

# Co-op loyalty – campaigning

**ALL OVER** Greater London, during the weeks leading up to the Co-operative Women's Guild centenary rally in Central Hall, Westminster on December 3, co-operative groups of various kinds, including the Woodcraft Folk, having been watching performances of an unusual play with music, "Of Whole Heart Cometh Hope", written and presented by the Age Exchange Theatre Company.

This is a small group of young women, who were commissioned by Co-operative Retail Services, London region, and had some financial support from the Greater London Council.

For those of us who have been unable to see the production there is now an illustrated "book of the play" which may be even more enjoyable,

in evoking nostalgic memories of the guild in its most influential days. With time to dig into the script one comes upon nuggets of real gold.

I think it is a pity it is presented as if it were a continuous monologue.

By MARY STOTT

The authors no doubt wanted to avoid the scrappy effect that might have resulted from labelling every paragraph or two, but it would have given many readers great pleasure to be able to identify the "speakers" — as it does to recognise familiar faces of long ago. (For instance, in my case, Mrs. E. E. Williams, a distinguished member of the Co-operative Press board in my day at a peace rally).

In a section headed "Equal Rights", there is a memorable reminder of the guild's long commitment to equal pay ...

"When Eleanor Barton was appointed a secretary — which must have been 1920 — they set a salary that was the male salary, and the guild has always paid its office staff, all through the years, the male rate,

though the unions had two rates, the male rate and the female rate."

Who, one wonders, is the guildswoman who lived in the Garrett Anderson household in Gower St., so long ago, and was taken by Agnes Garrett, sister of Mrs. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, into her room for a little pep talk about the guilds and what they were doing? This member recalls that Lloyd George came along, and "Mrs. Fossett, the postmaster general's wife, you know."

That must have been Millicent Garrett Fawcett,

leader for so many years, of the constitutional suffrage movement, who is remembered every February 6 by a ceremony of wreath-laying on her memorial tablet in Westminster Abbey.

Two themes, though, dominate the book — co-operative loyalty, and peace campaigning. Quotation after quotation reiterates the theme of total loyalty to the co-operative store and to co-operative products: "My mother wouldn't have shopped anywhere but the Co-op not for groceries, not for shoes, not for our school clothes or anything. Everything was from the Co-op.

"There's one thing I can say — I practise what I preach. Nobody would see me coming out of Marks and Spencers, or any of those stores.

"I would have died rather than be seen by any of my guild members coming out of a place like Marks and Spencer's, or another butcher's. I've still got those sorts of

feelings."

One wonders sadly whether that member, who must be quite old, now has a Co-op store within walking distance, or even an easy bus ride? More than one member expresses the feeling of "being an alien" in any other shop, and a lingering "feeling of guilt". But what can they do about it?

The loyalty wasn't only to the shops, it was to the CWS products — names like Pelaw polishes, Crumpsall crackers, Desbeau corsets, Brislington butter are still treasured in memory, and the photographs of advertisements for these products are one of the charms of the book.

The peace demonstrators of the thirties and forties were no less courageous than the Greenham Common women. One member, telling the story of delivering a peace petition to 10 Downing St., with Renee Short MP, "you know, tummies turning

upside down," — goes on to relate how in spite of being warned by police not to display banners outside the Houses of Parliament, one dear friend, now dead, "insisted on marching up and down with her banner shouting 'Ban the bomb, ban the bomb'.

"They hauled her inside and she spent the night in prison and she was delighted."

The authors of the play and the book, Chrys Salt, Pam Schweitzer and Mervyn Wilson have worked hard on this compilation and have covered many areas of co-operative guild activity, organisation and commitment. So much of it is enjoyable that one wishes that similar books and plays could have been written and produced all over the country.

"Of whole heart cometh hope" is available at £2, post and packing included, from the All Exchange Theatre Co., 15 Camden Row, London SE3.