

Book Reviews

One Hundred Thousand Miles in the Kalahari: a history of co-operative development in Botswana, 1970-75

By Basil Loveridge

Published by Basil Loveridge and available from 3, Richmond Court, Park Lane, Milford-on-Sea, Hants. SO41 0PT. Price: £8.95 including p&p ISBN 13:978-0-9551975-0-5 and 10:0-9551975-0-3

Reviewed by John Collins, who served for 20 years in various UN and EU aid projects and was Project Manager of the EU Trade and Investment Promotion Project in Botswana 1981/1986

Basil Loveridge, a member of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, deserves praise for producing such an interesting and informative study of the International Labour Organisation's Project to develop the Co-operative Movement in Botswana between 1970 and 1975.

When the Project started Botswana was one of the world's 25 poorest countries. There was only six miles of tarred road in a country of 700,000 people, sparsely scattered over an area of 230,000 square miles.

The only national resource was the cattle, sheep and goat farming sector, which was very subject to the vagaries of climate. Its importance is well illustrated by estimated figures of that time that there were over two million cattle and more than one million sheep and goats. The livestock was – and still is! – raised in the north of the country and had to be transported to the abattoir in the south. In 1970 this business was largely in the control of whites, mainly from the then apartheid South Africa.

The Botswana Co-operative Movement had received assistance from British sources in the early 1960s and after independence in 1966. Some well-known UK co-operators such as Bert Youngjohns and Trevor Bottomley, were involved in the early stages and later Edgar Parnell helped to establish the Botswana Union (Wholesale) Society.

However, by 1970, weaknesses were appearing and a detailed review of what existed and what was needed was undertaken. Such a review required that the societies must be visited and individually assessed and other possibilities such as a fishing co-operative, be examined. Basil Loveridge's book includes an excellent series of photographs which illustrate some of the logistical problems that he and his team faced.

A single tour of groups of co-operatives could involve travelling several hundred miles, often on paths with more pot-holes than flat surface.

Basil's account is well rounded, with lots of human interest stories relating to the Project team of international consultants and local counterpart staff. The author gives several detailed descriptions of the problems and opportunities they identified and tackled. For example, in connection with the cattle industry, he explains that:

“The large scale white farmers took their cattle to Lobatse (where the abattoir was based) in large trucks or through the rail-head. These methods were generally beyond the villager, who was dependent on the passing truck, whose owner would pay a much reduced price for his beast. The villagers had to learn that what they could not do alone could be done in association. They formed a marketing co-operative, and together they ran a co-operative marketing agency to get the cattle to the abattoir in groups of twenty or more, either by trekking them through the bush or hiring railway wagons for the journey. These two types of co-operative were absolutely right for Botswana's needs.”

By 1972 the Project was well established and problems and possibilities like the above were being identified and acted upon. This also required the understanding and support of government officers and the local community. Basil puts this very well and his following remarks can be applied to co-operatives everywhere, not only to those in Botswana.

“Co-operatives cannot be imposed on people. They have to be persuaded of their value and accept the role they have to play in managing and owning the enterprise. There is much

discussion, education and training, and when, as in Botswana, it is a matter of starting from scratch, it is impossible to hurry things.”

Basil also pays tribute to the helpful and co-operative attitudes of the Botswana Government and the general population. Having lived and worked there for five years myself, I think it is necessary to put on record that Botswana is a genuine democracy, without any tribal tensions and, very important for a developing country, is devoid of corruption. Despite the discovery of high quality diamonds in the 1970s and, some years later Botswana becoming the “world’s second largest producer of diamonds”, those characteristics of democracy, probity and tolerance remain! The benefits of a growing mining sector have been used for the public good.

I would make a special appeal to the academics reading this review to purchase copies of Basil Loveridge’s history of co-operative development in Botswana between 1970 and 1975 and to use it as a case study for students. Appendix 1 records the impressive achievements made during the

Project. ie number of societies up; number of members up; share capital up; total net surplus up! The team must have been doing something right!

Appendix 2 summarises how the above results were obtained. It deals with centralisation of staff; specialisation of societies; continuing management counselling, previously called “inspections” in the field; training courses; setting up a Co-operative Cattle Agency; providing a new structure for the Botswana Co-operative Union, which had been formed at about the time of Independence in 1966; and the importance and scope of annual reports to make sure that they provided accurate and relevant information for society members.

