

United They Stand

THE ENGLISH COÖPERATIVES. By Sydney R. Elliott. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by MARQUIS CHILDS

HERE is the story of coöperative big business told by a coöperator who is also a skilled journalist. This account of what is far and away the most important consumers' movement in the world today is absorbing throughout, particularly as it is unfolded against the background of Britain's present-day trend toward cartelization and all the devices of monopoly control.

Mr. Elliott gives a convincing picture of the coöperative movement as a St. George single-handed and alone resisting the encroachments of the great trusts and combines that dominate British trade. Cartelization has taken place so gradually in Great Britain that we are unaware in this country of the extent to which it has gone. It has not been a spectacular growth as in our own NRA when industry united with government to fix prices.

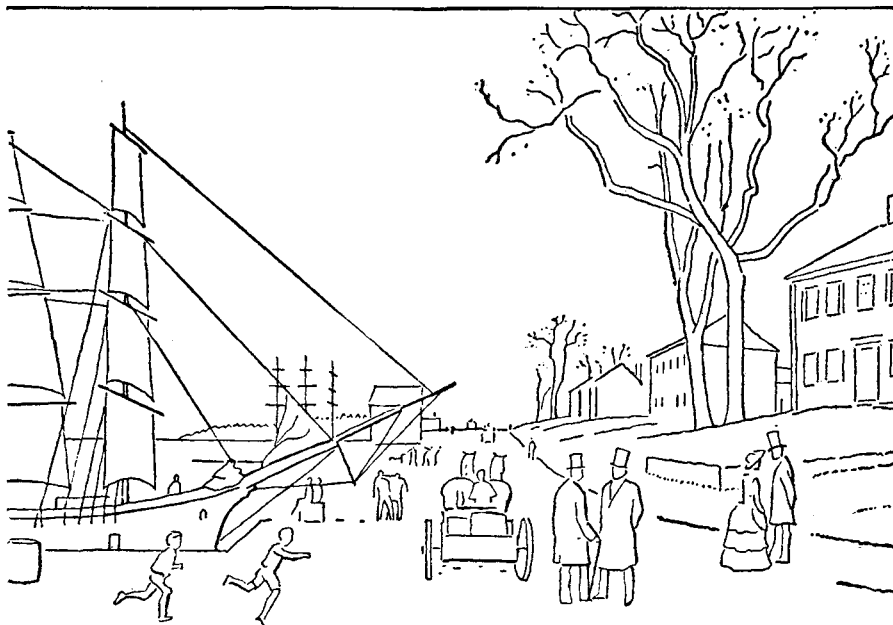
For that very reason perhaps it has been far more pervasive. And British experience, Mr. Elliott makes clear, confirms what we have learned in America during the past five years: that commissions, investigations, and laws are powerless to stop the growth of trusts. But the Coöperative Movement, with its 7,500,000 members, its thousands of retail stores, its great wholesale depots, factories, and warehouses, its banking and insurance departments, has had a considerable effect on the retail price level, lowering costs of a number of commodities.

Because the great trade combines succeeded in obtaining laws intended to tax away coöperative reserves, British co-operators have been forced to go into politics. There is a more or less loose alliance between the Coöperative Party and the Labor Party, and Mr. Elliott believes that the coöperative philosophy of production for use, quite apart from "visionary socialism," will have a larger influence upon labor in the future.

Certain hostile critics of the coöperative movement in this country have recently declared that coöperation is without the power, or even the incentive, to improve the quality of consumers' goods. Mr. Elliott shows that the coöperatives in Britain have consistently sought to raise the level of the products they sell under their own name. It seems highly unreasonable, not to say illogical, to expect them to have achieved perfection overnight.

He has watched the rise of a consumers' movement such as no one would have imagined possible forty years ago, and that is reason for a little hope.

Marquis Childs is author of "Sweden, the Middle Way," a study of the coöperative system.



DRAWING BY MAITLAND DE GOGORZA: From "Kennebec."

As the Kennebec Goes

KENNEBEC: CRADLE OF AMERICANS.

