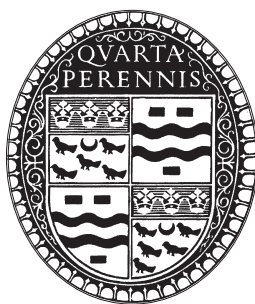


THE BODLEIAN LIBRARY RECORD



EDITOR

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RELIGION, CLASS AND RACE IN THE EARLY CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT: THE MANUSCRIPTS OF LADY BYRON AT THE BODLEIAN LIBRARY

BY DAVID CHAN SMITH

4512. This was the mysterious signature of a letter published in the *Liverpool Mercury* on 28 May 1830. The subject was revolutionary: the anonymous writer described the ‘birth of practical co-operation’. While co-operatives, including worker- and consumer-owned businesses, had existed in Britain from at least the eighteenth century, they developed into an organized ‘co-operative movement’ during the 1820s. 4512 explained that practical co-operation aimed at nothing less than the transformation of society and a ruthless economic system that harvested the value created by labourers for the benefit of a few. Based on mutuality and the shared ownership of property, co-operation empowered the working classes to recover the value produced by their labour, and by doing so ‘put themselves out of the reach of poverty’.¹ In writings, speeches and meetings throughout much of Britain, advocates of the movement described this better world to come. If you have shopped or purchased services recently from a co-op, you are the beneficiary of their efforts.

But who was 4512? The surprising answer unravels a story found in manuscripts at the Bodleian Library and brings to view a remarkable woman; it takes us into the crowded, hot rooms of working-class organizing, and leaves Britain for a school in Switzerland and a plantation in

The research for this project was completed while the author was the RBC Foundation Visiting Fellow at the Bodleian Library and a visiting fellow at Jesus College, University of Oxford. The author is deeply grateful for this support. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada also provided funding for the broader research project. The author wishes to thank the staff at the Weston Library, especially Alexandra Franklin, Rachel Naismith and Janet Walwyn. Special thanks go to Chris Fletcher, who suggested writing up this research, and Greg Claeys and Greig de Peuter who generously commented on early drafts. Bryan Ward-Perkins was an ever-patient editor and the anonymous reviewers provided very helpful feedback.

1 ‘Co-operation Societies’, *Liverpool Mercury* (28 May 1830), p. 171.

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Reconstruction-era Georgia. More broadly still, it reveals a new source for the ongoing revision of the early history of the British co-operative movement.

The Lovelace manuscripts in the Bodleian Library are the first step on the journey. The collection includes the papers of Anne Isabella Noel, Lady Byron (1792–1860), wife of the poet and mother of the computer pioneer Ada Lovelace. Overshadowed by a legendary husband and a brilliant daughter whose ambition was rather ‘to be great, than to be thought so’, Lady Byron worked quietly for social and educational causes, including the abolition of slavery.² Yet she was also criticized in her lifetime and since as a po-faced brute for her separation from her celebrity spouse. Observing the mores of the time, and all too aware of her precarious position in a legal system that favoured husbands, she left those criticisms unanswered. The subtitle of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s essay, which sought posthumously to clear Lady Byron’s name in 1869, thus seems apt: ‘Lady Byron has not spoken at all’.³

And yet, she had. A surviving draft and letters in the Lovelace manuscripts prove that Lady Byron was 4512.⁴ Lady Byron had ventured into the public forum here and even elsewhere to advocate for a subject close to her heart.⁵ Though the origins of her involvement remain to be traced, Lady Byron was prominent in the co-operative movement as an investor and supporter during the crucial period 1829–33. Yet histories of co-operation and even recent biographies do no more than note in passing her contributions, and especially her friendship with Dr William King, one of the most prolific early writers on the subject.⁶

Attention is paid instead to Lady Byron’s promotion of working-class education. In some accounts these projects followed on her ‘disenchantment’ with the co-operative movement, while others have it that co-operative ideas straightforwardly influenced Lady Byron’s design of her

2 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 42, fols 13^v–14^r.

3 Harriet Beecher Stowe, ‘The True Story of Lady Byron’s Life’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 20 (1869), p. 376.

4 ‘Copy to the Liverpool Mercury’, Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 106^r.

5 For references to other publications, see Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 98^r; Julia Markus, *Lady Byron and Her Daughters* (New York, 2015), p. 162.

