

Sadie Spurr 1933

BUYERS & BUILDERS



A Jubilee Sketch of
The Women's Co-operative Guild
1883 to 1933
by
Evelyn Sharp

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BUYERS *and* BUILDERS

The Jubilee Sketch
of the
Women's Co-operative Guild
1883-1933

by
Evelyn Sharp

*Author of "Daily Bread," "The London Child,"
&c., &c.*

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*To be obtained from the Women's Co-operative Guild,
14, John Street, Bedford Row,
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CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE WOMEN'S CO-OPERATIVE GUILD, 1933.

Left to Right—Standing: Mrs. MATT LEWIS (Western and Welsh Section), Mrs. MERCHANT (South-Western and Bristol Section), Mrs. CORRIGAN (Southern Section),
Mrs. DAWS, J.P. (Yorkshire Section).

Seated: Mrs. WOODWARD (Midland Section), Vice-President; Mrs. BERESFORD (Northern Section), Mrs. BEAVAN (Lancashire Section), President;
Mrs. ELEANOR BARTON, J.P., General Secretary; Mrs. PAVITT (South-Eastern Section), Treasurer.


Buyers and Builders :

The

Jubilee Sketch of the Women's Co-operative Guild,
1883-1933.

—
BY EVELYN SHARP.
—

“ Surely, without departing from our own sphere, and without trying to undertake work which can be better done by men, there is more for us women to do than to spend money . . . Why should we not have our meetings, our readings, our discussions ? ”
Mrs. Acland in 1883.

HE young Guildswoman of 1933, playing her part in celebrating the Jubilee of the Women's Co-operative Guild, will, perhaps, wonder why I have chosen as my text so obvious a passage as the one that is quoted above. To her, as to most young women of to-day, the right to come out from the home and to take part in public affairs that affect the home is a commonplace of modern life. That is exactly why I have quoted the words of one of the founders of the Guild; for this right was not a commonplace fifty years ago, and our Jubilee would lose half its meaning if we were to forget the part played by the Guild in overcoming prejudice and helping to bring about the immense change that has taken place in the position of the housewife since Mrs. Arthur Acland and Mrs. Lawrenson first conceived the idea of forming Co-operative women into an organisation of their own. The story of the growth of that idea is in some measure the story of the freedom that has been secured during the last half-century for the woman in the home.

When the Guild was founded in 1883, women members of the Co-operative Societies were just buyers and nothing more. It did not at first occur, either to them or to men Co-operators, that their importance as buyers carried with it a power and a responsibility far beyond the confines of the store itself. The

Women's Co-operative Guild: Jubilee Sketch, 1883-1933.

Co-operative woman's place was the home, except when she went shopping, and then it was the Co-operative store. All the social and political side of the movement, all its high aims directed towards the building of a new world, these were considered to be the concern of the men alone.

So the little group of women, who bravely thought, with the two founders of the Women's Guild, that "there was more for women to do than to spend money," had to face derision and sometimes even active opposition. "You see," said a Guildswoman to me, not long ago, "it was unheard of, when I was a child, for a woman's hands to be idle. My own aunt used to keep a half-knitted sock near the front door, so that, if a knock came, she could catch it up and open the door looking as though she had been interrupted in the middle of her work. At the early meetings of the Guild, the women used to bring their sewing with them, unable to rid their minds of the notion that there was something wrong in sitting with their hands in their laps while they listened to speeches, or took part in discussions. It has taken us fifty years, you might say, to get over the idea that a woman is idling and wasting her time when she is using her brains without using her hands, and doubly so if she is a married woman."

