrations selected by Bernard Howcroft, former manager of the Co-operative Wholesale Society's Library and Information Unit.

12 Jayne Southern, 'Co-operation in the North-West of England 1919–1939: Stronghold or Stagnation', *ibid.*, pp. 97–114.

13 Julie des Forges, "'We Make Millions of Pairs of Boots, but Not One Pair of Millionaires': Co-operation and the Working Class in Liverpool and the Rhondda' in *ibid.*, pp. 48–64. See also her essay, 'Co-operation, Labour and Consumption in Liverpool, 1890–1914' in Lancaster and Maguire (eds), *Co-operative Commonwealth* (1996), pp. 29–34.

14 Malcolm Hornsby, 'Symbolism in Co-operative Banners' in Thalia Campbell and Mervyn Wilson (eds), *Each For All And All For Each*, (Manchester, 1994), pp. 7–8.

15 Thalia Campbell, 'Women's Co-operative Guild Banners', *North West Labour History*, 19 (1994/95), pp. 145–150 (at p. 149).

The various writing on the British co-operative movement which has been published since the early 1990s has raised at least a dozen areas of major interest and requiring further exploration. While histories of individual societies abound and there are broader histories,¹⁶ there is a great need for modern business histories. However, the unusual nature of co-operatives, as intermediate organisations between state-owned and private enterprise, has been explored by Alan Ware.¹⁷

Some of the key business issues for the co-operative movement at the start of the twenty first century were highlighted by a major review. John Monks wrote in the preface to the Co-operative Commission's Report of January 2001, 'The Co-operative ethos can be in tune with an age that is increasingly disillusioned with corporate greed and lack of ethical standards displayed in some parts of the private sector'. The Report commented,

It is imperative that Co-operatives, as customer-owned organisations, should provide outstanding customer satisfaction, in terms both of the quality of goods and services and of benefits. Indeed, the Co-operative Movement should be providing the benchmarks for quality and service in the sectors and areas in which it operates.

It linked such competitive excellence with its ideals, defining 'the co-operative advantage' as 'excellent products or services with distinct competitive benefits derived from our values and principles, our rewards for members or our commitment to the communities we serve'.¹⁸

A second major theme rightly attracting significant interest has been to try to recognise fully the crucial role of women in the Co-operative Movement. This is a revived interest. The older literature includes Margaret Llewellyn Davies, *The Women's Co-operative Guild* (Kirkby Lonsdale, 1904) and Catherine Webb, *The Woman With The Basket: The History of the Women's Co-operative Guild, 1883–1927* (Manchester, 1927). *New Views On Co-operation* (1988) included two essays on women and co-operation, Alistair Thomson on co-operative women and the reform of housework and Gill Scott on the Women's Co-operative Guild and the contentious issue of divorce law reform, 1910–1920.

In the past decade there has been much work moving co-operative women from the wings to centre stage. The essays from the 150th anniversary included essays on women and the co-operative movement, with two essays on Margaret Llewellyn Davies by Muriel Jeffs, one on interwar campaigns for peace by Caroline Morrison and another on women's direct action on prices in 1872 by Nigel Todd. Perhaps most significant of all was Julie Des Forges' comparative analysis of women's involvement in the Liverpool and Rhondda co-operative societies, which suggested high female proportions of new members in Liverpool in the 1890–

16 See, for instance, A. Bonner, *British Co-operation*, (Manchester 1961; revised edn 1970); P. Redfern, *The new History of the CWS*, (London, 1938), and W. Richardson, *The CWS in War and Peace, 1938–1976* (Manchester, 1977).

17 Alan Ware, *Between Profit And State: Intermediate Organizations in Britain and the United States* (Cambridge, 1989).

18 Co-operative Commission, *The Co-operative Advantage: Creating a Successful Family of Co-operative Businesses. The Report of the Co-operative Commission* (Manchester, 2001).