By Robert P. Tristram Coffin. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by KENNETH P. KEMPTON

HERE is a lusty braggart of a book. Superlative and hyperbole chase heels through its pages. Maine is the best state in the Union, the Kennebec valley is the best of Maine, so the author's farm on Merymeeting Bay is the finest in all Christendom. Maine winds are strongest, her trees were eighty-footers, her men the ruggedest and her women most prolific; and the snow is always six feet deep on the level. Ships built on the Kennebec went forth "to whiten all the world with their sails." Maine winters are cold enough to "freeze the whiskers [sic] off a brass monkey."

Now to those who know them, Maine and the Kennebec can stand superlatives. But others may be a trifle dashed by the unutterable loveliness of, say, Kennebec fog—that "long parade of beauty half a mile high." And the blue water described so temptingly may seem a little cold. The trouble with tall talk about Maine is that when you come to the sad ends of wooden ships and the ice and lumber trades, the anticlimax is terrific but there's nothing more to say. The only real lack in this book is restraint. An academic argument, perhaps? But if you are looking for characteristic Maine qualities, what about serenity and the trick of understatement? A good many people down there are "just mod'rate." A classic quality that the author forgot.

Once allowance is made for Mr. Coffin's exuberance, however, the book is good reading. It is informative without being dull, and almost unfailingly interesting

without being facetious or merely sensational. And a great deal of information is packed in here. The author begins with a bird's-eye view of the river itself and a man's sense of Kennebec weather. He goes back to the Stone Age and the Oyster Shell Age, then, and brings us up through the Abenakis, the first Europeans, the six Indian wars, Arnold's disastrous march, the *Enterprise* and *Boxer* fight in 1813, and on past heroic nineteenth-century commerce and industry to the quiet river of today. Shrewdly throughout he intersperses the dead past with the lively present in the person of Cap'n Cy Bibber, lobsterman, anatomist, and philosopher at large. He writes history so racy that it sounds like a story, and a new one at that. His language is pungent with the salt of Maine speech.

Many parts of the book are memorable. I like the picture of farm dogs and cattle painfully alert for Indians. On the subject of food Mr. Coffin is irresistible: Aaron Burr's feast of bear meat on Swan Island, a chapter called "Good Eating Begins in Maine," and a passage on native cookery from skates' fins to pie will make your mouth water. But I like best a chapter called "Folk on the Farm" that shows the amphibious nature of Maine-coast people. "You have to back an eelspear out through the mowing machine wheels before you can start haying. The bagged Baldwins in the shed are mixed in with the split and dried hake. . . . The cow's milk in September may taste of tar, because she's been grazing where the seine was spread out after going through the tar kettle." That gets them where they live, and no nonsense.

Kenneth P. Kempton is the author of "Old Man Greenlaw."


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Opportunities

For a Prophet. The reawakening of interest in the Civil War among our novelists is only part of a wider revival. The amateur of military history is emboldened to publish his ideas about the last great war which was open enough to make strategy important and the first one in which tactics were determined by the defensive power of modern armament. The sociologist has at last begun to inquire into the patterns of American feeling and behavior during wartime, their relationship to our institutions, and their part in our present organization. The economist at last shows some impatience with the long-established assumption that his job was merely to contrast a plantation economy with an industrial one. The historian, who for a generation has been more interested in Reconstruction than in the House Divided, is beginning to take the back train in an effort to understand the implications of any divided house. Editorial writers bring to bear on current questions ideas (alas, usually mistaken ones) derived from the one disharmony in the American system and the one conflict between American classes that actually produced revolution. Even in the colleges an interest in the Civil War is now respectable, and rumor says that our literary Marxists approach the same respectability.