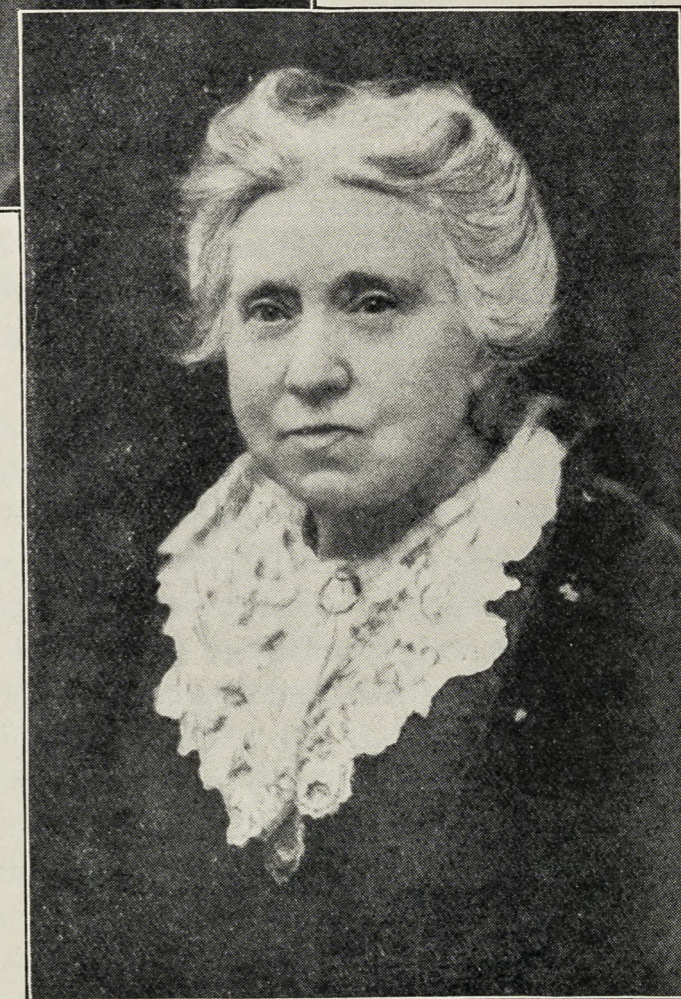
Records that are available of the work of women Co-operators bear out the truth of this assertion, half humorously as it was made. The early Guildswomen almost apologised for wanting to make their lives less humdrum, though this very natural desire was accompanied by a laudable wish to be useful at the same time. "Women want more changes than they have now," wrote one of these women in 1883; "they want taking away from the cares of home for a time, and I think there ought to be meetings held at the store expressly for women." This writer went on to express admirably, in the concluding sentence of her letter, what became eventually the dual purpose of the Guild: "I think that would be a nice change for us women, and at the same time we might be doing a little good."*

Modest as their demands were, they excited at first consider-

* See *The Woman with the Basket*, by Catherine Webb, page 19. To be obtained from the Women's Co-operative Guild, 14, John Street, Bedford Row, W.C.1. Price, 3s. 6d.



LADY ALICE ACLAND,
First Secretary, 1883-4;
First President, 1884-5.



Mrs. LAWRENSON,
Co-Founder, 1883;
General Secretary, 1885.

able perturbation. "When a woman stood for any position in those days, the abuse they met with was awful," writes one who was the first woman delegate from her Society to the Co-operative Congress: "I stood for Management Committee, and my husband and the wife of the man who proposed me had some dreadful postcards sent to them."* There is a familiar sound about this to anybody who has ever been concerned in a movement for the greater freedom of women, whether it was aimed at opening the doors of the professions to them or securing them the right to vote. But the special achievement of the movement represented by the Women's Co-operative Guild is the larger life it has opened to the hardworking domestic woman, the wife and mother who was supposed to have no interests outside the four walls of her home, and no public duties of any kind. Fifty years ago, doors were already being pushed open by women of another class, those who could afford to hire domestic help at home. These women, when they were single, were beginning to force their way into the Universities and into some of the professions, while their married sisters were gradually gaining their economic and legal independence. But the wife of the wage-earning workman had no recognised rights of her own, no independence, and no cultural leisure; and even in the Co-operative movement she was not expected to hold an official position, although nominally the movement stood for the equality of men and women.

