

# THE CO-OPERATIVE UNION LIBRARY

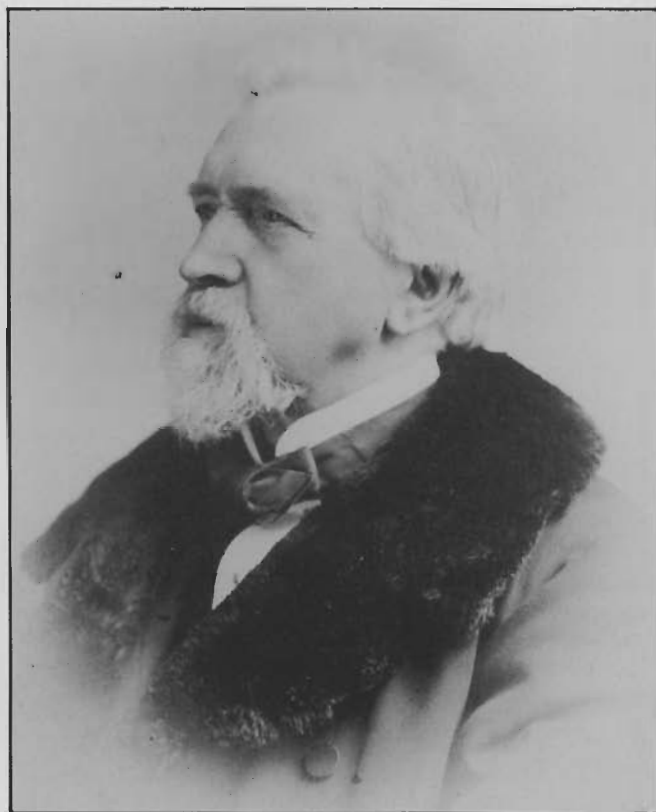
Roy Garratt

The Library of the Co-operative Union, the national federation of Britain's consumer retail Co-operative societies, is situated in the Union's headquarters — Holyoake House, Hanover Street, Manchester. This unusual library is the national historical library of the British Co-operative Movement, visited by historians, economists and educationists from all over the world. It is also a modern reference collection serving the day-to-day inquiries of the staff of the Co-operative Union in the work of their departments. To place this Library in context, it is necessary to have some acquaintance with the history of the Co-operative Movement in Britain and of its national federation — the Co-operative Union.

The Co-operative Movement is in the main a product of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th Century and in this country is predominantly a retail movement. Workers in the last century were exploited in the mills and factories and this contributed to the rise of the Trade Union Movement. They also faced exploitation as consumers. Consequently the Co-operative Movement arose as a practical protest against the adulteration of food, false weights and measures and overpricing which often occurred with private shopkeepers because of the absence of adequate consumer protection laws. The most notable example of consumer Co-operation was the establishment in 1844 of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society in Toad Lane, Rochdale. This society operated so successfully in the interests of its consumer-members that it became the model for the establishment of similar societies throughout the United Kingdom and eventually all over the world.

Although each British Co-operative was sovereign and independent they soon felt the need to co-operative with one another. Firstly many societies experienced difficulty in obtaining adequate supplies of goods from private wholesalers, anxious not to offend their private trade clients, so in 1863 the Co-operatives established a wholesale organisation which eventually became known as the Co-operative Wholesale Society. This society is today Britain's 25th biggest business and is the Co-operative Movement's principal wholesaling agency and manufacturer. In 1867 societies provided themselves with insurance protection by forming the Co-operative Insurance Company which today is the Co-operative Insurance Society, a household word in the field of business and family insurance. Co-operative banking facilities were set up in 1872 and the Co-operative Bank is now the 6th largest bank in Britain.