6 Markus, *Lady Byron and Her Daughters*, pp. 149, 167; Johnston Birchall, *Co-op: The People’s Business* (Manchester, 1994), p. 23; Joan Pierson, *The Real Lady Byron* (London, 1992), pp. 187–9; Arnold Bonner, *British Co-operation: The History, Principles and Organisation of the British Co-operative Movement*, rev. ed. (Manchester, 1970), p. 32; G. D. H. Cole, *A Century of Co-operation* (Manchester, 1944), p. 22; George Jacob Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England: Its Literature and its Advocates*, 2 vols (London 1875–9), vol. 1, pp. 145, 352–3, 361–2, 381–2.

schools.⁷ By investigating the Lovelace manuscripts, we can see how Lady Byron's interest in education and co-operation were closely related, and related more closely still to her deep piety.⁸

THE STORY OF EARLY CO-OPERATION

This recovery of the fuller context of her philanthropic activities also provides material to continue the revision of the well-worn narrative of early co-operation. The first 'historian' of the co-operative movement, G. J. Holyoake, cast the die in his still-influential narrative.⁹ The landmark year in British co-operation was 1844, when twenty-eight members began to trade as the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers and thereby inaugurated the modern 'movement'. The business success of the Pioneers, especially through the issuing of the dividend or 'divi', provided an organizational template for other co-operatives to emulate. Co-operators sprang from success to success, with improved legal recognition in 1852 and the establishment of the English Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), a national wholesaler, in 1863.¹⁰ Through mergers, these businesses became the modern Co-operative Group, one of Britain's largest trading companies.

Holyoake labelled the other side of 1844 the 'pioneer period' of co-operation. Robert Owen was the pivotal figure during the 1820s and early 1830s, and the 'originator' of the system of co-operation.¹¹ Owen's development of 'philanthropic management' at his New Lanark mills revealed to many that profitability need not be tied to exploitation (a major insight at the time). Owen introduced fair trading at his company store

7 Markus, *Lady Byron and Her Daughters*, pp. 167, 170; Pierson, *The Real Lady Byron*, p. 189; Brian W. Taylor, 'Annabella, Lady Noel-Byron: A Study of Lady Byron on Education', *History of Education Quarterly*, 38/4 (1998), p. 439.

8 Material related to co-operatives can be found in Bodleian, MSS. Lovelace 45-6, 65, 69, 72, 75, 77, 105, 112-13, 116, 119, 172.

9 G. J. Holyoake, *Self-Help by the People: History of Co-operation in Rochdale* (London, 1858); Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England*, vol. 1; Peter Gurney, 'George Jacob Holyoake: Socialism, Association, and Co-operation in Nineteenth-Century England', in Stephen Yeo (ed.), *New Views of Co-operation* (London, 1988), pp. 52-72. Other early accounts include, Cole, *A Century of Co-operation*; Bonner, *British Co-operation*; Ronald Garnett, *Co-operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain, 1825-45* (Manchester, 1972).

10 John Wilson, Anthony Webster and Rachael Vorberg-Rugh, *Building Co-operation: A Business History of the Co-operative Group, 1863-2013* (Oxford, 2013). The Scottish Wholesale Co-operative Society was founded in 1868: see James Kinloch and John Butt, *History of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society Limited* (Manchester, 1981).

11 Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England*, vol. 1, p. 52.

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and invested in the education of the children of his workers. This gave him occasion to develop his educational theories and his arguments that the environment, not an in-born character, shaped human moral development. Raise a child in good conditions and they will become an honest worker.

The financial success of New Lanark emboldened Owen, and he developed more radical ideas about the priority of labour over capital and the superiority of co-operation over competition. He sought to exercise his philosophies through the establishment of 'villages of union' led by elites who would transform society.¹² Owen left Britain in 1824–9, with the profits of New Lanark, in order to establish a model community at New Harmony, Indiana. This revolutionary experiment proved dysfunctional and a costly failure.

Even local communities built around the co-operative ideal were expensive, and few had Owen's financial resources. So, working- and middle-class supporters fused Owen's ideas with pre-existing practices of co-operative trading during the 1820s.¹³ The 'surplus' (profits) from co-operative businesses would be used to establish communities. Abram Combe in Edinburgh, George Mudie in London and William King in Brighton, among others, argued that co-operatives could be the means to transform society, business by business, village by village. Practical co-operation was a gradualist approach to achieving Owenite ideals.

This traditional narrative describes both a largely secularized movement, especially after Owen's criticism of organized religion in 1817, and an initial surge of co-operative enthusiasm. In 1828 King noted only nine trading co-operatives, but by 1830 he claimed the existence of 300. Co-operative congresses even began to meet in 1831. Yet collapse soon followed. The last of this first generation of congresses met in 1835. In the years 1835–44, after the failure of many local societies, the co-operative movement slipped into a supposedly subterranean phase of local organization and missionary work by Owenite socialists, until revived in Rochdale.¹⁴

¹² On Owen, see most recently Ian Donnachie, *Robert Owen: Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony* (Edinburgh, 2005).

¹³ The importance of these earlier societies has been established by Joshua Bamfield, 'Consumer-Owned Community Flour and Bread Societies in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Business History*, 40/4 (1998), pp. 16–36; Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 11–16.

¹⁴ Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England*, vol. 1, pp. 175–249; Cole, *A Century of Co-operation*, pp. 25–36; Bonner, *British Co-operation*, pp. 27–8; Birchall, *Co-op*, pp. 30–32.