Other movements and other women's societies, notably those connected with Trade Unionism and Woman Suffrage, have contributed greatly to the improvement in her position to-day; but I am concerned here only with what the Guild, at first working almost single-handed in her interests, has done for the married working woman in a threefold capacity—as a Co-operator, as a citizen, and as a human being. As Co-operators, married women were able to find a bond of union. A Women's Guild that started in 1883 with seven members and, in 1933, can show 72,503 members, organised in 1,513 branches that are sending 1,600 to 1,700 delegates to the Jubilee Guild Congress, has given to women Co-operators a status that commands respect

* See *Life as we have known it*, page 96. Hogarth Press, Tavistock Square, W.C.1. Price, 5s.

from the whole movement, apart from the very wholesome regard that is always felt for them as customers of the store. One obvious sign of their place in Co-operation is their presence on the official bodies from which they were at first tacitly excluded. No woman at present sits on the new National Authority of the Co-operative Union (the legal and educational federation of Co-operative Societies), but four sit on Sectional Boards, and many on the Management and Educational Committees of their local Societies: one Guild member has been elected a Director of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, while others are sent regularly as delegates to the C.W.S. Quarterly and Divisional Meetings and to the Annual Co-operative Congress. Undoubtedly, there is still some anti-feminist prejudice lingering in the movement, for this is to be found whenever men and women find themselves in any kind of political or economic rivalry, but there is probably less in the Co-operative movement than elsewhere, and this may be fairly attributed in a considerable degree to the position women have established for themselves by their advisory and executive work within the Guild.

It is worth emphasising here that the Guild is a self-governing organisation, chiefly financed by the subscriptions and donations of its branches, though it receives grants from official Co-operative bodies. This independence has been of great importance in enabling the members to become pioneers, introducing new progressive policies into the movement, such as the adoption, very early in its history, of special methods in special stores in order to extend Co-operation to the poorest neighbourhoods. In Sunderland, this method included a grocery store where goods were sold in small quantities, a cooked meat shop, run on the same economic principle, and for a few years the establishment of a small settlement with a hall—a scheme that proved to be practical as well as ideal.

A later activity, directed towards the maintenance of women's interests, was the Guild's campaign for a minimum wage for all Co-operative women employed both in the C.W.S. factories and the distributive stores. The Branches set themselves to win the support of their several Societies, and their success showed how reforms of all kinds might be carried out in a Co-operative

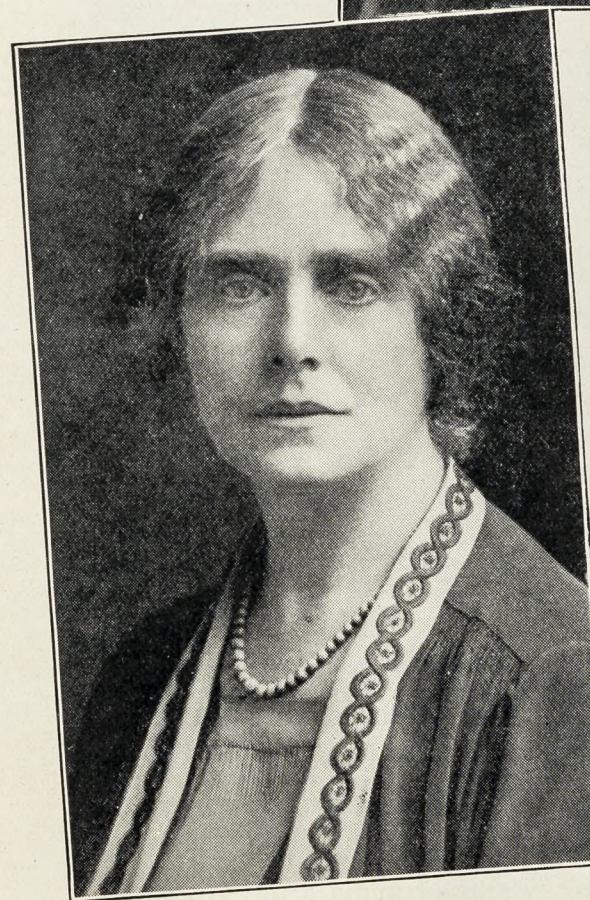
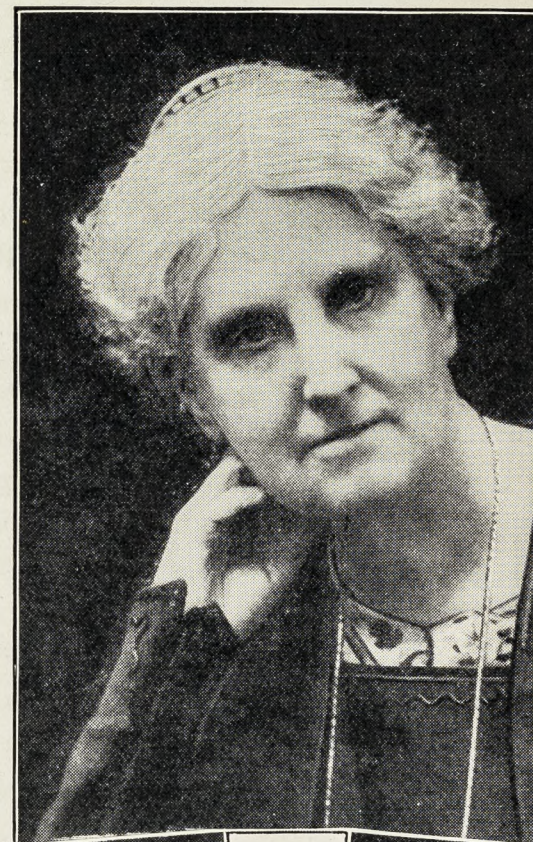
Women's Co-operative Guild: Jubilee Sketch, 1883-1933.

