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REVIEWS

Co-operative Production. By BENJAMIN JONES. With a Prefatory Note by the Right Hon. A. H. Dyke Acland, M.P. Oxford: The Clarendon Press. 1894.

THE author of these two volumes is, as Mr. Acland states in his prefatory note, a well-known figure of the Co-operative world. He is one of the most active and prominent members of that body of administrators of co-operative business which comprises some of the shrewdest working men in the country. From the very nature of the position that he occupies he is as fully cognisant as any man can be of the main directions in which the stream of co-operative enterprise has pursued its course, and therefore he is as competent also to express a decided opinion on the constituent elements of which that stream is made up, and on the circumstances which at one time or place have increased, at another have diminished, its volume. In the book before us he does not shrink from giving emphatic expression to this opinion. But he has in addition, as the book proves, been at considerable pains to explore the various nooks and recesses in which the smaller tributaries of the co-operative river have now and again burst forth into existence, and after an interval of greater or less duration dried up, or have contrived to retain, in some cases a feeble, in others a more potent and enduring, measure of activity. Accordingly, as Mr. Acland observes, the volumes place on permanent record much that might otherwise disappear into the limbo of the forgotten; and for the fulfilment of this important task all students of social history will be grateful to Mr. Jones.

There are, however, we think, certain defects in his treatment; and we believe these defects to be due, at any rate in some measure, to the position that he occupies. We cannot help feeling that a laudable desire to be comprehensive has betrayed him into needless and wearisome prolixity. No doubt the social pioneer can hardly hope to push his way to any distance on the path of reform unless he is willing humbly to profit by the lessons of experience. No doubt he will be unable to read those lessons aright, or to derive the full instruction which they contain, unless he is at the trouble to acquaint himself with particular details; for it is often the case that success or failure has turned upon some one detail which a careless observer might neglect as

unimportant. But Mr. Jones has taken a larger view of his duties than these conditions demand. In some parts of his book he appears animated with a desire to write the history of the whole co-operative movement rather than of that special phase of it which his title indicates. We doubt if it would be possible to find any side of that movement of which Mr. Jones has not contrived to include some mention—and not infrequently a mention, as it appears to us, of undue length—within the pages of his book. Surely a part of his story becomes thus a mere repetition of a thrice-told tale; and demands, which might well have been spared, are made on the courage of the reader to commence, and on his patience to conclude, the perusal of two volumes containing between them more than eight hundred pages. We admit that Mr. Jones may plead the necessity, or at least the advantage, of showing the connection of the phase of the movement with which he is professedly dealing, with the other departments of co-operative enterprise. We acknowledge with grateful sincerity the possibility that so distinguished a representative of so important a movement—of which he may justly claim to have himself been '*pars magna*'—may feel a legitimate pride in exhibiting the successes it has won, and the services it has rendered to the cause of social advancement. But we remain of the opinion that Mr. Jones might have compressed his narrative with advantage to himself and his readers—to himself, because his book would probably have been more widely and carefully studied—to his readers, who would have been able to carry away a clearer and more permanent impression of its contents.

The error into which, as it appears to us, Mr. Jones has fallen is, we think, in some measure to be attributed to the position that he occupies. Being inside the movement he has access to stores of information which others cannot command; but he will forgive us for affirming that the outsider may conceivably be better placed for viewing the phenomena in their true perspective. It is from such a point of view that we are disposed to criticise his liberal interpretation of the limits of his subject. For we attribute—whether rightly or wrongly—the copiousness of his narrative, not merely to a natural desire to utilise the abundant material of which he exhibits so thorough a knowledge, nor only to a legitimate pride in the greatness of the movement with which he is so honourably connected, but also to the sense in which he, in common with many others, uses the term 'co-operative production.'

It is, no doubt, open to a writer to use a term in a sense which he defines; and Mr. Jones can appeal to an usage, which has established itself over no inconsiderable area, in support of the sense he himself apparently intends to convey by the words. But we believe that this usage has led to some misapprehension and confusion. If any instructed economist were asked what it was that economic literature intended by 'co-operative production,' he would probably

reply that it was a system under which the workmen engaged in a business took on themselves the responsibilities of management and distributed the profits. If an inquiry were addressed to the plain citizen with a view of ascertaining the sense in which he understood that 'co-operative production' was a remedy for industrial disputes, the answer would probably be returned that it was by making workmen their own employers, managing the business, and distributing the profits. If you put a question to a survivor of the old Christian Socialists in order to acquaint yourself with the reason for his support of the co-operative movement, he would answer in all likelihood that he looked forward to a social regeneration to be accomplished by enabling workmen to direct the business in which they were employed and to share the profits among themselves. It is in this sense of the words that 'co-operative production' has won the sympathy—whether founded on reason or not, whether falsified by stern practical experience or not—of the general public and the professional economist.