While co-operators produced important histories of their movement, interest among historians has been more limited.¹⁵ Co-operation has attracted consumer historians, and more recently business historians have become attentive to this alternative form of organization.¹⁶ Labour historians and historians of the working classes have been more diffident.¹⁷ Some cause may be due to the dispiriting narrative arc sketched above. Here was a revolutionary movement that became enchanted by capitalism. The Rochdale 'divi' socialized the working classes into patterns of consumption such that they lost sight of higher aims.¹⁸ Dreamers became shopkeepers.

Recent historiography, however, has contested and revised this narrative. The new historiography has contextualized the Rochdale Pioneers within a much more vigorous early co-operative movement and argued for a greater emphasis on continuity rather than a sharp break during the years 1835–44.¹⁹ Second, new research has challenged the focus on middle- and upper-class leadership of the movement, recovering the centrality of working-class individuals to the story of early co-operation. Owen's celebrity no longer holds the gaze of more recent historiography.²⁰ He was, after all, doubtful about co-operatives and whether the working classes

15 Nicole Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914–1960: Minding Their Own Business* (London, 2010), p. 4; Christopher Wrigley, 'The Commemorative Urge: The Co-operative Movement's Collective Memory', in *Consumerism and the Co-operative Movement in Modern British History: Taking Stock* (Manchester, 2009), pp. 157–73.

16 John K. Walton, 'The Post-War Decline of the British Retail Co-operative Movement: Nature, Causes and Consequences', in Lawrence Black and Nicole Robertson (eds), *Consumerism and the Co-operative Movement*, pp. 13–31; Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge, 2003). Business history approaches include Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, *Building Co-operation*; Anthony Webster, 'Building the Wholesale: The Development of the English CWS and British Co-operative Business 1863–90', *Business History*, 54/6 (2012), pp. 883–904.

17 Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement*, pp. 4–6.

18 Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, pp. 1–11.

19 Stephen Yeo, 'Rival Clusters of Potential: Ways of Seeing Co-operation', in Stephen Yeo, *New Views of Co-operation* (London, 1988), pp. 1–9. For an early argument for continuity, see Sidney Pollard, 'Nineteenth-Century Co-operation: From Community Building to Shopkeeping', in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History in Memory of G. D. H. Cole*, rev. ed. (London, 1967), pp. 74–112. The extent of co-operative retailing from 1835–44 has been demonstrated by M. Purvis, 'Cooperative Retailing in England 1835–1850: Developments beyond Rochdale', *Northern History*, 22 (1986), pp. 198–215. For a recent summary of literature on Rochdale see John K. Walton, 'Revisiting the Rochdale Pioneers', *Labour History Review*, 80/3 (2015), pp. 215–48.

20 Andy Durr, 'William King of Brighton: Co-operation's Prophet?', in Yeo (ed.), *New Views of Co-operation*, pp. 10–26.

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could achieve much on their own.²¹ Third, historians have broadened our understanding of co-operation and its supposed shift from a 'world-transforming movement' to shopkeeping. Peter Gurney, for example, has investigated the wider reach of co-operative culture, which included education, gymnasiums and entertainment, and was an important influence on working-class identity.²² This research has pointed to the role that co-operative thought and practice played in moralizing the economy and creating new solidarities. Finally, the crucial role of women in the movement, especially beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, has also drawn attention.²³ Women's influence during the earlier years is, however, still murky. Lady Byron joined a group of philanthropically minded upper-class women whose support is sometimes acknowledged in the literature, but whose networks, impact and role have not been studied in detail.²⁴

The challenge for all researchers is that the early years of co-operation have poor source survival.²⁵ During the first decades many local co-operatives failed and their papers disappeared with them. Reconstructions of the movement during the 1820s and 1830s have relied largely on the co-operative press that bloomed during this period, including the London-based *Economist* (1821–2) and King's *The Co-operator* (1828–30). Known archival material, such as papers produced by co-operative congresses, are clustered in a few repositories, especially the National Co-operative Archive in Manchester, the Bishopsgate Institute and King's College London. The recent publication by Gregory

21 Birchall, *Co-op*, p. 22; Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World* (London, 2009), pp. 165, 169–70, 176.

22 Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*.

23 Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1983), pp. 83–130; Kirsten Madden and Joseph Persky, 'The Economic Thought of the Women's Co-operative Guild', in Kirsten Madden and Robert W. Dimand (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Women's Economic Thought* (Abingdon, 2019), pp. 150–68; Barbara J. Blaszak, *The Matriarchs of England's Cooperative Movement: A Study in Gender Politics and Female Leadership, 1883–1921* (Westport, CT, and London, 2000); Gill Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London, 1998); Jean Gaffin and David Thoms, *Caring and Sharing: The Centenary History of the Co-operative Women's Guild* (Manchester, 1983).