1914 period. She argues that in Liverpool 'both men and women could look for more opportunities outside the formal economy'. In the case of the Ton society in the Rhondda she suggests that 'the decline of stable earnings did not undermine support for co-operation, but it actually increased dependency on the dividend'.¹⁹

Women co-operators were the focus of two major studies in 1998–2000. Gill Scott followed up her influential 1988 D.Phil thesis and several essays with her *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London, 1998).²⁰ It provided the well-researched and thematic modern monograph that the Women's Co-operative Guild much needed. Although the Guild peaked in membership in 1938 at 88,000, with 1,800 branches, Scott argues that decline was a result of its close association with the Labour and Co-operative parties from the end of the First World War: 'In order to fit the electoralist requirements of Labourism, the Guild not only abandoned its working-class feminist aspirations but also the democratic practices that had sustained its vitality as a broad-based movement'. There may be a case for scepticism about a pre First World War democratic and feminist golden age and a post-war change which took twenty years to undercut support. Indeed the Guild's pre-war feminism is suspect in at least some later views, given its acceptance that women's focus should be the home and family. Yet this is one of the finest and liveliest books on the British Co-operative Movement.

The second notable study of women co-operators was Barbara J. Blaszak, *The Matriarchs of England's Co-operative Movement: A Study in Gender, Politics and Female Leadership, 1883–1921* (Westport, Connecticut, 2000). This was prone to criticise past women on failing to match up to late twentieth century US feminism. It also followed US feminist writing in exploring possible lesbian relations (between Margaret Llewellyn Davies and Lilian Harris) before conceding that 'it is just as likely that [they] were celibate humanitarians, devoting their lives to the service of others after the fashion of Roman Catholic nuns' (p.125). While the book was open to criticism for not being always firmly grounded in the secondary literature, it provided a further substantial and lively account of the Women's Co-operative Guild and is likely to spark off debate and more academic interest in its subject.²¹ It makes a

19 Muriel Jeffs, 'Margaret Llewellyn Davies and the Women's Co-operative Guild', Caroline Morrison, 'The Women's Co-operative Guild: Campaigns for peace 1918–1939' and Nigel Todd, 'The Red Herring War of 1872: Women's Rights, Butchers and Co-ops in the Northern Coalfield' in Lancaster and Maguire (eds), *Co-operative Commonwealth*, pp. 75–82, 8–94 and 55–62. Muriel Jeffs, 'Margaret Llewellyn Davies, 1861–1944: Co-operator and Social Reformer' and Julie Des Forges, 'Co-operation and the Working Class in Liverpool and the Rhondda', in: *North West Labour History*, 19 (1992), pp. 129–139 and pp. 148–164.

20 "The working-class women's most active and democratic movement": The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1883–1950', Sussex University D.Phil thesis, 1988; "A Trade Union for Working Women": The Women's Co-operative Guild 1914–1945' in S. Oldfield (ed.), *This Working Day World: Women's Lives and Cultures in Britain 1914–1945* (London, 1994); 'Basket Power and Market Forces: The Women's Co-operative Guild 1883–1920' in B. Einhorn and E. Yeo, *Women and Market Societies* (Aldershot, 1995); as well as her essay in *New Views of Co-operation* (1988).

21 For instance, her 'The Gendered Geography of the English Co-operative Movement at the turn of the Nineteenth Century', *Women's History Review*, 9, (2000), pp. 559–584 (a topic forming chapter 2 of

major contribution to ensuring that future writers about the Co-operative Movement are gender aware.

A third theme which has received much recent attention has concerned the variable spread of co-operatives. Martin Purvis's work has provided a substantial account which, inter alia, details the spread of co-operation before the Rochdale Pioneers.²² He suggests that the 192 co-operatives of mid nineteenth century had a membership of some 20,000 and annual sales of £ 250,000. By 1901 the 1,229 societies had over 1.5 million members and sales of £ 48.9 million. In 1851 150 of the societies were in the North-West and Yorkshire and 13 in London. There was rapid expansion around 1860, and co-ops spread widely. By the late nineteenth century co-operation's greatest strength was in northern industrial areas and the East Midlands of England. Purvis summarised his findings on success or otherwise of co-operative societies: 'Differences in spheres such as the adequacy of private retail provision, the occupational diversity of the workforce, the level and manner of wage payments, community and residential mobility mesh together with forces related to information diffusion to begin to explain the pattern of local variation in co-operative success underlying bold regional contracts in its strength'.²³ John Walton, in further developing Purvis' work on Lancashire, emphasises 'that the Co-op's areas of strength were also those of other kinds of working-class voluntary organisation like the Friendly Societies and the trade unions'. He also noted Co-op strength in the 1860s–80s where Chartism had been strong, where there was regular, relatively well-paid work and speculated that women's factory wages (which boosted family income) may have also been important.²⁴