democracy. In 1912, the new scale, which meant a very considerable rise in the low standard of women's wages then prevalent, was approved by the delegates to the C.W.S. Quarterly Meetings, and it was put in force throughout the movement in the following year. In this campaign, as in all aspects of its work, the Guild owes much to the free access given to it by the *Co-operative News*.

As a Co-operator, the intelligent Guildswoman works loyally for all the objects of the movement, using her spending power to build up this great workers' organisation. She knows that it contains within it the elements of a peaceful revolution that may some day transform our social system from a competitive struggle for existence to a nobler way of living, in which the interests of the individual will be the interests of the community. This wider significance of Co-operation, never lost sight of by the Guild since its foundation, brings her into line with the public life of her time. The woman who hoped tentatively, half-century ago, that Guildswomen might learn, through attending a meeting now and then, "to do a little good" as well as enjoy a change of scene, would be amazed to-day to drop into a quarterly district conference, or even a routine weekly branch meeting, and to find that no national or international question, from milk to war, is outside the province of these assembled housewives, who, just because their main experience and interest lie with home, husband, and family, in conjunction with the Co-operative store, have come to realise the vital importance of bringing their influence to bear on all public questions that affect their daily lives.

It is instructive to compare the first report, dated 1884, of the first branch of the Guild—Hebden Bridge—with the list of resolutions passed by the Annual Congress of the Guild last year (1932). At Hebden Bridge, it was reported, two meetings during the year had been occupied in listening to papers read on "Co-operation and how to improve it," and two others in discussing "Drapery" and the provision of cheaper goods in the store for poorer members—a selection of subjects, both abstract and practical, that offered a good omen for the future. The omen was fulfilled in both senses at the Congress of 1932, when

Miss LLEWELYN DAVIES,
General Secretary, 1889-1921.



Miss ENFIELD,
General Secretary, 1922-1925;
International Secretary.



Miss LILIAN HARRIS,
Assistant Secretary, 1901-1921;
Cashier, 1893.

Women's Co-operative Guild: Jubilee Sketch, 1883-1933.