Which is all excellent. But the tendency has got to develop further. Nothing else in our past has so much to teach this generation as the cataclysm which was produced by an unresolved paradox in the national life and which, in resolving the paradox, determined which way the national life was to go. And this generation does not know what to think about the Civil War. Its information is faulty and its deductions are bad. The ideas it expresses are professional clichés, dialectical simplicities, or findings of an earlier generation based on an insufficient investigation made with too meager tools. Just the other day, for instance, Miss Dorothy

Thompson declared, on the way to another generalization, that the Civil War was, in process and in fact, the transformation of mercantile capitalism into industrial capitalism, and it was nothing more. Miss Thompson might try, on the basis of that analysis, to explain why the Middle West fought on the side of the old Northeast. She would come out a long way from where she started and at a startling angle to her original position. It is a pretty question to ask anyone who approaches the Civil War with any formula about the transformation of capitalism, and if you then require the manipulator of formulas to bring this one to bear on that other idea of these days, that the Civil War was an unnecessary tragedy for which a half-dozen personal devils were to blame, you will produce schizophrenia in him.

The whole history of the War must be rewritten, on a broader base, with the use of all instruments now at the disposal of the student. The job offers many opportunities to many minds. But an additional opportunity is this: to form, by means of the known behavior of the Americans during that time, some judgments about how they will behave in the future crisis which hypothesis says they have got to face. This is no great task for Marxists, who have only to get out the gospel and the slide rule, but it will be hard going for the kind of prophet who prefers data to divination. The results, however, will be worth the effort—and they may throw some unexpected light on both the hypothesis and the crisis.

For a Sociologist. Only a kind of sociologist whom natural selection has so far neglected to develop should undertake that job, but within the limits of sociology as now practised, even within the limits of literary sociology, there is a magnificent opportunity. There is still no general study of social experimentation in the United States, there is no general study of Utopian communities in the United States, and in particular there is no general study of the religious and economic communities which were such a striking development in American life during the first half of the last century. Half a dozen superficial histories, none of them better than Noyes's and Nordhoff's, which were published sixty-odd years ago, as many fallacious literary studies, a handful of specialized treatises on minute aspects of the movement—and no more.

The editor of this magazine recently devoted sixty pages to describing the rich vein which Mormonism offers the prospector, and Mormonism probably is the finest opportunity as well as the one that can be worked most easily. But there is no adequate treatment of either Owenism or Fourierism, there is no comprehensive study of the Oneida Community,

there is not even a good history of Brook Farm. There is no history at all of the Shakers, who would probably reward study more than any other sect except the Mormons. There is no satisfactory account of the lesser experiments, no survey of the contributions to factory management and horticulture and the handicrafts made by these groups, no analysis of their ideas and the relationship of their ideas to what we think of as the main body of American thought, no idea to determine where and how the experiments issued from American society. All of these lacks suggest opportunities for qualified investigators—and indicate that the most immediate opportunity is a pioneering work, a first approximation, on the phenomenon as a whole.

For a Novelist. What one misses most in the fiction of the day is the novel of personal relationships devoted to men and women as you and I know them. Or let us say, more simply, the realistic novel about the middle class. Some day a bright young man or woman is going to write a long and expert novel about people as people, not as items in the decline of the West or decimal points in some dogma. It will deal as justly with what you and I consider their virtues as it does with what the novelist considers their shortcomings. It will understand that there is human emotion in trying to pay one's debts and educating the children and behaving with reasonable decency—and that this emotion is quite as good material for fiction as the novelist's own feeling that not to like Sibelius is plain proof of vulgarity, that not to abandon all and serve on a picket line is bourgeois cowardice, and that people are pretty helpless anyway. It will have no theory except the very startling one that a person's experience means quite a bit to him and that he isn't therefore absurd. It will enable quite a lot of us to feel ourselves in it from the inside instead of admiring it from the outside. It will be the first revolutionary novel of our time.

For a Biographer. Ever since July 4th, 1826, the greatest opportunity in American biography has been the life of Thomas Jefferson. Many people have tried to take advantage of it, and it still remains the greatest opportunity. For years the editor believed that, always excepting Jefferson, the finest remaining opportunity for the ambitious biographer was Bronson Alcott. Mr. Shepard has now taken advantage of it—how well the editor does not know now but will know in a few weeks. The runner-up therefore advances to first place: for Bronson Alcott, read Edwin M. Stanton.

For a Poet. The great opportunity for our poets just now is to write some poetry that somebody will like.