A fourth theme has been to consider representations of co-operation: its iconography, the architecture and its films. As already noted, there has been much interest in banners by Thalia Campbell and others, encouraged by the preservation work carried out at the Museum of Labour History and the Pump House Museum in Manchester. There has also been interest in co-operative emblems, such as the wheatsheaf, on buildings. John Walton has commented of the Co-ops 'increasingly impressive and distinctive buildings of the second half of the nineteenth century': 'Not only were the branches which, in towns like Preston, were colonising every working-class neighbourhood by the turn of the century, often built in an ornate and distinctive architectural style (and a study of Co-op architecture would be both fascinating and rewarding); there was also the flagship buildings, displaying pride in the society's prog-

the book) led to a critical response from John Walton, 'Locality, Gender and Co-operation in England', *Women's History Review*, 11 (2002).

22 Martin Purvis, 'Co-operative Retailing in England, 1835–1850: developments beyond Rochdale', *Northern History*, 22, 1986, and 'The Development of Co-operative Retailing in England and Wales, 1851–1901: A geographical study', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 16, (1990), pp. 314–331. For the pre-1844 period see also Robert Thornes, 'Change and Continuity in the Development of Co-operation, 1827–1844' in S. Yeo (ed.), *New Views of Co-operation*.

23 Purvis, 'Development of co-operative retailing', p. 314.

24 Walton, 'Co-operation in Lancashire', pp. 119–124.

ress, such as the great central stores and department stores, offices and headquarter buildings, warehouses and bakeries, which were opened with ever more elaborate ceremonies and ever more eminent speakers.²⁵

Interest in the Co-operative Movement's films was boosted by the establishment of the National Co-operative Film Archive in 1992. This was followed by the 1994 Festival of Films on Co-operation and Alan Burton's study, published by the National Film Theatre.²⁶ The Co-operative movement produced films between 1898 and 1966 and provided film shows from the start of the twentieth century in places with no cinema. These included *Men of Rochdale* (1944) which ended on an almost Beveridge-type note of a better life based on co-operative ideals following the end of the Second World War, and a film on the blitz in Manchester, *Manchester Took It Too* (1941). Its 'Home Front' (1940) went beyond the norms of wartime patriotic films of defiant cockneys by depicting hoarding wealthy housewives and profiteering shopkeepers. Many local co-ops made their own films and 31 were made for the Woodcraft Folk.²⁷

A fifth, related area has been to study the use of language by the Co-operative Movement. Eileen and Stephen Yeo wrote 'On the Uses of «Community»: From Owenism to the Present' as part of their study of keywords, noting that it was very much an 'essentially contested concept'. It was much used by the early co-operators when referring to their future 'new moral world'. It was also taken up by William Morris to denote a vastly better alternative to capitalism and by those using it to indicate service to others, be it housing or leisure. However, the Yeos also point to the way notions of community could be used by middle class charity organisations 'to absorb poor women's networks' and warn that usage of such words is marked by 'contradictions and countercurrents'.²⁸

Linked to that, a sixth area, has been discussion of the Co-operative Movement's alternative vision, its idealism. There has been continuing interest in Owenism. Edward Royle has published a major study of the Harmony community in Hampshire (1839–1845) in which he emphasises the failure of its farming which undercut the vision of an alternative community based on the land. This effectively closed one route for co-operation's development.²⁹ The failure of co-operative production, generally seen as the most radical form of co-operation, to spread widely in Britain and to appeal less widely than in France, also left co-operative retailing to hold the field in Britain. Margot Finn's important study of the post Chartist period ne-

25 Walton, 'Co-operation in Lancashire', pp. 117–118.

26 Alan Burton, *The People's Cinema: Film and the Co-operative Movement*, (London, 1994).

27 See also by Alan Burton, 'The People's Cinemas: The Picture Houses of the Co-operative Movement', *PictureHouse*, 19 (1993/4), reprinted in *North West Labour History*, 19 (1994–1995), 31–47 and *British Co-operative Movement Film Catalogue*, London, 1997. More generally see Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain 1929–1939* (London, 1986) and S.G. Jones, *The British Labour Movement and Film 1918–1939* (London, 1987).