24 Holyoake provided a brief sketch: Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England*, vol. 1, pp. 379–82.

25 For a survey of sources, see R. G. Garnett, 'The Records of Early Cooperation with Particular Reference to Pre-Rochdale Consumer Co-operation', *Local Historian*, 9/4 (1970), pp. 163–71.

Claeys of the ten-volume *Owenite Socialist Tracts*, however, demonstrates the documentary richness of this period of co-operative activism.²⁶

The Lovelace collection suggests the possibilities afforded by additional manuscript evidence for early co-operation. Lady Byron maintained a lively correspondence with leading co-operators, including King, William Pare, P. O. Skene and John Finch.²⁷ She retained some printed material from co-operatives, and herself wrote on co-operative education. How can these sources reveal the link between piety, education and co-operatives in Lady Byron's own mind? How might they help us to know better the 'pioneering period' of the first decades of mass co-operative organization?

THE LOVELACE MANUSCRIPTS AND THE CHALLENGE OF
RUNNING A CO-OPERATIVE

First, Lady Byron's papers offer glimpses into the business challenges and aspirations of working-class entrepreneurship. This was no easy business. Her informants included King, Finch, local societies and especially her young cousin Robert Noel, who travelled the country (and is remembered for his later work in phrenology). At points, her opinion was solicited about material that other co-operators were drafting.²⁸ Through this network she was kept abreast of debates at co-operative congresses and often tumultuous local meetings.²⁹ Lady Byron also invested in a number of co-operatives, including in Brighton, Huddersfield, Salford and Liverpool, and exchanged news and information with them.

Her exchanges with local societies reveal some of their troubles, especially as they came to her for loans or to explain their failures to repay them. A report of the balance sheet at the closing of the First Liverpool Cooperative revealed that the association had a running loss of nearly £200 in 1830–32 and was indebted to Lady Byron for £100. Member subscriptions totalled a mere £74.³⁰ Byron's response was insightful: she believed that it was bad policy to provide too much capital to new societies: 'I know of one instance at Tunbridge Wells in which a loan of £50 was the cause of the ruin of a society by lessening the spirit of exertion.'

26 Gregory Claeys (ed.), *Owenite Socialism: Pamphlets and Correspondence* (London, 2005).

27 Correspondence with Dr King is found in Bodleian, MSS. Lovelace 45–6, 77, 172; with Finch in MS. Lovelace 69 and with Pare in MS. Lovelace 105.

28 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 69, fols 88, 93^v; MS. Lovelace 105, fol. 190^v.

29 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fols 70^r, 76^r, 88^r–89^r, 148^r; 166^{r-v}; MS. Lovelace 69, fols 85–7, 92^r.

30 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 69, fol. 104^r.

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The same had been true in Brighton, she added, and insisted that 'the principle of independence should be preserved to the utmost, as a pledge for other principles, and as a stimulus to further exertion.' Byron sought to support the autonomy of working-class entrepreneurs, not establish their dependence on a wealthy backer.³¹

These setbacks produced a running discussion of management problems throughout her papers.³² Finch provided Byron with a detailed analysis of the challenges facing co-operators, including the now classic problems of agency and control of managers, and legal remedies to protect the solvency of the business.³³ In response, Byron's correspondence often mentions attempts to create model rules for co-operatives to guide them (something that King's *Co-operator* and other publications had also distributed).³⁴ Realism tempered experimentation. Finch proposed the adoption of a yearly dividend to the first Liverpool Cooperative Society in 1831. The rationale was that few of the working classes understood 'what community means' and that co-operatives should instead function to inculcate 'habits of frugality'. A dividend, moreover, would appeal to 'wives', who would thus be more motivated to shop at the co-operative. Those interested in establishing a separate communitarian village could then accumulate their dividends for this purpose.³⁵

NETWORKS AND CLASS CONFLICT IN EARLY CO-OPERATION

Early co-operators such as Lady Byron quickly understood the importance of sharing information to improve business. Networks of co-operators were crucial and they remain to be mapped. Lady Byron made introductions, relayed information and recruited new advocates. Through her, Finch, for example, wrote that he wanted to meet King.³⁶ She distributed pamphlets and newspapers, purchasing through an agent hundreds of copies of co-operative publications.³⁷ When Thomas Hirst visited her in London, he returned with several printed works related to co-operation

31 Ibid., fol. 112^r.

32 Ibid., fol. 90^v.

33 Ibid., fol. 98^r.

34 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 75^r; MS. Lovelace 69, fol. 111^v. Advice and models were also published in the co-operative press: Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England*, vol. 1, pp. 132–5.

35 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 69, fol. 93^v.