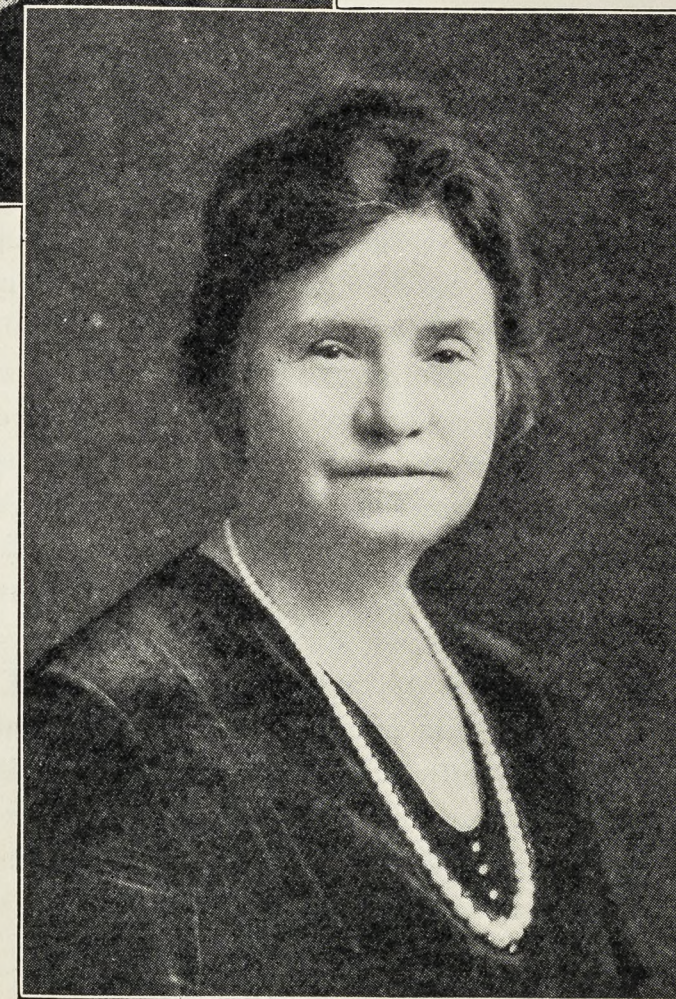
thirty resolutions in all were passed, their subjects ranging from Co-operative Trade to War in the Far East, and from the abolition of Capital Punishment to the abolition of the Means Test.

One very interesting fact emerges from a study of the political activities of the Women's Co-operative Guild. The opinion of the Guild is overwhelmingly progressive in character, whether shown in the resolutions passed in Congress or in subsequent action taken upon them. It is true that one of the objects of the Guild is "to support the aims of the Co-operative Party," which are substantially those of the Labour Party; but membership of the Guild is open to members of all political parties, and there is enough difference of opinion among the women in the rank and file of the Women's Guild to make the debates real and to keep the majority in touch with the opposition that exists in the world outside. The Guild being self-governing, the choice of subject rests with the rank and file, and the utmost freedom of thought and speech prevails. It is therefore all the more significant that the result should go to prove that when the married working woman approaches public matters with an open mind she comes to the conclusion that the world wants changing pretty badly.

It is not remarkable to find this Parliament of Women, as the Guild Congress is often called, demanding legislation to deal effectively with education and public health, and overtime and unemployment, and rents, and police in public parks. If the woman in the home troubles about public questions at all, these are the questions that will naturally occupy her. It is a surer sign of the educative work done by the Guild, and of its broad political outlook, that the vote cast by Congress should be in the majority of cases what would be considered an extremist vote in our national Parliament. The Women's Guild has declared that it stands for the removal of tariffs and the freedom of international trade, for total disarmament within a specified period and the abolition of war debts and Reparations, for the representation of peoples as well as governments on the League of Nations, for restoring education cuts instead of spending public money on subsidising Officers' Training Corps and Cadet Corps, for the freedom of India and release of Indian political prisoners, for stopping the export of arms and refusing



Mrs. E. BEAVAN,
National President, 1932.



Mrs. ELEANOR BARTON,
J.P.,
President, 1914;
Assistant Secretary, 1921;
General Secretary,
elected 1926.

loans to Japan. It is not a bad list of demands to come from a set of women traditionally supposed to have no time and no inclination to trouble about anything that happens beyond the four walls of home!

But the Guild is not content merely to talk or express opinions, though it is natural that the opinion of such an organised body of wives and mothers should carry weight whenever the opinion of women is sought on some subject of the day. The work of Guildswomen as magistrates, as aldermen, and as members of County and Municipal Councils and other public bodies, is a further testimony to the way the Guild has brought these women out from the home and enabled them to use in the public service the practical knowledge they possess of the lives and needs of the great mass of the people. Anybody can vote enthusiastically for a resolution, and then go home to forget all about it amid the pressing cares of everyday life. But the Women's Co-operative Guild, with its system of lectures and discussions, of One-Day and Two-Day Schools, does not let a woman forget all about it: she has to study the facts that form a basis for her beliefs, and is also called upon to see that her beliefs are put into practice by taking part in organised national campaigns, of which a good example is the successful work done recently by the Guild Branches in stirring up local authorities to supply milk to schoolchildren.