28 S. Yeo (ed.), *New Views of Co-operation*, pp. 229–258.

29 Edward Royle, *Robert Owen and the Commencement of the Millennium: A Study of the Harmony Community* (Manchester, 1998).

glected co-operative retailing, dealing rather with Christian Socialists and co-operative production, which they favoured.³⁰

Yet, there has been continuing interest in co-operation's role in working class politics after Chartism. Neville Kirk noted the 'great rejoicing and euphoria' among old Chartists and other radicals that greeted the rapid expansion of co-operatives in the 1860s and 1870s.³¹ The Co-operative movement returns to centre stage in Iorwerth Prothero's excellent comparative study of radical artisans in Britain and France. He commented,

There are three obvious reasons why co-operation may be seen as a form of socialism. Firstly, socialists were actively involved in co-operative societies. Secondly, socialists advocated co-operation. Thirdly, co-operative societies declared their socialism.³²

However, by the late nineteenth century most co-operators in Britain were probably Liberal in their politics.

A seventh area has been the co-operative movement's political role from the late nineteenth to the twenty first century. Thomas Carbery provided a careful and scholarly, but none too lively, study of the Co-op Party in 1969.³³ The formation of the Co-op Party has been debated by Sidney Pollard and Tony Adams. The latter has argued that the retailing concerns of the co-operators in wartime was crucial, not a swing to socialism, in bringing about support for a separate party.³⁴ Ross McKibbin still provides the best account of Labour Party-Co-op Party relations in the early days for the Co-op Party.³⁵ In the pre-First World War period Duncan Tanner has pointed to a growing role of the co-op societies in Labour politics in the East Midlands and East Anglia.³⁶ Mary Hilson has provided a study of the co-op movement in Plymouth politics, 1890–1920. She wisely notes that 'the unusualness of these local circumstances should alert us to the particularity of the local study' and that 'rather than allowing us to extrapolate national trends, the study ... will help us to complete a fragmented national picture'. In Plymouth the co-op, not the trade union movement, was 'by far the largest working class collective organisation', with over 35,000 members from the start of the twentieth century. Its funds made independent labour parliamentary candidates possible. She ar-

30 Margot C. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848–1874* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 153–158.

31 Neville Kirk, *The Growth of Working Class Reformism in Mid Victorian England* (London, 1985), p. 151.

32 Iorwerth Prothero, *Radical Artisans in England and France 1830-1870* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 145.

33 Thomas Carbery, *Consumers in Politics: A History and General Review of the Co-operative Party* (Manchester, 1969).

34 Tony Adams, 'The Formation of the Co-operative Party Reconsidered', *International Review of Social History*, 32, 1 (1987), pp. 48–68 and with Sidney Pollard, an exchange of views, *International Review of Social History*, 32, 2 (1987), pp. 168–79.

35 Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924* (Oxford, 1974), 178–91. For Arthur Henderson's concern to gain co-op support see also Chris Wrigley, *Arthur Henderson* (Cardiff, 1990). Nicole Robertson has been studying early Co-op Party strongholds.

36 Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918*, (Cambridge, 1990), p. 297–8. Mary Hilson, 'Consumers and Politics: The Co-operative Movement in Plymouth, 1890-1920', *Labour History Review*, 67, 1 (2002), pp. 7–27.

gues that in Plymouth the co-op's entry into politics was 'a response to what was perceived as a new type of politics, a politicisation of everyday bread and butter issues'.³⁷

This leads to an eighth, and much interrelated, aspect of recent writing of co-operative history. This is to see the co-operative movement as a major aspect of consumer history, a notable alternative to capitalist modes of provision, be they by small shopkeepers or large multiple stores. The context of the shopkeeper has been explored by several British academics, not least by Michael Winstanley and Geoffrey Crossick.³⁸ Momentum to set up many societies, including that of the Rochdale Pioneers, came in at least part from a desire to gain quality food at fair prices from collective endeavour rather than to be exploited by small shopkeepers. Later there was serious competition from multiple stores, an area explored by John Benson, Gareth Shaw, Bill Lancaster, Patrick Maguire and others. Bill Lancaster has written, 'the co-operative movement had always emphasised economy and rational consumption, and the department stores with their «frivolous displays» and inducements to impulse purchasing were anathema to co-operative principles'. Nevertheless, in 1920 the co-op movement responded by planning to establish large emporiums and centralised buying.³⁹ Malcolm Hornsby, in an unpublished thesis, has written of the impact of such competition from multiples on the co-ops.⁴⁰