36 Ibid., fol. 86^r.

37 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 75, fol. 27^r.

for the Huddersfield society.³⁸ She routinely cultivated new supporters, especially among middle- and upper-class women. The papers suggest that the influence of middle- and upper-class women in the early years of the movement may have been greater than has so far been recognized. Anne Hirst, the wife of Thomas Hirst, corresponded with her, and she introduced Lady Olivia Sparrow and others to co-operation.³⁹ Perhaps most surprisingly, she attempted to influence the queen herself, and described a conversation Queen Adelaide (the wife of William IV) had had in 1830, in which 'cooperation occupied most of the time'.⁴⁰

Yet Lady Byron worried that pressing the matter too closely would bring the queen into contact with the 'radical' London societies. This was a sign of the deep class tension within co-operation. The ostensible goal of co-operation for Lady Byron was the conciliation of the classes. After Robert Noel's 'tour' of English co-operators in 1831, she reported to King that the 'working cooperators ... are disposed to place confidence in all professed friends, tho' their leaders seek to render them suspicious of the kindness of their superiors in rank'.⁴¹ She wrote that the 'co-operative principle, if it be more than a name, should extend its influence beyond one circle, and gradually melt down all exclusive sentiments'.⁴² Consequently, many elite co-operators were often suspicious of other forms of labour organization, including trade unionism. Union meant conciliation, and not confrontation between bargaining classes.

Suspicion and class hostility created obstacles to conciliation. King declared that co-operatives should have as their members only those from among the working classes, because, 'in the present state of society, the different classes do not easily amalgamate: they are jealous of each other.'⁴³ These tensions sometimes broke out into the open within the movement. In 1830, King published a letter in the *Co-operator* supposedly from a gentleman holding 'a high and important office', which urged the need for patrons to support new co-operatives.⁴⁴ The response in the co-operative press was harsh, with other publications objecting to

38 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 116, fol. 150^r.

39 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 72, fol. 240^r; MS. Lovelace 77, fols 75^r, 116^r.

40 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 119^r-120^r, 121^v-122^r.

41 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 162^v. Byron herself visited the northern industrial towns in 1834: Markus, *Lady Byron and Her Daughters*, p. 151.

42 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 108^v.

43 William King, *Co-operation's Prophet: The Life and Letters of Dr. William King of Brighton, with a Reprint of The Co-operator, 1828-1830*, ed. T. W. Mercer (Manchester, 1947), p. 23.

44 Ibid., pp. 85-7. Garnett, *Co-operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities*, p. 57.

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patronage at all.⁴⁵ The Lovelace manuscripts shed further light on the episode. During the same week, Lady Byron recounted in her correspondence that King had written a letter to the London Central Society that spoke to the 'goodwill shown by persons who were not of the working class'.⁴⁶ This letter was also not well received. Even Lady Byron acknowledged that it seemed like a 'claim to gratitude'. Around the same time, she received reports of a working-class meeting discussing co-operation, in which any support from the wealthy was taken to be motivated by fear rather than sympathy.⁴⁷

If suspicion coloured the perspective of the working classes, condescension obscured that of their elite supporters. Discussing a pamphlet prepared for the working-class parents of one of her schools, Lady Byron observed that the prose was 'not a specimen of the best English, but of that which will be intelligible to them'.⁴⁸ She was not alone in these sentiments. At one contentious meeting in London, Owen shot back at the assembly that 'they were still "too ignorant for cooperation"' and urged them not to dwell on their grievances.⁴⁹ The audience probably did not receive this comment well.

These problems spoke to the challenge of creating community, especially classless community. Co-operation required that individuals think very differently about themselves and their relationships. Whereas competition encouraged individualism, the co-operator, as Lady Byron urged, 'sinks the individual in the community'.⁵⁰ How then to get people to do this?

CHRISTIANITY AND CO-OPERATION

For Lady Byron, the key to conciliation and the moral improvement of co-operators was Christianity. Christianity provided the value matrix within which co-operation could function. Christian influences on early co-operation are often mentioned in the historiography, but seldom closely considered.⁵¹ Yet it is known that influential co-operators, like King and

45 Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England*, vol. 1, p. 133.

46 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 87^r.

47 Ibid., fols 88–9.

48 Ibid., fol. 275^r.

49 Ibid., fol. 89^r.

50 'Co-operation Societies', *Liverpool Mercury* (28 May 1830), p. 171.

51 Mick Reed, "'The Lord Does Combination Love': Religion and Co-operation Amongst a Peculiar People", in Yeo (ed.), *New Views of Co-operation*, pp. 73–87; though, as Peter Ackers shows, working- and middle-class religiosity could assume very different forms: Peter Ackers, 'West End Chapel, Back Street Bethel: Labour and Capital in the

J. T. W. Mitchell, had a strong sense of religious obligation and wrote extensively about the relationship between Christianity and co-operation.⁵² Religious commitment was important to the formation of the Rochdale Pioneers and societies in Liverpool, Huddersfield and elsewhere.⁵³ The connection between Christian thought and co-operation continued long after Lady Byron's time, in the work, for example, of the Christian Socialists.⁵⁴

