



## **Margaret Llewelyn Davies: With Women for a New World. By Ruth Cohen.**

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How to cite this article:

Matthews, N. (2020). Margaret Llewelyn Davies: with Women for a New World. By Ruth Cohen [Book Review]. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 53(1), 38-41

## Book Review

# Margaret Llewelyn Davies: With Women for a New World

By Ruth Cohen

Merlin Press. 2020. 256pp. ISBN 978-0-85036-759-1.

Of whole heart cometh hope

This is a remarkable piece of historical writing which does justice to the remarkable woman it is about. Ruth Cohen deserves great credit for her scholarship and the tremendous effort she has undertaken to rebuild Margaret's story when she left very little detail of her inspiring life. Ruth's use of a diverse range of sources to tell this story reflects great credit on her diligence and persistence as a scholar.

There is no doubt also that the subject of this work is more than worthy of this great effort. I must also congratulate the publishers Merlin, this is a beautifully produced book and coming soon after Andrew Bibby's, *All Their Own Work* about the co-operators of Hebden Bridge's Nutclough Mill, I hope it signifies a new enthusiasm for publishing work of interest to co-operators.

Margaret Llewelyn Davies was for thirty years the General Secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild. After taking over as general secretary in 1889 she had, before the First World War, played a key role in building the Guild into, in the words of the Manchester Guardian (1914), "probably the most remarkable women's organisation in the world". It is hard to overestimate the importance of this work and I think Ruth Cohen has done a great job in documenting Margaret's key role in this process. This is an excellent piece of work and I hope it opens the floodgates on more scholarly work on the women particularly the co-operative women of the period. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that the Guild played a key role in growing and creating a co-operative movement in the United Kingdom; the importance of which is often shown as a footnote in other works.

Margaret was a multidimensional woman with huge talent and a towering intellect. This intelligence is apparent from the evidence of her correspondence with both Bertrand Russell and Leonard Woolf. It was the co-operative movement's good fortune that she was drawn into it and not many of the other organisations and causes in which she was interested. Like all great co-operative biographies there is a conversion moment and Margaret's will probably make you smile:

Margaret joined her local co-operative society in 1886. Her enthusiasm for co-operative sausages became a family joke, but this seemingly small step was to change her life (p. 32).

This is a delightful example of the very ordinary and everyday things that, coupled with the movement's potential to create a completely new world, makes the co-operative movement attractive to so many.

I suspect like many bright women of her period she was frustrated by her circumstances and the barriers women faced (and in some circumstances still face) to make a change in the world. Whilst there were numerous stresses and strains along the way she navigated an immensely complicated set of political axes: that of the co-operative movement itself, that of the socialist movement of the period and, possibly in this period the most challenging of all, the rising movement for female emancipation.

Ruth Cohen gives an excellent account of this latter movement outlining the differences and the divisions in the movement for women's suffrage and how Margaret worked to get the maximum

support for what she saw was possible. There is a very useful guide to the gradations between the organisations supporting suffragists and suffragettes that preludes the story of how all these movements and events affected the Guild.

I appreciate that to keep this book at a manageable length there is not more background on the similar forces at play within the co-operative movement. Nevertheless, Cohen provides an admirable appendix to guide readers through the alphabet soup of co-operative organisation and eloquently makes the case that Guildswomen “often spoke of the co-operative ideas that united them” (p. 118). There are however tantalising glimpses of just as complex set of variations in co-operative politics as there were in the advocates of women’s suffrage. There is a fascinating passage (p. 118) when she describes the divisions in the Guild over social reform based on differing interpretations of co-operative principles. Some of those she describes as more conservative Guildswomen drew upon the principles of “individual responsibility and self help”. Others, at the other end of the spectrum, were suspicious of state welfare as it would “create dependence and weaken working-class organisation”. It would be interesting to explore how these variations on co-operative thinking fed into the development of the Guild but that, I suspect, is a job for someone else.

Whilst challenging, Margaret generally navigated these waters with a degree of grace and aplomb. Another area of complexity was her own politics. Despite coming from a lower middle-class background and the daughter of a clergyman, she was a staunch socialist. As an ethical rather than a bureaucratic socialist myself, I was pleased to find that Margaret whilst a great friend of Leonard and also of Virginia Woolf had little time for the Fabian Society. She cordially disliked the “Webberies” as she called them (p. 115). As Cohen describes:

Margaret was no hard-line revolutionary Marxist and wrote approvingly of the German Social Democrat Eduardo Bernstein and his reformist version of socialism. Yet she was never a supporter of the Fabians. Instead her humanistic approach fitted with that of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which she is said to have joined around 1908 or 1909. She was a faithful reader of the ILP paper the *Labour Leader* (p. 113).

This work details a wonderful life full of purpose but not short of controversy. There is an interesting situation where all these different sets of politics clashed and had a profound effect upon the Co-operative Guild politics and that was over divorce reform. This almost put the Guild itself in jeopardy as divorce reform was a contentious issue within the Guild. For many working-class women, the high cost of divorce simply put it out of reach. Margaret was all for reform and the debate within the Guild was indeed fraught, but trouble came from a surprising quarter. In mid 1913 the Salford Diocese Catholic Federation wrote to the Guild demanding that it give up its divorce campaign.