The hand of the Guild may be discerned in much of the social legislation of the last fifty years, especially (as is natural, since it is a married women's organisation) in matters relating to marriage and motherhood. With courage and persistence the Guild both promoted and worked for the reform of evils resulting from ignorance, neglect, and injustice. It took a strong line, for instance, on Divorce Law Reform, and stood by the evidence its representatives gave before the Royal Commission, though much opposition was thus roused within the movement, and the Guild even suffered a temporary loss to the amount of £1,600 in the Co-operative grants. But this did not make it swerve from its position, based as it was upon the women's own knowledge and experience of the suffering entailed by the existing marriage laws.

Perhaps the most spectacular political achievement of the Guild was its campaign for securing the inclusion of the Maternity Benefit in the Insurance Act, and afterwards for getting it made the wife's property. No woman ought ever to forget that mothers owe this benefit mainly to the campaign of the Women's Co-operative Guild on their behalf.

One day, a stranger called on a member of the Guild to ask some service of her. She was out, and the visitor was invited to sit down and wait. "There's one thing," observed the woman's husband with a smile, "she'll be in a good temper when she does come in because she's gone to a Guild meeting." This remark, trivial as it sounds, might be taken as an indication of what the Guild has meant to its members on the human side. You may read, in an account of the Festival held in Manchester at the end of the first ten years of its existence, that many of the women who attended it had left home for the first time since their marriage twenty or thirty years before.* But even to-day, the mother in many a worker's home is still the member of the family whose work never seems done, who most rarely gets any real distraction from that work; and she is usually sufficiently unselfish to keep the rest of the family in ignorance of the sacrifice she is making. What the Guild has done for this sort of woman is to show her, and through her, the family, that she is a Co-operator and citizen as well as a married woman, and that, all the more because she is a married woman, she and her services are wanted outside the home as well as inside. If the Guild had done nothing else than to establish this fact in the minds of thousands of Guild members and their families, it would have justified its existence, I think. For it enables the Co-operative woman to become a complete human being, without laying herself open to the reproach that she is neglecting her work as a home-maker. Instead of growing irritable, her nerves frayed by perpetual toil in the home circle without change of scene or thought, she goes to her Guild meetings, exchanges ideas with other women, enjoys their comradeship, learns what is going on and what has to be done in the world, and returns home "in a good temper," and with something fresh to talk about—a great help to daily

* See *The Woman with the Basket*, page 35.

intercourse. These may seem trivial reasons for joining the Guild, but they are not really trivial. To increase the sum of human happiness, in the world as it is to-day, is worth doing; and it is a result that is achieved by the Women's Co-operative Guild.

It is hardly necessary to comment on the fact that the Guild stands solidly for peace and internationalism. How could an organisation of wives and mothers do otherwise? For that matter, some of its unmarried members were first drawn into its ranks through its work for disarmament and peace, especially in regard to making Armistice week an occasion for spreading the idea of universal brotherhood and not for glorifying war. In addition to this, the Guild has been responsible for promoting the idea of a special Peace Day for celebration in all schools. Indeed, the very essence of Co-operation is the negation of war, because the movement is actually as well as theoretically an international movement.