Early co-operators were divided on the issue. Many were put off by Owen's criticisms of religion.⁵⁵ The Lovelace papers provide some further insights into how early co-operators connected Christian values with the practice of co-operation. Lady Byron herself was not sectarian and observed that religious talk was sometimes used to justify uncharitable or self-interested actions.⁵⁶ Yet, by the early 1830s, she also believed that co-operation was a form of practical Christianity and one that could prosper in the hands of Christians: 'the cooperative body must ultimately consist of religious characters, whereas for want of the "bond of peace", the infidel co-operators have been baffled in their attempts at association.'⁵⁷ Her correspondents explored these themes with her. P. O. Skene, for example, urged that cooperation was 'a new Consistent Christian Practice'.⁵⁸

The division over the question of religious values within the movement was a fundamental cleavage for Lady Byron, who wrote in 1829:

This is the critical moment ... which will determine whether Cooperation is to be allied with, or opposed to Religion. The prejudice entertained by many of the prime-movers of Cooperation against Christianity, from their intellectual incapacity to discern [*sic*] in it any thing but priestcraft, will no doubt have a powerful influence.⁵⁹

Wigan Churches of Christ c.1845–1945', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47/2 (1996), pp. 298–329.

52 Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, *Building Co-operation*, p. 31; Birchall, *Co-op*, p. 29; Bonner, *British Co-operation*, p. 26; Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, pp. 53–4.

53 Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, p. 48.

54 See the discussion in Lovett's remembrances: *The Life and Struggles of William Lovett* (London, 1876), p. 42. See also: Rob McQueen, *A Social History of Company Law: Great Britain and the Australian Colonies 1854–1920* (Farnham, 2009); Philip N. Backstrom, *Christian Socialism and Co-operation in Victorian England: Edward Vansittart Neale and the Co-operative Movement* (London, 1974); Charles E. Raven, *Christian Socialism, 1848–1854* (New York, 1968); Torben Christensen, *Origin and History of Christian Socialism, 1848–54* (Leiden, 1962).

55 The Liverpool society, for example: Garnett, *Co-operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities*, p. 54.

56 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 116^v.

57 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 119, fol. 10^v.

58 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 112, fol. 21^v.

59 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 77^r.

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This was a reference to Owen. The Huddersfield society noted in its correspondence that Lady Byron herself had urged that ‘Co-operation [was] founded on Christian Principles’ that were ‘Intirely opposed to Mr. Owens infidelity’.⁶⁰ While Lady Byron sometimes wrote admiringly about Owen, she was also critical of him, observing to King in 1829, ‘I was not very favorably prepossessed by my interview with Owen – vanity and presumption appeared to me strongly to characterize him.’⁶¹ She engaged with Owen in ‘argumentative discussions’ over his *Memorial to the Mexican Republic* (reprinted in 1829) and concluded that his ‘thoughts’ were ‘so confined to one narrow channel as to render him incapable of apprehending any other train of reasoning’.⁶² Lady Byron blamed him and his followers for separating co-operation from Christianity, a hostility that sometimes came out in the form of jokes about whether Owenites were true Christians at all.⁶³ At other points, however, Lady Byron sought reconciliation, urging King to publish a volume of his articles to ‘attract Christians and Owenites. It would form a bond between them by making the former practical and the latter spiritual.’⁶⁴

Though Owen promised that co-operation would deliver a ‘new moral world’, Christianity provided a different utopian narrative for Lady Byron and others. The future would see the realization of Christian values of charity and community through the mechanism of co-operation, since Christian values would solve the problem of how to get people to enact co-operation. The strain of millenarianism within Owenite thought is well known, but other co-operators saw this utopianism through a distinctively Christian lens that still awaits further investigation.⁶⁵

THE ROOTS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

While Christianity could provide the values necessary for durable co-operation, the process of moral improvement needed to proceed through

60 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 72, fols 236^{f-v}.

61 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 75^v.

62 Ibid., fol. 85^r. The 1829 reprint also included a speech by Owen about the errors of religion.

63 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 130^v.

64 Ibid., fol. 209^r.

65 Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Millennium and Enlightenment: Robert Owen and the Second Coming of the Truth’, *History of European Ideas*, 47/2 (2021), pp. 1–19; Edward Royle, *Robert Owen and the Commencement of the Millennium: A Study of the Harmony Community* (Manchester, 1998); Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815–1860* (Princeton, 1987).

education. Education, at least of a technical sort, was central to the co-operative movement.⁶⁶ Co-operators founded mechanics' institutes and co-operatives sponsored libraries that included both technical material as well as pamphlets and accounts of co-operation.⁶⁷ Lady Byron's promotion of schools emerged from this context and her belief that, without moral education, co-operation would ultimately fail. She added a Christian moral layer to the practical orientation of the co-operative educational movement.