An aspect of co-op history which particularly deserves attention is the vigour of its opponents in both local and national politics. There has often been a strong Anti-Co-op as well as Anti-Labour politics. John Walton has commented on 'the jokes and carefully-fostered culture of disparagement which were systematically directed against the Co-op as they were against ... the nationalised industries'.⁴¹ Mary Hilson recounts the Plymouth shopkeepers campaign against the Plymouth Co-op, which led to successful libel litigation.⁴² Such hostility has been displayed in local councils, with planning permissions denied to co-ops but later granted to private traders. To many opponents of the Labour Movement, the co-op movement still appeared subversive in the late twentieth century.

The relationship between the co-ops and the trade unions is a ninth area of particular interest to historians. The co-ops in mining communities often provided miners and their families with credit during disputes. This was a source of concern to the government during the post First World War labour unrest. Lloyd George, at the Paris Peace Conference in March 1919, wrote to Bonar Law,

37 Hilson, 'Consumers and Politics', p. 20.

38 Michael Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World* (Manchester, 1983). Geoffrey Crossick and H.G. Haupt (eds), *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth Century Europe* (London, 1984).

39 John Benson and Gareth Shaw (eds), *The Evolution of Retail Systems, c. 1800–1914* (Leicester, 1992). Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (Leicester, 1995) (quotation at page 88).

40 M.T. Hornsby, *Co-operation in Crisis: Challenge and Response in the Co-operative Retail Movement in England*, MPhil, University of York, (1989).

41 Walton, 'Co-operation in Lancashire', p. 118.

42 Hilson, 'Consumers and Politics', p. 11–12.

The miners, I happen to know, are relying upon the Co-operative stores to feed them. The great co-operative supplies are outside the mining areas. They ought not to be moved. Once the strike begins it is imperative that the state should win. Failure to do so would inevitably lead to a Soviet Republic.

Co-op credit, he felt, made the confiscation of miners' strike funds not worthwhile.⁴³ The miners received much financial help in the major coal dispute of 1921, but in some areas were dilatory to repay the co-op societies. This even led to some stores going into liquidation. It also led to some reluctance to provide generous credit during the 1926 dispute. However, many co-ops did provide major help to the miners then. Linda McCullough Thew recorded in her autobiography that she believed some miners 'were still paying off when the Second World War started'.⁴⁴

However, the co-op movement's relationship with its own employees was mixed. In some mining communities, at least, jobs in the co-op store were eagerly sought after by women, given the relative lack of other employment. This is brought out well by Linda McCullough Thew in her memoirs of the 1930s. She also reveals the bullying behaviour of some of the male workers.⁴⁵ The co-op management was often more concerned with its members' dividends than with its workforce's conditions. Jayne Southern has examined many labour disputes in co-ops, examining the clash between co-op identity and ideals and the realities of co-op working conditions.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, often the co-ops were in the fore in concessions over working hours.⁴⁷

Perhaps, of greatest recent interest to historians has been the significance of the co-op movement in labour movement culture. In some major studies it has been absent. This is notably the case with Joanna Burke's outstanding study of working class cultures.⁴⁸ It was also one vision lacking in Patrick Joyce's *Visions of the People*.⁴⁹ This was a strange omission given his sensitive discussion of the 'self-help culture' of the co-ops in his *Work, Society and Politics*. There he commented, 'If respectability was the mark of membership, then this seems to have characterised the majority of working people, especially in the cotton towns'. He rightly noted that in the areas of small masters, the master often shared 'many of the interests of his workers, such as co-op membership'.⁵⁰

Paul Johnson put the co-op societies centre stage in his study of the working class economy in Britain, 1870–1939. He delivered the verdict, 'The real success of consumers' co-operation rested on its dual nature as a saving and as a credit institution, thereby serving the twin financial requirements of working-class households – providing a repository for funds and allow-

43 Chris Wrigley, *Lloyd George and the Challenge of Labour* (Hemel Hempstead, 1990), pp.160 and 164.

44 Thew, *The Pit Village*, p. 112.

45 Thew, *The Pit Village*, pp. 135–147.

46 Jayne Southern, *The Co-operative Movement in North-West England, 1919–1939: Images and Realities*, PhD thesis, University of Lancaster, (1996).

