

# Note on the Co-operative Women's Guild

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foreword to:  
Life As We Have Known It  
by  
Co-operative Working Women  
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this book has an introductory letter by Virginia Woolf

Besides being primarily a record of individual experiences, the following memories of co-operative women bring out the part that is played by the workers' own Movements in their every day life. These Movements are very different from philanthropic and social reform organisations. Trade Unionism and Co-operation are woven into the very fabric of the workers' lives. Trade Unionists stretch the warp of a decent living wage. Co-operators thread the woof of intelligent spending on their own manufactured goods, thus gaining control of industry by the people for the people.

So little is generally known of consumers' Co-operation that the numerous allusions to it in the following pages require a brief explanation of the Movement.

People are apt to think of Co-operation as a thrift movement, or to associate it with the Army and Navy Stores . How little it is realised by economists and others that Co-operation is the beginning of a great revolution! The Movement shows in practice that there is nothing visionary or impossible in the aspirations of those who desire to see the Community in control, instead of the Capitalists. Under the Co-operative system, no individuals can make fortunes, Co-operators evidently believing, like the old writer that "money is like muck, no good unless it is spread." No "profits" are made; the surplus, inseparable from trading, is shared among the purchasers, according to the amount each spends. Capital becomes the tool of labour, and not its master.

Men and women, as members of their local co-operative societies, own the shops where they buy, supply their own capital (on which a fixed interest is paid), and manage their business through elected committees and members' meetings, where the rule of one man one vote prevails. Federated together, over 1,000 societies with some 6,000,000 members constitute the England and Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Societies. These, combined, form one of the largest trading and manufacturing concerns in Great Britain. The local societies are also federated into the Co-operative Union for educational, legal and propagandist purposes, and through the Co-operative Party, are allied politically with the Labour Party. The Movement also takes an active part in the International Co-operative Alliance, to which 34 countries are affiliated.

This peaceful revolution from autocratic Capitalism to democratic Co-operation is based on the women's Marketing Basket. Isolated in their own individual homes, it is through their common everyday interests as buyers that married working women have come together, and found their place in the labour world and national life. The Womens' Co-operative Guild (the Guild was founded by Mrs. Acland and Mrs. Lawrenson in 1883) with nearly 1,400 branches and 67,000 members, has given the unity and force which enable the women to become a power in the Movement and to share in its administration. Each branch of the Guild manages its own affairs, and branches are associated in self-governing Districts and Sections. For the whole Guild a Central Committee is elected, and a congress, attended by 1,000 delegates and presided over by the working-woman President for the year, crowns the year's work.

It is usual to regard education as quite apart from practice. But the characteristic of the Guild education is bound up with appropriate action. This combination is naturally attractive to practical housewives. The study of Co-operation leads Guild women not only to buy consistently at the Store, but also to press forward enlightened policies affecting the whole Movement.

There has been, and still is, the usual struggle to obtain "seats for women," but many Guild members are on the Management and Educational Committees of their Societies, several are on the Co-operative Union, and one has been elected as a Director of the Co-operative Wholesale Society. A recent article in the *Co-operative News* has described the Guild as a

“ living link between leaders and the rank and file.....it joins the Co-operative factory to the Co-operative home and makes Co-operation the vital issue at thousands of firesides.....It is a power-house of Co-operative ideas and initiative as well as a testing house for Co-operative policy.....The Guild lives and grows because it refuses to wait till opportunity knocks at the door. It makes opportunity, then uses it vigorously to promote its own and Co-operation’s cause.”

Outside the Co-operative Movement, Guilds-women have effectively voiced the neglected needs of married working-women. They supported vigorously the establishment of School Clinics. They brought forward a National scheme for the care of Maternity, which included many of the points now advocated by the Ministry of Health. After working for the inclusion of Maternity Benefit in the Insurance Act, the Guild was successful in securing Maternity Benefit as the property of the wife. The Guild has also made a notable contribution to braking down class and sex disabilities in public life. Ten Guildswomen are Aldermen, eighty-one are on County and Municipal Councils, eighty-three are magistrates, and many more are taking part in the varied work of numerous public committees.

It will be seen in the Memories that Guildswomen, starting from buying bread and butter on revolutionary principles, have reached an international outlook. This has led to the creation of an International Co-operative Women’s Guild, in which 27 countries, including Soviet Russia, are now taking part. At its recent Congress (1930) in Vienna, attended by 250 delegates from 20 countries, discussions took place on the legal co-operative status of women, and whether the economic position of women should be best solved by State family allowances or factory work. A previous subject had been “The Family Wash,” and methods from riverside washing to co-operative washhouses with electrical labour-saving appliances were illustrated by photographs taken, not only in European countries but in Japan.

The International Guild has steadfastly stood for Peace, and has laid before the League of Nations the strong demand of its members for Disarmament.

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