Already in 1830 Lady Byron was sounding a note of doubt about the capacity of people raised in a competitive society to develop as co-operators. 'But how weak and ignorant is man!' she wrote. She became increasingly emphatic in the belief that the impediment to co-operative business was not simply a lack of technical knowledge:

all my experience tends to prove that there is not yet sufficient knowledge or virtue among them to qualify any great number for such a state of society. Very few of the labouring classes can understand what community means. I do not believe from what I have seen and heard that one man in ten of those who have joined these societies knows any thing at all of the real principles of cooperation.⁶⁸

Her correspondents reinforced her in this view. William Jackson in Salford wrote that 'Experience convinces me that the cooperative Trading Societies err exceedingly in first endeavouring to accumulate capital which must however in all cases be preceded by an accumulation of moral feeling derived from a knowledge of our own nature.' The pursuit of capital over moral improvement explained the failure of co-operatives, since 'unless men and women can first acquire benevolent feelings and a desire for moral improvement, they will never cordially unite or continue long together.'⁶⁹ Finch made similar observations and wrote, 'our great cooperative leaders are 20 30 perhaps 50 years in advance of the morals and intellect of the working classes.'⁷⁰

Lady Byron's founding of the Ealing Grove Co-operative School (1834-7) was closely related to her experience with co-operation. She pursued an extensive research programme in preparation and published

66 Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, pp. 41-5; John F. C. Harrison, "'The Steam Engine of the New Moral World': Owenism and Education, 1817-1829', *Journal of British Studies*, 6/2 (1967), pp. 76-98.

67 Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914-1960*, p. 17.

68 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 166^r.

69 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 75, fol. 27^v.

70 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 69, fol. 94^r.

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a short history of industrial schools, the drafts of which are in the Lovelace collection.⁷¹ Ealing Grove applied the philosophies of Emanuel de Fellenberg, whose academy at Hofwyl in Switzerland Lady Byron visited.⁷² She also engaged in critical discussions with Rowland Detrosier, a champion of working-class education who agreed with her that 'educational objects should take precedence of absolute community.'⁷³

The outcome was an educational philosophy at Ealing Grove in which children learned through labour. Ealing Grove enrolled boarders and day schoolers, both paying for tuition. In the afternoons the students were given gardening allotments to work and could sell the produce.⁷⁴ As Lady Byron explained, Fellenberg had used labour to bring teaching 'into harmony with the system of action'. The impact was not limited to the individual. Agricultural labour was particularly suited to the form of teaching that Lady Byron sought because 'Each member of the family performs his part of the common work and thus gains the elevating consciousness of being a useful member of the community.'⁷⁵

This experiential knowledge was more than utilitarian. When Lady Byron learned that some parents were reluctant to school their children at Ealing Grove because they thought the education trained them to be agricultural labourers, she prepared a response. The pamphlet explained the moral and intellectual benefits of tending to the garden.⁷⁶ Certainly the success of such labour would reveal to students the thrill of profit derived from industry (as well as an opportunity to learn accounting by managing seeds).⁷⁷ Yet there was more. Gardening produced a 'sense of dependence upon Divine Providence' and receptiveness to further Christian truths. Though Ealing Grove was non-denominational, the education was nonetheless infused with Christian morality, as Lady Byron herself wrote: 'All who are engaged in the direction and instruction of the children, must aim at forming their characters after the Christian model, and thus making them instruments for promoting religion and goodness.'⁷⁸ Piety, the moral improvement necessary for co-operation, and education had come together.

71 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 119 has several copies beginning fol. 15^r.

72 Markus, *Lady Byron and Her Daughters*, pp. 143, 161–5.

73 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 168^r; see R. Detrosier, *An address ... to the ... new Mechanics' institution, Manchester ... on the necessity of an extension of moral and political instruction among the working classes* (Manchester, [1831]).

74 Markus, *Lady Byron and Her Daughters*, pp. 167–8.

75 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 119, fol. 93^r.

76 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 77, fol. 275^r.

77 Ibid., fol. 274^r.

78 Bodleian, MS. Lovelace 119, fol. 174^r.

Situating Lady Byron's educational efforts within the larger context of the co-operative project suggests two contributions. First, it explains how she and other co-operators pursued a vision different from Owen's, one that was inflected by Christian thought. It also underscores the long-term relationship between co-operation and religious commitment that Owenite secularism has obscured. Second, her work in the later 1830s, during the supposedly exilic phase of Owenite co-operatives, demonstrates instead the liveliness and creativity of the period leading up to Rochdale. Rochdale emerged from an intellectual context where secular and religious ideas braided together, and from a co-operative project that had, by adopting a diversity of approaches, expanded in its world-making scope after 1833.

CONCLUSION: CO-OPERATION AND THE WIDER WORLD

The ideas and networks that Lady Byron and other co-operators created in the 1820s and 1830s endured with surprising results. Her later work with the anti-slavery movement led to her sponsorship of William and Ellen Craft. Their daring escape from slavery in the American South in 1848 – Ellen dressed as a white man while William pretended to be her slave – was celebrated by the abolitionist cause. The couple's prominence, however, prompted fears of slave catchers sent under the Fugitive Slave Law. The Crafts sought protection in Britain, where they lectured on behalf of the anti-slavery cause.