Let us end this review with a story from Basil’s regular visits around Botswana. It took place in the village of Ukuntsi. The local group were discussing the need for regular visits from central headquarters to individual societies. An old man in the group put the need in clear local terms. He said, “You know, Mr. Loveridge, we have boys out at our cattle posts near the borehole, and if we don’t go to check on them we lose cattle, and if you don’t check on your co-operatives, you will lose them.” Later, Basil tells how he was reminded of this basic rule when regular visits to one seemingly strong society had been ignored and it suddenly developed problems.

The Emergence of Global Citizenship; Utopian Ideas, Co-operative Movements and the Third Sector

Edited by Chushichi Tsuzki, Naobumi Hijikata and Akira Kurimoto

Robert Owen Association of Japan, 2005 ISBN 4-9902273-0-1. Copies available from C/o Consumer Co-operative Institute of Japan, 15, Rokubancho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-0085 Japan

Reviewed by Richard Bickle, Secretary, UK Society for Co-operative Studies

Anyone with an interest in social history will be familiar with the perennial debate in that discipline between the 'Great Men' theory of history (and they invariably are men!) and the 'Great Movements' theory of history. Within the story of the co-operative movement we can identify both individuals such as Robert Owen and groups of people such as the Rochdale Pioneers who have been granted a privileged position within the movement's history by many scholars and co-operators alike down the years.

It was with these thoughts then that I read the first section of this book – a collection of essays about various aspects of Robert Owen's philosophy, life, work and impact. These contributions fitted well with Ian MacPherson's later essay in section 11, *Founders" and the formative years of Caisses Populaire and Credit Unions in North America* and had the book stopped there, I would have been able to confidently recommend it to anyone with an interest in social history or co-operation.

Within the addition of a discussion setting this debate within the context wider questions of 'structure' and 'agency' in the social sciences (ie the extent to which individuals and groups of people behave as independent agents for change and the extent to which these actions are constrained by social structures beyond their control), the book could have been welcomed by a wider readership still.

However, the further through the volume I got – and it runs to 326 pages containing 19 substantial essays – the more I was drawn towards the frustrating conclusion that, despite raising many fascinating practical and theoretical issues, as a whole it was seriously lacking in coherence and at times seemed to

amount to little more than a random selection of papers.

This is a great shame because any of the topics touched upon – the role of co-operatives in conflict resolution, the relationship between economic globalisation and concepts of 'global citizenship', placing co-operative histories within the context of changing economic and social environments, or discussing Co-operative Values within the context of debates about whether there is such a thing as 'universal' human rights, would justify a collection of essay in their own right which would almost certainly command a greater audience than this unwieldy volume.

In particular, Roger Spear's essay looking at the wider 'Third Sector' and 'Social Economy' policy discourse could have been the basis of a series of papers looking at the sometimes contested relationship between Co-operation and Social Enterprise in Britain and the United States compared with the more integrated 'Third Sector' approaches he describes in much of continental Europe.

Reading the Editorial Note, it is clear how this particular format came about. In 1992 the Robert Owen Association of Japan produced a collection of essays entitled *Robert Owen and the World of Co-operation* and "the present volume is (their) attempt to publish a similar volume, a sequence to the first, after the lapse of more than a decade".

Before publishing a third volume, I would respectfully suggest that the Executive Committee of the Robert Owen Association of Japan either begin a regular Journal along the lines of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* and/or an occasional paper series on the model of that produced by the Socialist History Society in the UK.

Co-operatives and Mutuals: the new challenge

An ILP Pamphlet

Independent Labour Publications, Keir Hardie House, 49 Top Moor Side, Leeds LS11 9LW

Reviewed by Trevor Bottomley, Previously Head of Education and Development of the International Co-operative Alliance

This collection of three essays is intended to contribute to a discussion on the possible role of co-operatives and mutual societies in stimulating a 'renewal of socialism'. It begs a number of questions, not least on the particular form of socialism the authors would like to see 'renewed'. In his introduction, the current chairperson of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) properly suggests that co-operatives are a distinctive type of social enterprise and that they require clarity of thought and action if they are to thrive and maintain that distinction. They exist in their own right and for their own purposes and cannot therefore be vehicles for any political persuasion. He also helpfully establishes how co-operatives differ from other forms of enterprise by reference to the core co-operative principles identified by the International Co-operative Alliance. Indeed, after reading the full pamphlet, this reviewer concluded that perhaps its most useful and interesting part could have been an expanded 'introduction'.

One difficulty arises with the first and major essay, *Co-operation, Mutuality and Radical Politics*, is that it attempts to discuss how action in support of the "co-operative and mutual sector" might assist a revival of 'radical' politics. Or, to put it another way, how might 'radical' politicians beneficially promote agencies operating in that sector and so support and advance their own political agendas? This may be a perfectly reasonable objective from a political point of view but it is somewhat misguided. It fails to comprehend that historically, and as the pamphlet's 'Introduction' makes clear, co-operatives and other forms of mutual enterprise exist in their own right with their own distinctive principles and purposes which may not, include a political objective.