But still societies felt scattered and not sufficiently in touch to exchange useful advice and information on how to develop their enterprises. Many people were anxious to form their own Co-operatives and beat a path for guidance to Rochdale and other successful societies which were almost overwhelmed with such inquiries. Consequently the Co-operative Union was formed in 1869 as the central co-ordinating, information and advisory body of the Co-operative Movement. Its primary task was to advise people on how to set up their own Co-operatives, and through an annual national Congress, attended by representatives from its member-societies, act as a forum for the exchange

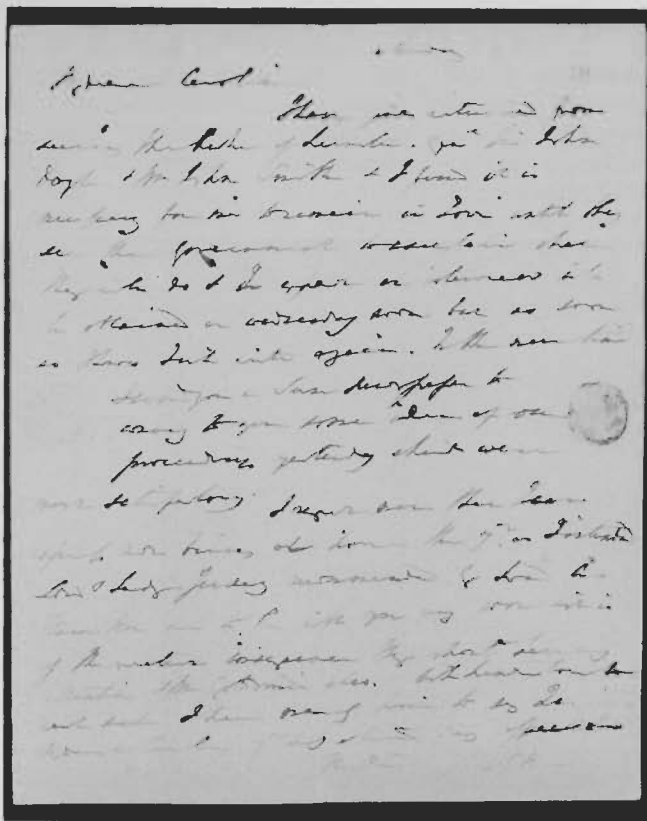


*G.J. Holyoake, a founder of the Co-operative Union. The Union's headquarters are named after Holyoake.*

of ideas and information and for the formulation of national Co-operative policies on relevant issues.

The Union, as the 'umbrella' organisation of the developing Co-operative Movement naturally acquired many documents and books relating to famous Co-operators, to its member-societies, to foreign Co-operative organisations, and to the theory and practice of Co-operation. The Union was housed in one or two small, non-descript offices in the centre of Manchester but as the Co-operative Movement developed so did the Co-operative Union, with increasing demands placed on its advisory services. In 1906 matters came to a head with the death of George Jacob Holyoake, a remarkable Co-operative leader and a founder of the Co-operative Union. The Co-operative Congress in that year decided that a building should be erected as a memorial to Holyoake to house the Co-operative Union. Advocating this memorial, one of the Congress delegates, H. Vivian M.P., said a central building for the Co-operative Union would be the focal point for the spread of ideas which were of vital importance to the progress of Co-operation. Mr Vivian went on "...it would enable us to bring together from all parts of the world books, literature, prints and magazines connected with the history of Co-operation. It is most important that we should not allow our literature to be scattered and some of it lost for all time".

The Congress unanimously agreed that a new headquarters for the Co-operative Union should be built. A subscription was raised from member-societies of the Union and the



Original letter dated 2 August, 1823, from Robert Owen to his wife Caroline recording that Lord and Lady Jersey and Sir Alexander Hamilton are to visit Owen's model factory and village at New Lanark. This is letter no.39 in the Library's Robert Owen Collection of Letters and Documents.

building was completed and opened in 1911. And not before time because an outstanding legacy from Holyoake was his precious collection of 3,000 letters and documents relating to Robert Owen, the great 19th Century Co-operator, social reformer and philanthropist. Holyoake was Owen's friend and disciple — indeed he had gone to prison for preaching his Owenite beliefs — and he himself had been eminent in Co-operative, socialist and secularist activities. His own books, papers and letters — totalling about 4,500 — were left to the Union by his widow. Possession of these two rich historical collections naturally excited the attention of scholars in Britain and overseas, and this point will be discussed later.