47 Chris Wrigley, *British Trade Unions Since 1933* (Cambridge, 2002), chapter 2.

48 Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures In Britain: Gender, Class And Ethnicity* (London, 1994).

49 Patrick Joyce, *Visions Of The People* (Cambridge, 1991). Walton, 'Co-operation in Lancashire', p. 117.

50 Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society And Politics* (Brighton, 1980), pp. 167 and 289.

ing access to these funds (through credit purchases) at times of need'. Johnson was dismissive of co-operative ideals, observing that 'the spending power of the masses was ultimately more important than the idealism of the leaders'.⁵¹

In contrast Peter Gurney, in one of the most important studies of the British co-operative movement, has argued against the dismissal of the importance of co-operative ideals. He has observed that, 'The majority of members may not have all shared this explicit and developed critique, but many had glimpsed an alternative, anti-competitive future in fragmentary form'.⁵² Gurney succeeds where others have failed in the past half century, in displaying the co-operative movement as an integral part of the British labour movement. He brings it in from the margins. Jean Turnbull and Jayne Southern provide a short assessment of the co-op in one of its stronger areas, Lancashire, with their *More Than A Shop* (1995), dealing with its relationship with the community as well as it as a business.⁵³

Where it was strong, the co-op movement provided some elements of popular culture. Trevor Griffiths, in his Lancashire study, follows Paul Johnson in being dismissive of the co-operative movement's moral aspirations, yet notes the flourishing in Bolton of the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Co-operative Choral Union.⁵⁴ In the inter-war and post Second World War periods the co-op movement became associated with the Woodcraft Folk, the non-militaristic alternative to the scouting movement, formed in 1925. The Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and some other societies were strong supporters, while the central bodies supported British Federation of Co-operative Youth and its successor bodies. The Woodcraft Folk had over 5,000 members in 1939 and nearly 16,000 in 1983.⁵⁵ In comparison, the Co-operative Women's Guild had over 87,000 members in 1939 and peaked in the post-war years in 1950 at nearly 60,000 members. The Women's Co-operative Guild, the co-ops successive youth groups, the choral, debating and other societies and, above all, the Co-op Women's Guild go some way, albeit relatively small, to providing an alternative labour movement culture to that of private enterprise.⁵⁶ It was relatively small compared to that of the SPD in pre 1914 Germany.

51 Paul Johnson, *Saving And Spending* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 142–143.

52 Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester, 1996). See also, Peter Gurney, 'Heads, Hands and the Co-operative Utopia: An essay in historiography', *North West Labour History*, 19, 1994/95, pp. 3–23 (quotation p.15). Peter Gurney, 'Labor's Great Arch: Co-operation and Cultural Revolution in Britain 1795–1926' in E. Furlough and C. Strikwerda (eds), *Consumers Against Capitalism?* (Lanham, Maryland, 1999), pp. 135–171.

53 Jean Turnbull and Jayne Southern, *More Than Just A Shop: A History of the Co-op in Lancashire* (Lancaster, 1995).

54 Trevor Griffiths, *The Lancashire Working Classes, c. 1880–1930* (Oxford, 2001), p. 218.

55 Mary Davies, *Fashioning A New World: A History of the Woodcraft Folk* (Loughborough, 2000). Derek Edgell, *The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, 1916–1949, as a New Age Alternative to the Boy Scouts*, 2 vols (Lampeter, 1992). Brief Woodcraft Folk memories feature in the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, *Writing For A Change: Celebrating co-operative values and achievements* (Burslem, 1994).