Nevertheless, the first essay provides an interesting, although limited, commentary on the origins of the UK's various forms of mutual and co-operative action through "working people coming together to provide collective

self-help solutions to (diverse) needs". It goes on to consider possible reasons for their decline, including state 'socialist' action.

The author makes an almost chauvinistic point when he observes that: "The ability of the British to form mutual associations around a shared interest or concern, controlled by their members, has been a hallmark of the development of civil society over the last four centuries". It is therefore a little surprising that he does not make a stronger or more direct reference to the most notable example of that 'ability', namely the UK co-operative consumer movement. It can be argued that before 1960, this was the dominant retailer in Britain and that in its federal structure it was the largest **socially-owned** enterprise in the history of mankind being owned, financed and controlled entirely by its members. Such an omission is all the more surprising given that the 'Introduction' reminds us, that **member-control**, is an essential characteristic of co-operatives which, together with the pursuit of their own objectives which may not necessarily be those of politicians, make it a "distinctive form of social enterprise".

At this point it is perhaps appropriate to remind ourselves that before 1960 the British co-operative consumer movement had a membership of more than 12 million. The author in fact mentions that pre-war there were some 14 million members of friendly societies. Most of those societies were relatively small and locally managed. If we assumed that there was a total population of 56 million, and that co-operatives' individual membership largely comprising housewives represented average households of 3.5 persons, we can see that consumer co-operatives served more than 75 per cent of the population. It was unlikely, however, that more than a tiny proportion would have joined co-operatives for political reasons. It is more likely that in attracting and maintaining such high membership levels, British consumer co-operatives were satisfying their members' economic and social needs. Self-interest, rather than mutuality or

political concerns, was therefore the motivating factor. If we are to rebuild that movement, it may first be necessary to analyse the reasons for its rapid and virtual demise.

The author concedes that “New Labour does appear to have some degree of a radical vision for the ‘renewal’ of Britain” and that one of its central themes “is putting communities at the heart of the decisions that affect their lives”. He also sees Stephen Yeo’s concept of ‘association’, presumably a new Labour word for ‘co-operation’, as a natural progression from the nineteenth century radical politics of old Labour to new Labour. Moreover, the author believes that numerous co-operative, social and mutual enterprises of various kinds will be the most appropriate vehicles for the latest version of radical politics.

For many of those who have long been engaged in the organisation and management of co-operatives, friendly societies, and other mutual organisations, the notion of political action, let alone ‘radical’ political action, will not be unfamiliar or even original. The pamphlet’s ‘Introduction’ emphasises that if co-operatives are ‘to thrive’, they need clarity of thought and action. Within that, however, it is not clear how relevant the ‘British’ experience of politics, radical or not, might be. An efficient response to personal economic needs would seem to be more important. There also seems to be little evidence either in new Labour, or in contemporary co-operative and mutual enterprises, that the current surge of political interest in their promotion, will justify the hope that they will strengthen new Labour.

I have some difficulty in reviewing the much shorter article by David Byrne entitled *The Temptation of Honest Mutuality*. One reason is that I am not sure what he means by this.

Another is that I do not know at what he is aiming. My difficulty may arise from my inadequate comprehension of the language of current left-wing social analysis. I gather, though, that he is critical of what he terms “welfare capitalism”, while applauding the State’s cash benefits system as being “outstandingly efficient”. Nevertheless, he deprecates the “managerial domination” of the NHS and other social services, believing it to be “bitterly resented by both providers and consumers”.

Referring to experiments in Brazil, Bologna, and even pre-war Peckham, he goes on to propose some form of “worker-managed syndicates” which he believes should combine with agencies of the “users of services” to run social services. Many would agree with his view that radical institutional change is necessary if the delivery of services is to be improved; also that this should include some form of mutuality. David Byrne’s imperative is that “supporters of mutuality have to decide which side to line up with – corporate capital or the socialists”. Some might ask, “What about the Co-operators?”

The third essay by Matthew Brown is a pleasing description of the successful efforts of a group of parents to create a co-operative structure for the village school of Lowick after it had been threatened with closure. This is a commendable and even inspiring story of community action that has an important social purpose. It could provide a guide for similar action, particularly in remote communities, where local schools are threatened with closure. It is suggested that this could be “blueprint”, for an alternative, nationwide system of school provision. This, however, seems unlikely. Imagine the problems there might be in trying to introduce it, say, in Peckham!