In its early years, the Library for the most part was a repository of the historical records of the Co-operative Movement but in 1919 it gained a new dimension. In that year the Co-operative College was established within Holyoake House. Consequently, the Library provided a service of modern text-books and reference works for the 40 students in their various studies. In 1946 the College was transferred to more spacious premises at Stanford Hall, Loughborough, and a considerable number of books went with it to form the nucleus of the new College Library. Incidentally, this College has considerably expanded, now housing more than 100 students from Britain and overseas and providing long and short-term courses for both professional and voluntary Co-operators. It is recognised by the Department of Education and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

To retrace our steps a little, during the Second World War, Holyoake House was hit during the German

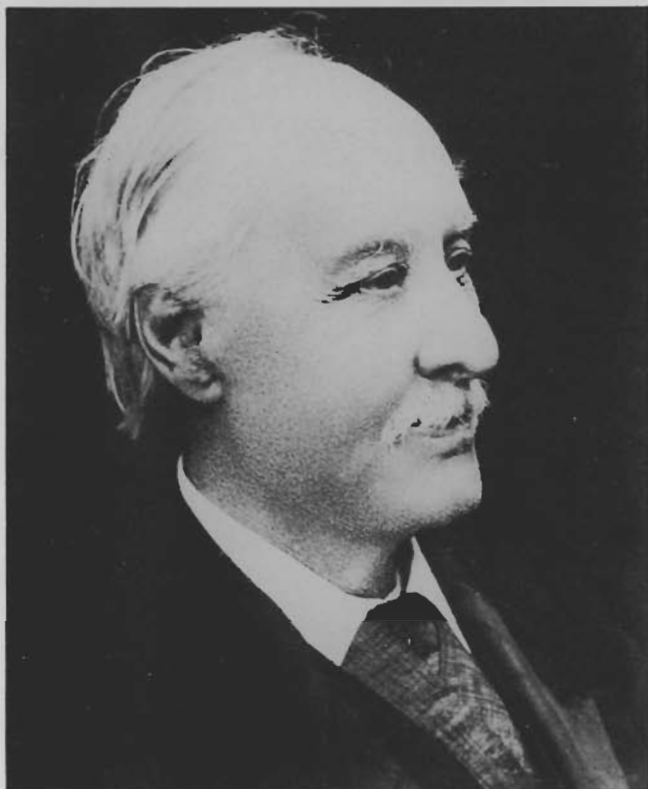
'blitzkrieg' on Manchester. Incendiary bombs fell into the Library destroying many books. Miraculously, the great manuscript collections relating to Robert Owen and G.J. Holyoake were preserved. They had been hurriedly placed in an old metal trunk by someone on the diminished staff still working at the Co-operative Union. The trunk was found amid the wreckage in the Library. It was feared that the heat from the fire would have reduced the contents to ashes but on opening the box there were the contents safe and sound.

The first Librarian of note was Desmond Flanagan who had been transferred from the Publications Department of the Union after the Second World War. Mr Flanagan was a journalist by profession but he had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the British and overseas Co-operative Movements and had written many pamphlets on various aspects of Co-operative history. His chef d'oeuvre, *A Centenary History of the Co-operative Union*, was published in 1969. This book, which appeared in both hardback and paperback editions, is one of the basic works on British Co-operation and its central organisation. Mr Flanagan was also charged with the task of running the Library as a reception centre for overseas visitors. Co-operative businessmen, lay-leaders, educationists, Government representatives — including ministers and ambassadors — and, of course, students from as far afield as the United States to the Pacific Islands visit Holyoake House seeking first hand information on the British Co-operative Movement. Mr Flanagan (who died in 1969) and the present incumbent have been responsible for organising suitable programmes for these visitors including study in the Library, lectures and interviews with senior officials of national Co-operative organisations, visits to Co-operative society shops and stores, and pilgrimages to the Rochdale Pioneers Museum, the birthplace of the world-wide Co-operative Movement. A great deal of the time of the Librarian is occupied with arranging and carrying out these programmes for overseas visitors, but the Library is regarded as basically a public relations service. The logic is that public relations involve the dissemination of information and that also is the identical task of the Library. Therefore, to mix these functions seems reasonable.

The present Librarian is also a journalist by profession and because of his background knowledge of British Co-operation and its history he has written and edited books and pamphlets on the subject and lectured extensively in the United Kingdom and abroad. He also answers many historical inquiries by correspondence and telephone. There is an Assistant Librarian who is a Chartered Librarian. She attends to the day to day administration of the Library and supervision of students. She also participates on occasion in carrying out programmes for overseas visitors. As a Library, its primary duty is to serve the Union itself. It is the repository of a vast amount of business and technical data essential to the Union staff during the course of their work and new books are constantly acquired for their consultation. On the periodical side alone, the Library obtains more than 200 British and foreign business and technical magazines and journals.