56 On this theme see, for instance, Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884–1914* (Manchester, 1990).

An eleventh area of recent historical interest in co-operative history has been as part of comparative labour history. Martin Purvis in his essay on co-operation in Europe 1850–1920 noted that co-operation was linked in several countries with Conservative forces, including the Catholic Church, as well as radical. He also discusses the view that co-operatives were quicker to develop among subject races (by which he referred notably to the Austro-Hungarian Empire) than others, being one form of cultural resistance.⁵⁷ There is major secondary material for international comparisons in Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda's major collection of essays, *Consumers Against Capitalism?*, which provided assessments of individual European, US, Canadian and Japanese movements.⁵⁸ This adds to individual European histories which include an Anglo-German study by Michael Prinz.⁵⁹ Prinz concludes that whereas co-ops in Germany became part and parcel of pillarised political milieus (Social Democratic, Catholic and Liberal), the co-ops in England retained a more independent and self-confident position. In most areas of Britain the co-op movement was slower to move from Liberals to Labour in political allegiances. However, as Stefan Berger has commented, the Prinz study would have been even stronger had it been directly comparative in its structure.⁶⁰ There is also a wealth of material on different forms of co-operation in Africa, Asia and South America, not least among the theses written for the Co-operative College, formerly at Stanford Hall, Loughborough.⁶¹ A twelfth area of interest has been the international co-operative movement and the movement's principles. Rita Rhodes has published a study of 1910–1950 and a brief survey.⁶² William Watkins, Director of the International Co-operative Alliance, 1951–1963, published in 1986 a substantial work on the philosophy of co-operation, *Co-operative Principles: Today and Tomorrow*.⁶³

These twelve areas obviously do not cover all the areas of interest, but do touch on many major themes. In addition, there has been continuing biographical interest, following on from the many studies in Joyce Bellamy and John Saville (eds) *The Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vols 1–10 (London, 1972–2000). The more notable recent biographies include W. Hamish Fraser on Alexander Campbell, and Stephen Yeo on J.T. Mitchell.⁶⁴

57 Martin Purvis, 'Co-operation, Consumption and Politics: Europe 1850–1920' in: Lancaster and Maguire (eds), *Co-operative Commonwealth*, pp. 99–104.

58 Furlough and Strikwerda (eds), *Consumers*.

59 Michael Prinz, *Brot und Dividende. Konsumvereine in Deutschland und England vor 1914* (Göttingen, 1996). Other examples include John Earle, *The Italian Co-operative Movement* (London, 1986) and Walter Hesselbach, *Public, Trade Union and Co-operative Enterprise in Germany: The Commonwealth Idea* (English edition, London, 1976).

60 Stefan Berger's review of Prinz's book in: *German History* 16 (1998), p. 268 f.

61 There is a brief survey, following useful UK information in the UK Co-operative Council, *The Co-operative Opportunity* (Manchester, 1994).

62 Rita Rhodes, *The International Co-operative Alliance During War and Peace, 1910–1950* (Geneva, 1995) and 'The Internationalism of the Co-operative Movement' in Lancaster and Maguire (eds), *Co-operative Commonwealth*, pp. 105–108.

63 W.P. Watkins, *Co-operative Principles: Today and Tomorrow* (Manchester, 1986).

64 W. Hamish Fraser, *Alexander Campbell and the Search for Socialism* (Manchester, 1996). Stephen Yeo, *Who Was J.T. Mitchell?* (Manchester, 1995).

Future writing on co-operation is likely to pay more attention to the local part played by it. Such studies may well move away from the movement to the impact on working class localities of stores. While the very poor may not have been members, there were many relatively poor families who depended on the divi for new shoes or for day trips or longer holidays. Conservative voting working people were often as eager as socialist voters to participate. There is also much need for a more locality-based study of Co-op Party-Labour Party relations and broader co-operative politics.⁶⁵ The political complexion of The Co-op Party and co-op societies have varied in different places at different times, in some places being Left-wing, elsewhere being bastions of the old Labour Right. There is also room for many more high quality business histories. Perhaps, above all, there is need for well-researched comparative studies, both of areas within Britain and international. What is quite clear is that the co-operative movement is the part of British Labour movement which is most in need of historical attention.

⁶⁵ For a recent centenary volume see Rita Rhodes, *An Arsenal For Labour: The Royal Arsenal Society and Politics, 1896–1996* (Manchester, 1998), which is stronger on information than interpretation.