

Co-operation's Prophet: The Life and Letters of Dr William King of Brighton

with a reprint of *The Co-operator*, 1828-1830
Co-operative Union Ltd, Manchester, 1947.

Re-visited by Professor Stephen Yeo

Dr William King's project was total: no less than to create Communities, starting in Brighton, which would compose a Society in which "interest and duty would go hand in hand". Christ's "social commandment" to love your neighbour as yourself was, he thought, "the fundamental basis" of any Community and Society. He used the capital C and the capital S. The trouble with the unsustainable epoch in which he lived was that "in common life it is impossible to act upon this principle". Self-interest ruled. So a set of social inventions was needed whose "moral and religious" dynamic would supersede the present contradiction between individual and society: "our own interest is much better secured in that of the Community". Enter co-operatives.

King set about debating with the editor of the local paper and fellow activists including William Bryan and many others. Only some of their names are known but they were as important in the local story as William King.¹ As far as King is concerned we should remember that we are dealing with a practical prophet from the medical profession at a time when doctors were also progressive social reformers; with a sympathetic human being active in Brighton from 1821 until his death in 1865; with the pre-Rochdale phase of co-operative history in Britain which included hundreds of shops, in Societies designed to accumulate capital for community rather than distribute it as individual dividend; with a journal *The Co-operator*, which ran from 1 May 1828 to 1 August 1830; with letters King wrote between 1825 and 1865 to the *Brighton Herald*, Henry Brougham, Thomas Hirst, Henry Crabb Robinson and Henry Pitman; and with a forty-five page biography of King by T W Mercer (1885-1947). This was left uncorrected but with excellent Endnotes at the time of Mercer's death. Mercer's writings are as remarkable as King's: his papers await researchers in the National Co-operative Archive. He was honoured in his own way by David Lazell (1932-2007).²

I will not use my rationed space here to rehearse the place of King and the journal in the narrative of the movement. The standard histories from Holyoake to Bonner and Cole, from Harrison to Birchall and Claeys, tell the story well enough. Hopefully, there will be many more such histories and from a global perspective. King and The Co-operator will always be somewhere near the beginning at least until aboriginal Australians and First Nation North Americans write the history. Instead, I want to invite readers back to Mercer's classic text with thoughts derived from King's Co-operator on a single question: what kind of movement for membership and belonging are we working with when we study and organise Co-operative and Mutual Enterprises (CMEs)?

A close reading of King suggests six characteristics. First, CMEs work vigorously for membership and belonging at times when society's wider offer seems unsustainable. In our times, unsustainability means ecological crisis. In King's time it meant "the state of the poor" or "starvation" (his word) and something which "alarms everybody who thinks": escalating crime, particularly acts "connected with low wages and difficulty of living". He meant what we call 'terror'. Secondly, CMEs are based on people working together: "union is strength in all cases". But union is also a means to an end. The end is not to alienate our enterprise (work/labour), which is what otherwise would happen to it: 'employers' seeing it as theirs. As humans – capitalists realise this every day – it is fulfilling (natural?) to own and control our capital, to know about its circuits, "the produce of our work". A sense of ownership is important, yes, but it can best be achieved by some form of actual property (common? Co-operative? mutual?). Thirdly, union among working people is best achieved through a range of associations. These include Savings Banks and Friendly Societies. Fourthly, for working people it need not be a question of all or nothing.

If the members choose to remain in a town instead of going into a community, they may derive all the advantages from the Society like their own shop and their own school. Fifthly, a proper state of union must include Institutes for learning, because ignorance is its worst enemy and knowledge its best friend. In a letter to Henry Pitman of October 1864, King prophesied: "by-and-by, too, you will have co-operative schools". And in No 1 of the Co-operator (May 1828) he wrote,

"we *must* send our children to school,
why should we not have a school of our own?"

Every issue of The Co-operator carried this mast-head, in capital letters:

Knowledge and union are power: power, directed by knowledge, is
happiness: happiness is the end of creation.

Intelligence, in every modern sense of that word, is essential for union – which brings me to the sixth and most difficult lens through which I recommend readers of the Journal of Co-operative Studies to read The Co-operator. King's Societies, he calculates, will accumulate capital, reasonably fast.

Suppose 200 persons thus unite, and subscribe each, a shilling a week, and by purchasing at their own store, produce a profit of £20 a week, they will accumulate at the rate of £30 a week, or £1,560 a year.

Given the history of Building Societies, let alone of the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), who is to say that King was wrong? This means that intelligence will have a site (land) or state to direct. 'State' is my word not his. Members will, in fact, constitute their own State, doing what 'the state' suggests that only 'it' ('us' misrepresented) can do. Although this is my way of putting it, King makes the point by specifying what 'the Society' will be able to do. It will be able to "find work for some of its own members", in the end employing them all. There will be "medical attendance at the common expense".

Manufacturing will commence, providing for all their wants. In old age members "will still live comfortably among their friends" rather than in the workhouse. So will dependent widows and children, although women will also engage in manufacture. "In a few years we shall have capital, comfort and independence". Not bad, and all this from the very first, May Day issue of The Co-operator. Read on!

Notes

1 See Andy Durr, "William King of Brighton: Co-operation's Prophet" in Stephen Yeo ed New Views of Co-operation, Routledge, London and New York, 1988 pp10-26.

2 See David Lazell, T W Mercer: the William Morris of the Co-operative Movement published by the writer, East Leake, Loughborough, 2005 available in the National Co-operative Archive.