As the national historical library of the British Co-operative Movement, the Library is the archive for three great collections of correspondence, manuscripts and documents — in addition to those of Robert Owen and G.J. Holyoake, there is also a rich collection of material relating to Edward Owen Greening, the pioneer of Co-operative Co-partnership Societies in Britain and a founder of the International Co-





Edward Owen Greening, a founder of the International Co-operative Alliance, the 'United Nations' of the world-wide Co-operative Movement. The Library has a collection of his letters.

name catalogues for the Holyoake collection which has been completely photocopied for the use of students.

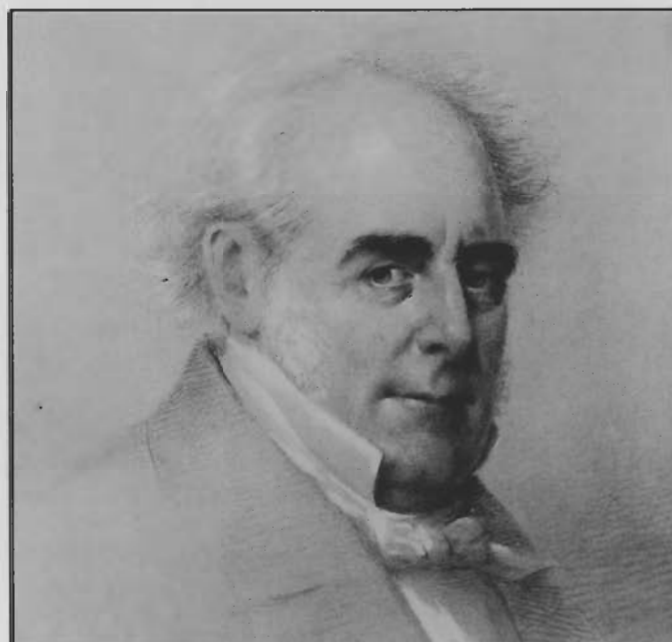
Perhaps less well known than Owen and Holyoake is the name of Edward Owen Greening (1836-1923) but his work for Co-operation in many ways equalled theirs. He advocated the development of productive societies (factory co-operatives wholly owned by the workers) or co-partnership Co-operatives (invested in by both workers and sympathetic retail Co-operatives). Like Holyoake, Greening was a founder of the Co-operative Union and opened Holyoake House in 1911. The Library possesses a remarkable collection of some 15,000 letters and documents relating to Greening. Cataloguing of these has almost been completed. The collection is again notable for the wide range of interests it covers but since the resurgence of worker Co-operatives in Britain during the past decade there has been particular interest in Greening's work for the Co-operative productive Movement. Greening, too, wrote a number of books which are in the Library.

The most precious and famous documents concerning the Rochdale Pioneers are, of course, on display at the Rochdale Pioneers Museum, Toad Lane, but a number of others or copies have been retained in the Library. Unhappily, the Library does not hold any manuscripts of Dr William King (1786-1865) a Brighton physician and advocate of retail Co-operative societies, whom many regard as the real 'Father of Co-operation'. However, it has in its archives two first editions of King's influential journal *The Co-operator* which was avidly read by members of the Rochdale Pioneers.

The Union Library probably has the most comprehensive collection of histories of individual co-operative societies in the United Kingdom. Many societies commissioned

histories of their progress when they celebrated jubilees or centenaries. These range from flimsy leaflets of a few pages to beautifully bound, gold leaf editions of considerable length. They are often the only source of information about a Co-operative society which has ceased separate existence through amalgamation or merger and whose records have unfortunately been lost or destroyed. (The Library had consistently advocated over the years that Co-operatives ceasing to exist, or for any other reason, should ensure that their minute books and other records of historical interest for safekeeping should be deposited with a county archive, public or university library or other appropriate institution and that the Union Library be informed). A bibliography by John Smethurst of these society histories was published by the Co-operative Union some years ago but is now out of print. Copies of the bibliography were purchased by many public and university libraries. Also included in the society histories' collection are a number of runs of societies' own journals published for their members or employees. The Library also has a complete set of Co-operative Union Directories from 1887 to date. Again these volumes are often the only source of basic information about certain societies — usually short-lived — which did not preserve their records or publish a history.