But it is in a far wider sense that the term is interpreted in Mr. Jones's volumes. The productive enterprises of the retail stores, which scarcely exceed the dimensions of domestic industries, the larger undertakings of the wholesale societies, even the cotton spinning companies, which have given—and, it would seem, deservedly—so much importance to the town of Oldham, find a place in his narrative, together with those small productive societies where that idea of profit-sharing, which rightly or wrongly has enlisted the sympathies of the public and the economist, has been carried—in some cases, no doubt, imperfectly, in others disastrously—into practice. Is there not, we may ask, some danger of misapprehension in this comprehensive use of the words? We may possibly interpret 'co-operative production' as implying of necessity the recognition of the principle of distributing the profits among the workmen engaged in a business. Or we may extend the term until it covers those enterprises for productive purposes, in which there is this element of co-operation—that the profits are divided, not between shareholders, customers, and workmen, but between the first two classes alone—and we should then bring under the term the productive undertakings of the retail stores and of the English Wholesale Society. But it is surely an application of the term, which can hardly stand the test of rigorous analysis, to use it of the Oldham Spinning Mills. Their only title seems to be that historically they are connected with the main co-operative movement, or that their members consist for the most part of working men. But they can hardly establish a better claim to be examples of co-operation than would be accorded on a philosophical view to the sliding scale and to the many varieties of piece-wages; and this Mr. Jones himself virtually admits. Yet his use of the term apparently enables him to apply it to any enterprise for production which exhibits at the present, or has enjoyed in the past, a connection with the co-operative movement.

Has this not a suspicious resemblance to merging the essential in the accidental, and substituting vagueness for precision ?

We have ventured on this criticism with the more confidence, because we are disposed to attach great weight to the objections which Mr. Jones urges again in this book, and he with others has advanced elsewhere, to the principles and practice of profit-sharing. We regard this as one of those cases in which the amiable hopes of the theorist sustain a rude, but salutary, shock from coming into contact with the stubborn resistance of practical experience. We think indeed that the vision of a co-operative commonwealth, such as that indicated by the evidence, to which Mr. Jones refers in his first chapter, of Mr. Mitchell before the Labour Commission, and apparently, if we may judge by his concluding chapter, approved by Mr. Jones himself, is scarcely less imaginative than the ideal of the Christian Socialists. But we find it difficult to rate too highly the practical conclusions on profit-sharing to which actual co-operative administration has led many hard-headed men of the stamp and calibre of Mr. Jones. The difficulty of devising a satisfactory and equitable system of distributing a share of the profits among the workmen ; the inadvisability of allowing the workmen actually employed in a business to serve as officers in the stores for which they are working—these are lessons drawn from practical experience which it may well behove eager theorists to ponder with patient humility. Less unquestionable, but scarcely less deserving of consideration, are the points that the system of imparting a share in the profits to the consumer is democratic in its tendencies and liberal in its aims, while profit-sharing on the contrary is prone to engender a spirit of narrow exclusive aristocracy, and that the direct tangible immediate interest of the workmen in an advance of wages is likely, should a conflict arise, to outweigh his distant and problematic interest in a diminution of profits. These last points have been urged by other inquirers, but they are forcibly stated afresh by Mr. Jones in the concluding chapters of the present book ; and, if they do not appear to be entirely free from the bias of the ardent partisan, they are at any rate based on wide knowledge and long experience.

We have left ourselves little space for examining the abundant and interesting material, which Mr. Jones has gathered together on the history of what we venture to consider 'co-operative production' in the stricter sense of the term—of productive enterprises, that is, in which the workmen actually engaged in the work manage the business and divide the profits. But we do not know that there is much that is new to be said on this topic, or that it would be profitable, or indeed possible, to compress within the necessary limits of a review even a sufficient sample of the details which Mr. Jones has recorded. The story is undoubtedly discouraging to those who regard 'co-operative production,' in this strict sense of the words, as a panacea for social ills. It has attained as yet a very limited amount of success ; and the causes of failure have produced themselves with disappointing reiteration.

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Mutual distrust, quarrels and jealousy, impatience and rashness, are defects to which human nature has always been liable; and, unless they are counteracted, they will ruin the most promising schemes. But on the other hand, if 'co-operative production' thus interpreted be regarded, not as a panacea, but as one form out of many which the society of the future may not improbably assume, we do not know that the verdict to be pronounced is of necessity unfavourable, or that Mr. Jones's examination of the attempts of the past is wholly discouraging. For he shows that other branches of the co-operative movement, which are now admitted successes, have won their position at the cost of experiment and failure; and it is no less true of this than of other projects of social reform, that the experience of the past is likely to prove of advantage to the future.

Of the exhaustiveness of Mr. Jones's treatise it is unnecessary to offer any proof. He first gives an account of the earlier attempts, which include the various experiments—not always accompanied by discretion—of Robert Owen, of Communities, of Labour Exchanges, of Redemption Societies, and of the projects of the Christian Socialists. In his later chapters he traces the various forms of 'co-operative production,' no longer chronologically, but trade by trade. The recognition by law in 1862 of the principle of limited liability forms the dividing point, and the subsequent chapters bear the headings of Domestic Production, Corn Milling, the Wholesale Societies, Cotton Factories, Woollen Factories, Sundry Textile and Kindred Societies, Efforts in the Iron Trade, Colliery Failures, Associations in the Building and Allied Trades, Printing, Publishing, and Paper Making, Success and Failure in Agriculture, and, lastly, Miscellaneous Societies. These headings will illustrate the variety of the material that has been collected and the largeness of the area which Mr. Jones has traversed, and he is as careful as he is apparently impartial in setting forth the history of the different experiments and the possible reasons of their failure or success. It may perhaps be stated generally that success has followed where the ground has been prepared beforehand, where a market is secured, and the speculative element is no longer prominent. Collieries, for instance, have failed and ventures in the iron trade have proved disastrous, while in the printing and allied industries the probability of becoming a master has apparently served to prevent the trial of co-operative production where it might seem likely to succeed. Mr. Jones's book enforces afresh the salutary lesson that we must look for social reform to be accomplished in various directions and by gradual stages. A hard lesson, it may be said, but by no means destitute of hope.

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