The Crafts lived at a co-operative school in Ockham, Surrey with the funding of Lady Byron and other supporters.⁷⁹ The founders of this school in 1835 were Lady Byron's daughter, Ada Lovelace, and her husband.⁸⁰ They too had applied the educational philosophies of Fellenberg at Ockham. The Crafts seem to have enrolled at the school and then taught there. The experience stayed with them. William established a similar school in Dahomey in 1863–7. They then sought to promote co-operative principles in the United States to ameliorate the conditions of freed persons after the Civil War. African-American communitarian movements had existed prior to the war and, prompted by the example of New Harmony, co-operation had also spread.⁸¹ Rochdale co-opera-

79 William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (New York, 1969), p. 109.

80 R. J. M. Blackett, 'Fugitive Slaves in Britain: The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft', *Journal of American Studies*, 12/1 (1978), p. 51.

81 Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park, PA, 2014), pp. 33–40, 49.

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tives emerged from at least 1863 in the United States.⁸² That same year William was canvassing for contributions towards co-operative projects. The British co-operator press reported that he was 'endeavouring to raise a fund for the purchase and stock of a Co-operative farm in the United States, with a view to the employment of freedmen'. The report took occasion to remind readers that 'the Co-operative movement is not merely productive of material benefit – it is also a great educational agency.'⁸³ The Crafts eventually established the Woodville Co-operative School and plantation on 1,800 acres in Georgia (in 1870).⁸⁴ The school met with hostility from neighbours and eventually failed.⁸⁵ Yet the Crafts' efforts proved the appeal of Byron's ideas as a means of transforming individuals and society. In fact, co-operative schools in the UK are resurgent today, though with the same attendant concerns about their relationship to capitalist society and marketization.⁸⁶

The Lovelace manuscripts reveal the connections among co-operation, piety and education, helping us to recontextualize the work of an energetic and creative woman. They also suggest new avenues for research in co-operation and the need to recover manuscript and primary source documentation. First, the linkages in the Lovelace collection between Christian thought and co-operation underscore the impact of religious thought and 'economic theology' in moralizing the economy.⁸⁷ Second, co-operative history offers opportunities for business and management historians interested in organizational innovation. Lady Byron and many of her correspondents realized the rootedness of management practices in cultural values. Inculcating these values among those raised in a competitive society took time. Rochdale had a co-operative tradition

82 Ibid., pp. 60–77.

83 'Co-operation among the Freedmen', *Co-operator*, 3/35 (1863), p. 360.

84 William Craft, 'Primary Education in Georgia', *Boston Daily Advertiser* (22 August 1873); William Craft, 'Georgia', *Boston Daily Advertiser* (30 July 1875).

85 'Mr. William Craft and His School in Georgia', *Boston Daily Advertiser* (21 October 1876); 'The Craft-Naylor Suit', *Boston Daily Advertiser* (8 June 1878); 'The Craft Libel Suit', *Boston Daily Advertiser* (15 June 1878); 'William Craft Has Had a Hard Experience in Boston', *Boston Daily Advertiser* (16 July 1878).

86 Tom Woodin, 'Co-operative Schools: Democratic Values, Networks and Leadership', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23/11 (2019), pp. 1164–79; Joanna Dennis, 'The Logic of the Marketplace and the Ethic of Co-operation: A Case Study of a Co-operative School', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23/11 (2019), pp. 1196–207.

87 See, for example, Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford, 1988); Ian Mitchell, 'Ethical Shopping in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 7/3 (2015), pp. 310–29.

from at least 1830. The Pioneers read King's *Co-operator* with its 'complete, down to earth social and economic philosophy of Co-operation'.⁸⁸ Co-operators studied and learned both from their own experiences as well as those of others. Third, this suggests that we should conceive of early co-operation not simply as a history of organizations or of intellectual ideas, but as the story of the people who composed and recomposed co-operatives and of the networks that they constructed. Co-operation was an iterative process of organizational experimentation. As a business practice, it required cultural adjustment, and long-term and often tacit learning to run the technical aspects of the business and to socialize people to co-operative principles. By emphasizing this continuity of people and networks, the history of co-operation can contribute to the larger historiography on innovation during the period, with its emphasis on tacit learning and networks.⁸⁹

Opportunities in the collection abound. Perhaps future researchers can even solve one minor mystery: what is the significance of the number 4512?

88 Birchall, *Co-op*, pp. 23–5, 49; Bonner, *British Co-operation*, p. 23.

89 Joel Mokyr, 'Progress, Useful Knowledge, and the Origins of the Industrial Revolution', in Avner Greif and others (eds), *Institutions, Innovation, and Industrialization: Essays in Economic History and Development* (Princeton, 2015), pp. 33–67; Celina Fox, *The Arts of Industry in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2010).