A sole source of much historical information are the bound volumes of the *Co-operative News*, the official journal of the Co-operative Movement and the world's oldest Co-operative newspaper. The Library is fortunate in having a complete run of the *News* from 1871 to date. If records are missing or books were never published about a certain Co-operative event, an account of it will probably be found in the *Co-operative News*. Of equal value for Scotland are the volumes of the sister-newspaper *The Scottish Co-operator*. It is a source of regret that this Library did not receive the collection of *Reynolds News* and *Sunday Citizen* volumes when *Sunday Citizen* ceased publication. *Reynolds News*, a popular Chartist newspaper in the 19th Century, was purchased by the Co-operative Newspaper Publishing Society (later Co-operative Press Ltd) in the 1930s and eventually became a tabloid as the *Sunday*



William King (1786-1865) a leading advocate of retail Co-operation and an inspirer of the Rochdale Pioneers. His *Co-operator* journal is housed in the Library's archive.

Citizen. Both these papers contain a wealth of Co-operative information. They are housed at Bradford University. The Library does possess the precursor of the *Co-operative News* — *The Co-operator* (not King's *Co-operator*) published from 1869 to 1871. This, too, is the only record of certain Co-operative events. The Library is rich in historical periodicals. Among them is a complete collection of *The Cosmopolite* — a radical newspaper published in 1833. Not even the British Museum possesses a complete run of this paper and scholars have even travelled from the United States to examine the Co-operative Union's complete collection.

There have been 121 Co-operative Congresses since the inception of the Co-operative Union in 1869 and the volumes in the Library of Co-operative Congress Reports are a year by year account of the Movement's history and progress. There is also a complete set of Reports in either English or French of the Congresses of the International Co-operative Alliance since its foundation in 1895. This is supplemented by a collection of current books and journals from Co-operatives in various countries. Perhaps one of the best collections in the country of material on worker, credit and housing Co-operatives can also be found in the Co-operative Union Library. Although it exists primarily to serve Co-operative retail societies, the Co-operative Union does not take a blinkered attitude to other forms of Co-operation such as worker, housing and credit Co-operatives but will provide advice and guidance to them where appropriate and on request.

The press cuttings collection covers subjects of interest to people working in, or researching, the modern Co-operative Movement, eg. Consumer Protection, Convenience Stores, Co-operative Women's Guild and Worker Co-operatives. The press cuttings collection was started in 1980, with new subject headings being added as necessary. The number of such headings has now reached nearly 120. All cuttings are indexed by Co-



*Holyoake House, home of the national historical library of the British Co-operative Movement.*

operative society where applicable. This means it is possible to find easily all cuttings relating to a society over a period of time, or concerning a specific subject. Press cuttings are gleaned from the *Co-operative News*, journals received by the Library, national daily newspapers, through a press cuttings agency, other journals and newspapers.

As a source of historical and current information, the Library, in common with most special libraries, has a network of contacts with other related libraries such as the Libraries of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, Manchester; the Plunkett Foundation for Co-operative Studies, Oxford; the Co-operative College, Loughborough, and the International Co-operative Alliance, Geneva. And of course uses any other resources necessary to answer queries on subjects not covered by the Library's collections.

The Library operates within a larger Information Department of the Co-operative Union and plays a major role in the Department's public relations activities. The Librarian is frequently involved in writing articles, leaflets and pamphlets for the Department and assisting with the arrangement of exhibitions. The Assistant Librarian is a member of the Society of Indexers and provides indexes for new books published by Holyoake Books, the publishing arm of the Co-operative Union.

**The Library is open to students and researchers from 10am to 4.45pm, Monday to Friday. Closed on Saturdays. Photocopying services are available. It is preferable that intending visitors write to or telephone the Library before calling. Co-operative Union Library, Holyoake House, Hanover St., Manchester, M60 0AS. (Tel. 061-832 4300).**



*The Cosmopolite, a radical newspaper, published from 20 April, 1833; the Library has a full set.*