This set off a chain of events that gave the United Board of the Co-operative Union an opportunity to rein in the Guild under the pretext of the fear of religious division within the movement. I am sure the Guild’s earlier campaign for better pay for women shop workers had also not been entirely well received inside the co-operative board or been forgotten. This came to a head at the Co-operative Congress of May 1914 inauspiciously for the Guild held in Dublin. “The meeting decided that the Guild’s annual £400 grant would only continue on condition that it stopped the divorce law campaign, and in future only took up work approved by the United Board.”

It is pleasing that this demand was like a red rag to a bull and when the Guild met at its Congress a few weeks later in Birmingham, despite the fact they did not all agree about divorce reform, they did agree that they were not going to lose their independence for any price. Margaret explained to Leonard Woolf that this was about women’s autonomy and the Guild had not only found its soul it had most certainly found its feet.

Sadly it took a war for the rift between the Guild and the Central Board to be healed and it was largely the change in external circumstances that bought it about. By 1916 three and half million people were members of retail co-operative societies. Despite this, the government denied

the movement the same influence in the corridors of power that privately owned businesses enjoyed.

The 'excessive profits' tax undermining the co-op dividend was the last straw and led to the formation of the Co-operative Representation Committee the forerunner of the Co-operative Party. Margaret and the Guild enthusiastically supported this move. War had however put the suffrage movement on the back burner but the momentum for women's votes had not gone away. Following the Speaker's conference of 1916 a limited franchise was opened up for women over thirty.

Whilst this did not completely fulfil women's demands when it came in 1918 it was nonetheless a huge change. As the Women's Corner in the Co-operative News pointed out, "The vote is ours. The first thing to do — get registered!" Unsurprisingly Margaret urged the newly enfranchised women voters to use their vote for co-operative candidates. This was followed by her writing a pamphlet for the Co-operative Union *The Vote At Last — More power to Co-operators*. She used her pen to make the case for women's 'basket power' as consumers as a tool in the struggle.

This support did not go unnoticed and the relations between the Guild and the Central Board were healed to the extent that later in 1918 the grant was restored and the Guild was formally invited to send its own delegate to Co-operative Congress. This was a significant victory for the Guild raising its status in the co-operative universe.

The war however had been a difficult time for many like Margaret on the ILP left being a voice for peace at this time must have been immensely difficult. She engaged in numerous actions and gestures towards peace during the war whilst the formal Guild position was more representative of the country as a whole so she supported peace activities on an individual basis rather than on behalf of the Guild.

The war was a terrible thing with rows and deep divisions over conscription and a negotiated peace. Whilst the position of women in the absence of men had clearly advanced in many quarters the price that was paid for this was very high for many families.

Margaret's health broke down at the end of the war taking her out of action for many months. Despite this, peace brought huge growth to the Guild. 5,000 new members in 1918-19, by the time she came to retire in April 1921 membership had reached 50,000 and the Guild was a force in the land. Margaret's vision for the post war co-operative world was particularly ambitious.

In a pamphlet coauthored in 1919 with Honora Enfield, *Co-operation versus Capitalism, Memorandum on the Co-operative Movement and the Menace of Capitalism*, she argued for British co-operation to become independent of capitalist suppliers through international co-operative trade. She argued for a change in CWS rules so that it could extend its production and trading, "to create a co-operative shipping and transport business". For Margaret this would not only make good business sense but would also bolster world peace.

Internationalism had been a key thread in her thinking and post war this was something she pursued further. Working with women from other countries she ensured that when the ICA congress of 1921 was held in Basel, a third of its delegates were female. Forty women came together from several countries to create the ICA Women's Committee. As one male delegate put it "the women were making history" (p. 214).

This turned out to be a good time for Margaret to bow out from the Guild. In December 1921 she attended her last Guild Central Committee meeting and that was almost it. At the end of 1922 she was invited to be the very first woman to preside at Co-operative Congress. A fitting honour for over thirty years of commitment we have no less than Virginia Woolf's description of this event which is contained in the introduction of this delightful book.

Ruth mentions the fact that Margaret lived for the last 25 years of her life with Lillian Harris. It is pleasing that she does not make more of this than the evidence supports. Many women not

fitting neatly into the stereotypical role of the time felt more comfortable sharing a home. There is no doubt they were quite a team and Lillian deserves some of the praise that accompanies Margaret's success.

The First World War was a terrible disaster for all the working class organisations across Europe. Margaret hated everything about the war and I doubt if she was alone. Despite her experience her commitment to peace and internationalism was undimmed. In June 1933 she and Lillian presented the Guild with a new banner to mark its 50th anniversary. "The huge audience cheered Margaret again and again as she urged them not to rest in past triumphs, but to 'go forward with faith and trust in the irresistible advance that is bringing the new civilisation'" (p. 232). This was Margaret's last public speech.

Margaret died in the midst of another War in April 1944. Hats off to Redditch Co-operative Homes as her name lives on in a Close in the Breedon Housing Co-operative in Redditch. I hope this book contributes to a reclaiming of her enormous legacy for a new generation of co-operators. Indeed this work puts the Women's Guild right at the centre of a process that created one of the great twentieth century economic and social movements and for that we must give Ruth Cohen thanks.

## **Reviewer**

Nick Matthews is Vice Chair of Co-operatives UK.

Ruth Cohen's online talk about Margaret Llewelyn Davies for the Working Class Movement Library in Salford is available at: <https://youtu.be/V7HaxW9UKFw>