

### Historical Background:

The co-operative movement in England had its origins in the writings of Robert Owen from the 1820s. The practical expression of his ideas came in 1844 with the foundation of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, which was fully established by the 1850s. This society opened stores and workshops and was based on the principle of working people linked together in a system of manufacturing, distributing, selling and buying goods in a way that was co-operative and would, therefore, protect their interests. However, co-operative societies excluded women from membership and their early involvement was only as consumers, a fact that was later translated into the visual motto of 'the woman with the basket'.

In 1883 Alice Acland persuaded the editor of the Co-operative News to let her have a 'Woman's Corner'. She used this to print recipes, papers on health and report on classes available to working women on economical cookery. In the issue of 14 April 1883 it was announced that 'The Woman's League for the Spread of Co-operation' had formed and all interested should contact Alice Acland. Her cofounder was Mary Lawrenson. By June there were fifty members and a year later there were 235 and a number of branches had formed, the first in Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire.

In 1885 the League changed its name to the Women's Co-operative Guild, a conscious shift from being a prop to the wider co-operative movement to being a separate guild. The tenor of 'Woman's Corner' had also changed and it was running, alongside recipes, articles on women's university education. In 1889 Margaret Llewelyn Davies replaced Mary Lawrenson as general secretary and the Guild's role as an organ for a combination of socialism and feminism began. In 1889 'Woman's Corner' was addressing questions such as the legal position of women and the 'progress of women' especially through education. Its motto became 'a woman's influence begins at home, who can tell where it ends'. The tension between a domestic and feminist impulse was balanced for the next three decades by the voice of Margaret Llewelyn Davies.

Margaret Llewelyn Davies was born in 1861, the only female child in a family of seven. Her father was a churchman who was deeply influenced by Christian Socialism and her mother was a Unitarian. One paternal aunt founded Girton College, Cambridge, and one maternal aunt was married to Professor George Croom Robertson, an active worker for women's suffrage. Margaret was educated at Queen's College, London, and then Girton and she became involved in social work in her father's poor parish of Marylebone. She became secretary of the Marylebone branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild and in the year she took over as general secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild she moved with her family to the rectory at Kirkby Lonsdale in Westmorland. The offices of the Guild were set up here and a photo of them is at U DCW/6/38. From 1893 her greatest assistant in this work was Lilian Harris who became her lifelong friend (Dictionary of Labour Biography, i, pp.96-7).

In 1889, at the start of Davies's tenure, the Guild had 1700 members in 51 branches and she began work immediately on its organization. The first Women's Co-operative Guild brooches were engraved. The branches were grouped under six district secretaries, but the emphasis on democratic self-government of the branches was retained and the central committee was democratically elected and conducted an advisory role. The concept that Guild meetings were not mothers's meetings that 'descend into mere sewing classes' but meetings of women with a public duty and role to fulfil was emphasised in circulars to branches (Davies, *The Women's Co-operative Guild*, pp.32 & 35; Webb, *The woman with the basket*, p.32; U DCW/1/1).

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The work of the Guild can be seen as falling into two categories while Davies was the general secretary. First, it promoted the principles of the co-operative movement through publications like *The importance of women for the co-operative movement* and by opening the Sunderland co-operative store in 1902. Second, it involved itself in a number of political campaigns designed to improve the political and legal position of women and the social conditions of women, especially of the working classes. It encouraged women to join trade unions and lobbied for a minimum wage for women and equal pay. Early annual reports indicate that their campaign for women's suffrage took the direction of directly petitioning the prime minister, for example in 1906 (U DCW/2/1).

The Guild also became heavily involved in issues of women's health. For example, in 1898 it took an interest in the Midwives' Registration Bill and their concern about the need for proper care of women before, during and after childbirth culminated in the publication of one of its best known and most controversial works *Maternity: letters from working women* (Webb, *The woman with the basket*, pp.123-33).

*Maternity* uncovered the appalling plight of working class women, dragged down by too many often dangerous pregnancies and poor medical care, by publishing the letters of 160 women themselves, partly at the urging of Virginia Woolf. Most of the women wrote to say they had had a difficult time; the case of the woman who had had eight live births, one still birth and four miscarriages was not unusual. After one miscarriage she felt dreadful for four months until she finally felt she had to find the money for a doctor. He told her she was expecting the twin of the baby that had miscarried and when this second baby came it only lived a few months (*Maternity*, pp.33-5).

Many of the women blamed their difficulties on 'ignorance': 'my mother did not consider it proper to talk about such things' said one woman (*Maternity*, p.64). Moral constraints against contraception resulted in most women being afraid to take control of their own fertility. Ironically, when they were then forced by desperation to resort to the many dangerous abortifacients on the black market, the morality of their actions weighed on them heavily: 'I took the strong concoctions to purge me of the little life that might be mine' wrote one woman. The same woman spoke of crying 'for very weariness and hopelessness', the 'crown of glory' of motherhood turning into a crown of thorns. She educated herself, reading over the washing tub, and this letter is in a class of its own; in another life she could have been a writer (*Maternity*, pp.44-9).