During the Russian famine of 1921-2, I attended as a relief worker a committee meeting in the Co-operative store of a village in the Volga valley, not far from the foothills of the Urals and fifty miles from the nearest railway station. The villagers, dressed in their sheepskins and high fur hats, the women carrying jars on their shoulders and all of them embarrassingly eager, on seeing the Quaker relief worker's badge, to prostrate themselves in the snow and kiss one's boots in token of gratitude, looked so Eastern and seemed so remote from Western civilisation that I did not think of connecting their Co-operative movement with ours until I saw, on entering the committee-room, a bust of Robert Owen. Then I knew that in Co-operation we have another of those touches that make the whole world kin. And, indeed, our Guild celebrations of 1933 remind us that the British Women's Guild is the first to have a Jubilee, and, therefore, the first to be presented with an international banner by the President of the International Women's Co-operative Guild, which now has branches in fifteen countries and holds regular Congresses. That banner is a symbol of the Workers' Commonwealth for which every Guildswoman is working, consciously or unconsciously, in which all barriers of race and class will be

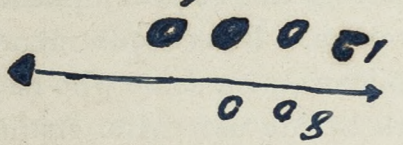
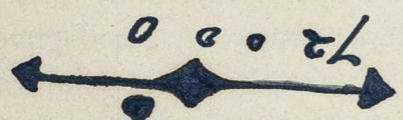
swept away and the competitive spirit driven from trade and industry.

"Woe betide the century," wrote Rousseau in his *Emile* (1762), "in which women have lost their influence, and in which their opinions cease to have any weight with men. It is the last stage of degeneracy." Reviewing the fifty years of activity that make the story of the Women's Co-operative Guild, we see how much may be accomplished independently by a self-governing body of free women, leading to that ideal collaboration of men and women without which nothing lasting can be accomplished in a world peopled by men and women. Before our mental vision there moves a procession of Guildswomen, some who have passed from us, some who still work beside us: Mrs. Arthur Acland and Mrs. Lawrenson, our founders; Miss Llewelyn Davies, who acted as General Secretary from 1889 to 1921; Miss Enfield, who succeeded her and is now international secretary; Mrs. Barton, who is to-day the General Secretary, and others far too many to mention. The Women's Co-operative Guild is democratic in thought and spirit as well as in its constitution; and the least renowned of its members is as important and as necessary to its life as any one of these women who by virtue of an official position make a name that is widely known, sometimes outside our own country.

The Guild has been built up by those thousands of women whose only title to fame is that they have, each one of them, made a worker's home and gone shopping with a basket in a Co-operative store. Buyers and builders, it is they who have made the Guild a power in the life of our time; and we who come after and try to carry on what they began are heirs to a great heritage that we hold in trust for the future. For the work of the past is as nothing to the work of the future, if Robert Owen's dream of a new social order is to be realised. A mighty task lies before our generation of Co-operators. This sketch of the Guild's progress in fifty years should encourage us to tackle it with faith and bravery.

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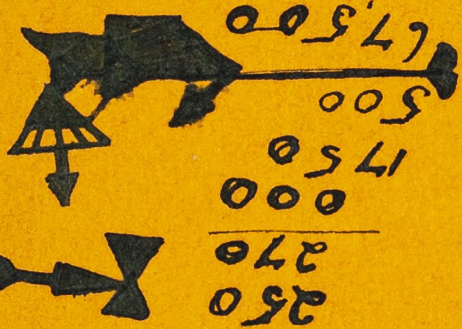
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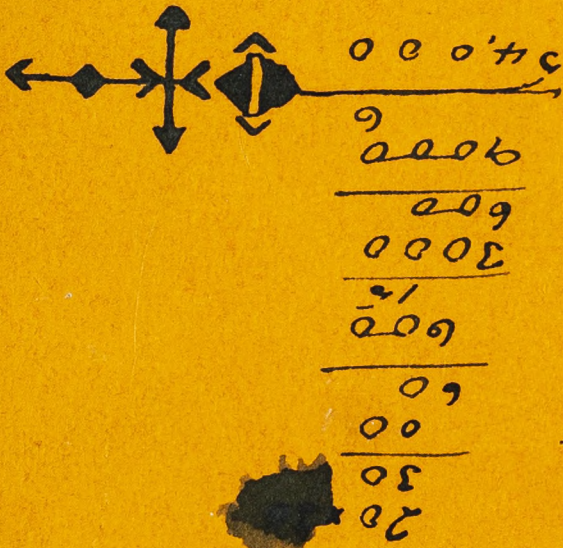
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