The Guild was ultimately successful in forcing an amendment to the National Health Insurance Bill so that maternity benefit would be paid to the mother and not the father of a child. Women's economic independence was a continuing issue for the Guild. It also worked on medical aid schemes, did a survey of infant mortality, set up classes for mothers and dispensaries for babies (Webb, *The woman with the basket*, ch.10).

In 1910 the Guild gave evidence before the Royal Commission into divorce law reform and Davies argued in favour of easier, cheaper procedures and an equal law for women and men. Under pressure from the Catholic Federation, the Co-operative Union advised the Guild to drop the matter, but Davies refused and the financial grant from the Union to the Guild was withdrawn. Davies carried on without their financial support and never changed her opinions (*Dictionary of Labour Biography*, i, pp.98-9).

The Women's Co-operative Guild came into confrontation with male co-operators even more seriously over pacifism in the years around the first world war. Linked to Davies's pacifism were attempts to promote global co-operation. In 1908 the congress of the Women's Co-

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operative Guild put up a proposal for an international alliance of co-operative women and it passed the motto 'of whole heart cometh hope, of comradeship comes strength'. Davies was not a member of the Communist Party (though she supported the Russian Revolution from 1917), but the rhetoric of 'comradeship' in the Guild's motto was not accidental.

In 1913, plans to set up an international alliance of co-operative women came closer to fruition with the attendance of several women delegates at the International co-operative Congress in Glasgow. Amongst these women was Emmy Freundlich of the Austrian Women's Co-operative Guild (see U DCX/7). Emmy Freundlich, like Davies, was a committed pacifist and wrote after the war had started to suggest a meeting of women co-operators 'to speak about peace'. The same letter of 1915 stated 'it is very necessary that we co-operative women have relations together when our men are fighting one another'. She believed that 'women must now be the protectors of international life'. It was an ideal that drove a wedge between male co-operators and the Women's Co-operative Guild in England as well as elsewhere (Webb, *The woman with the basket*, pp.169-70).

In 1921, after the war, hopes for an international alliance were fulfilled with the setting up of the International Women's Co-operative Guild with Emmy Freundlich as its first president (see U DCX). Honora Enfield, active in the English Guild and author of *The place of co-operation in the new social order* (1920), became the first general secretary. 1921 was also the year that Margaret Llewelyn Davies and Lilian Harris resigned their posts in the Guild. It was a high point on which to leave, at a time when women's co-operation never looked stronger; a revival at the end of the war saw the opening of 68 new branches with 11,631 new members in the years 1919 to 1920 and international links were finally forged. Margaret Llewelyn Davies and Lilian Harris were given the freedom of the Guild in 1922 (see U DCW/7/24 for the published account of this) and Davies continued to be politically active until her death in 1944 (Webb, *The woman with the basket*, p.134).

The 1920s were years of continuing success for the Guild. By 1933 it had 72,000 members in 1513 branches and over 1600 members attended the Jubilee congress in this year. A marvellous photograph of Margaret Llewelyn Davies and Lilian Harris at the Jubilee congress is at U DCW/6/10. There are also two of Emmy Freundlich, one of which is a London newsagency photograph of her on the rostrum delivering an animated speech (U DCW/6/39).

Throughout the 1920s Guild publications rolled off their presses indicating the strength of their confidence as a political organization. In 1923 Lilian Harris wrote *New forces for co-operative efficiency* and it was followed the the next year with *What can a Labour government do for co-operation?* by Emmy Freundlich. One of the earliest workers in the Guild, Catherine Webb (photograph at U DCW/6/39), wrote *The woman with the basket*, which came out in 1927 and is still one of the best sources for the history of the Guild. It replaced Davies's publication in 1904, *The Women's Co-operative Guild*, which had been the standard history. In 1931 Davies separately edited *Life as we have known it*, a series of autobiographical pieces from early workers in the Guild. Virginia Woolf arranged its publication. 'A Jubilee sketch, Buyers and builders', was written by Evelyn Sharp in 1933 (see U DX148/1)

In the 1930s the Guild turned its attentions to peace campaigning; it ran the dramatically effective white poppy campaign in 1932, using white poppies as an inversion of the armistice symbol of the red poppy. The fact that the Guild women were able to recognize the need for such action in 1932 may be attributed to their longstanding desire for international co-operation; they were perhaps more aware than most people of trouble brewing through their European contacts like Emmy Freundlich.

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In the year of the white poppy campaign, Freundlich published her speech to the International Women's Organization, The call of the mother's goes forth. Down with war. Down with arms. Her call to motherhood was directly antipathetical to Hitler's call to Arian mothers and in 1934 the English Guild found themselves frantically petitioning for her release after she was imprisoned as part of the Nazi assault upon Austrian socialists (see U DCX). Directly after her release she spent time in England and there is a photograph of her at this time at U DCW/6/34. The Guild ran peace demonstrations right through the 1930s (photographs at U DCW/6/55, 57, 59-61, 64), but failure became starkly evident in 1939 when Emmy Freundlich was one of the many people forced to flee Austria ahead of another European war.

During the second world war the Women's Co-operative Guild continued to combine their socialism and feminism with calls (though muted) for peace. In a set of notes in 1941 Guild speakers were advised to emphasise the progressive social policies of New Zealand: 'what New Zealand can do should not be impossible for us' (U DCW/5/12). Their feminism was in evidence in 1942 when speakers were advised to talk about how before the war women were trying 'to abolish the inferiority of status which was their lot for so many years'. They put the old struggle for suffrage in terms of 'emancipation from man's control' (U DCW/5/14). They also continued to concern themselves specifically with issues faced by working class women such as maternity services and the need for decent food.

After the war the Guild's vision became very global. Notes for speakers in 1948 were entitled 'Feeding the world' (U DCW/5/33). The Guild began to run food and aid projects, for example, in various African countries (see U DCW/6/73). English delegates of the Guild went abroad regularly to visit overseas guilds, and overseas guildswomen visited Britain in their turn. The tensions between the Guild's feminism and its emphasis on the needs of housewives surfaced dramatically with the postwar drive to get women out of the workplace and back into the domestic sphere and the Guild focused more and more on its global vision. In addition, in 1962 the Guild was worried that 'forces of reaction and capitalism' were building up against the co-operative movement generally and, consequently, they identified themselves more closely with other co-operative societies. The International Women's Co-operative Guild did the same and was subsumed as a committee of the International co-operative Alliance. In the same year, 1963, the Women's Co-operative Guild effected a significant name change to the Co-operative Women's Guild; this was accepted at the Birmingham congress which was hosted by the Birmingham Co-operative Society.

Thus, by the early 1960s, instead of holding their own congresses the Guild was accepting invitations from other co-operative societies to host congresses for them; in 1963 concern was expressed that getting anyone to host the next one had been difficult. Photographs of this period of the Guild's history indicate that speakers at congresses were no longer exclusively female and by 1959 the Guild was holding knitting contests with prizes given out by men. In that year the prize went to a pair of socks. The knitted garments were all for needy people and were presented to the mayor of Birmingham. In effect, the socialism (and an anti-nuclear pacifism) of the Guild was intact, but its feminism had been left behind. Annual reports of the 1960s covered issues of the co-operative movement generally and the national and international social work of the Guild as well as recipe and sewing competitions. Margaret Llewelyn Davies's early admonition to branches not to allow their meetings to 'descend into mere sewing classes' was just an echo while the domestic ethos of the postwar period prevailed. The chosen theme for 1964 was 'home and family' (U DCW/2/28) and no discussions at all can be found of women's political equality or economic independence.

**Custodial history:**

Donated by Dr Barbara Blaszak, New York, July 1981

**Description:**

Two items relating to the Co-operative Women's Guild including its Jubilee history (1933) and its Rules and Standing Orders (1968).

**Extent:** 2 items

**Related material:**

Main archive of the Co-operative Women's Guild [U DCW] including photographs of the Jubilee Congress in London [ref U DCW/6/10]

Records of the International Women's Co-operative Guild, 1921-1961 [U DCX]

Records of Hull Branches of Various Trade Unions, the Hull Trades Council and Hull Central Branch of the Co-Operative Women's Guild, 1893-1968 [U DP/161]

Jean Oxley's Scrapbook, 'Our Hometown', 1976-1977 [C DSCG]

Records of Hull and East Yorkshire Co-operative Society [U DHC]

**Other repositories:**

Records of the Co-operative Women's Guild, Bishopsgate Institute [GB 0372]

Records of the Co-operative Women's Guild, London School of Economics Library, Archives Division [GB 0097]

National Co-operative Archive [GB 1499]

**Access conditions:**

Access will be granted to any accredited reader

U DX148/1	'Buyers and Builders', by Evelyn Sharp A Jubilee Sketch of the Women's Co - operative Guild, 1883-1933. A short illustrated history of the Guild it includes photographs of some of the women who served as General Secretary or as National President. There is also a photograph of the Central Committee in 1933. 1 item	1933
U DX148/2	Rules and Standing Orders of the Co - operative Women's Guild Some aspects have been annotated and marked. 1 item	May 1968