

‘DOMESTIC DRUDGERY WILL BE A THING OF THE PAST’: CO-OPERATIVE WOMEN AND THE REFORM OF HOUSEWORK

ALISTAIR THOMSON

‘The fact of so many changes having occurred in domestic life, impels one to ask, Why should there not be others?’

Thus Ben Jones (1847–1942) whose mother had been a power-loom weaver and father a dyer’s labourer, and who became the first manager of the CWS London branch. Ben Jones wrote the massive and still useful *Co-operative Production* (1894). The quotation comes from the Proceedings of the Industrial Remuneration Conference in 1885. His wife, who died early, was a leading activist in the Womens Co-operative Guild. In his *Working Men Co-operators*, written with Acland in 1884 (p. 106) Ben Jones also tried to theorize ‘associated homes’. In 1885 he wrote,

It is worth while expressing one’s opinion in favour of these institutions, even at the expense of being taken for a visionary. Every man knows the immense benefit that has resulted from division of labour. The home has not been free from direct invasions. Cotton and wool used to be spun and woven at home; now it is not. Stockings used to be almost universally knitted at home; now the practice in England is rare. Most articles of underclothing used to be made at home, the practice is becoming less frequent, owing to the invention of sewing machines. The home has also been invaded by labour-saving machinery, such as these sewing machines and wringing machines. The fact of so many changes having occurred in domestic life, impels one to ask, why should there not be others? The work of women would be made much lighter by division of labour. In an associated home, one could cook, another could nurse, a third could act as chambermaid, a fourth could be the waitress, and so on. Those who wished to do nothing, and could afford the luxury, could pay their poorer or more energetic sisters to do the work for them. (*Proceedings of the Industrial Remuneration Conference, 1885, p. 294*)

This chapter follows through the limitations as well as the possibilities of such an outlook. First, however, it insists that there *was* vision, concerning

association and home, however hard historians now have to dig for it. Majority silence from places where noise is difficult to make, let alone to federate in order to get heard (whether pre-enclosure villages, 1920s housing estates, or that most sealed place of all: HOME) does not mean assent. Historians are privileged to try to listen, like this chapter does, to rumours from such places: most domestic irritations and visions necessarily had no echo, but some got through. There were challenges to the division of labour *between* homes, even if the challenges to the division of labour *within* homes and between genders were (seem to historians?) far more rare.

But then this chapter also makes clear what obstacles there were to any kind of grand co-operation in the domestic sphere from within the co-operative movement itself. The movement *was* mainly male: women *were*, for the most part, seen 'with a basket': patriarchy was the rule (for which see the sympathetic autobiography by Linda McCullough Thew, *The Pit Village and the Store*, London, Pluto, 1985). But the movement *did* also nurture, or at least (see Chapter 8), *allow*, the most successful working-class womens' organization yet seen in Britain, the Women's Co-operative Guild. The visions, however partial, and the obstacles however sexist are each worth knowing. And the obstacles, while evidenced within the movement itself, were, of course, far more strongly based in the society outside.

Imagine a world in which housework is taken out of the house, and out of the hands of women! At the end of each block of houses there is a common kitchen, providing meals for householders who have not the time or energy to cook for themselves. A neighbourhood washing service collects washing once a week and returns it washed, ironed, and folded, and a house-cleaning service is available for those who need it. Perhaps these services are collectively owned and controlled by a neighbourhood co-operative, perhaps they are sponsored by local government. They are not privately owned, profit-making enterprises. The home has become a place for rest and relaxation. And women, just as much as men, are freed to enter their preferred employment and to enjoy their leisure time as they wish.

This bold domestic future was keenly debated within the Women's Co-operative Guild during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Guildswomen argued about domestic life and reform with pride, anger, and despair. Primarily 'married women belonging to the artisan class',¹ they had good reason for all three.

Many guildswomen were wary of communal or co-operative

alternatives to their individual burden of housework. As working-class women they feared for the independence and privacy that the home could, ideally, offer a working-class family. As women they perceived a threat to their self-respect and power as managers of the home and family. A woman's hard work was essential for the family's survival. More than that, she would slave so that her family could 'turn out' as well as possible. A rarely used front parlour would be kept scrupulously clean, collars and pinafores would be dutifully ironed, scrubbing the flagstones could become a ritual performance. A family's good name in the neighbourhood, 'respectability', was at stake. It was also a woman's dignity.

Working women were also forever conscious of the middle-class ideology of 'the angel in the house' which was urged upon them. For example, in 1890 'Narcissus' wrote to the Guild's 'Woman's Corner' in the *Co-operative News* of the 'sacred thoughts that cling around that little word "home" . . . we should make it our pride to do our work in that sphere so well that . . . it will always be a place that our fathers and brothers may think of with pleasure'.²

The hard-working women of the Guild were not easily taken in by such 'sacred thoughts'. 'Mary' responded to 'Narcissus' with a ferocious protest:

Dear Madame, I am sure you and the other ladies mean well and kindly; but dear heart! how sick I am of being told that we ought to have a bright clear room ready for the menfolk when they come home, and a good supper, and be nicely dressed and so on! . . . I ask you, when the blessed evening does come, who has the most right to be 'hungry and tired', I after my day of being cook, housemaid, laundress, nurse, governess, playmate, sewing-woman and mother . . . or my husband after his day of sawing planks and drawing plans in a workshop full of mates?³

Concluding with 'it's a comfort to have spoken my mind for once', 'Mary' opened a valve of feeling. A stream of letters admired and repeated her protest. 'Polly' thanked her for the truth - 'it has been white-washed long enough!' - and 'P.P.' knew 'full well the crowd of duties each day brings in domestic life'.⁴

Above all, these guildswomen agreed that housework was an exhausting, isolated and unhealthy drudgery. For example, here is the domestic routine of Mrs Bury, a Lancashire guildswoman at the turn of the century:

I arrange my housework each week, as follows: On Monday I clear up all rooms after Sunday, brush and put away all Sunday clothes, and then separate and put out to soak all soiled clothes for washing. On Tuesday, the washing is done, the clothes folded and mangled. After the washing, the scullery receives a thorough cleaning for the week. Wednesday is the day for starching and ironing, and stocking darning, as well as the usual week's mending. On Thursday I bake the bread and clean the bedrooms. On Friday I clean the parlour, lobby and staircase, as well as the living room. Saturday is left for all outside cleaning - windows and stonework - besides putting all the clean linen on the beds.⁵

More detailed descriptions of guildswomen's 'Characteristic Working Days' fill in the gaps of that weekly routine.⁶ They add Sunday to the working week and make each day less ordered, rising before first light to start the fire, feed and send off husband to work and children to school, the all-day, every-day tasks of scrubbing and dusting and shopping and cooking, the nursing of a baby and worried watch over infants too young for school, the family trooping home for dinner and then again for the crowded turmoil of the evening, the working into the early hours while husband and children sleep, ironing, darning, sewing.

Working women usually struggled with inadequate household equipment to do this work. An Accrington woman described her washing facilities to a neighbouring guildswoman, Mrs Haworth, in 1900:

'I've got to heat every drop in kettle and pan, and carry it from the sink.' 'But', said I, 'there's a boiler in this range.' 'Won't hold a drop. It was cracked when I came to the house.' 'But haven't you told the landlord?' 'Yes. It's no use. He won't spend a penny. And the oven takes me hours to heat. Do you know, often I put to the fire and toil all morning to get a pie and pudding for dinner, and often I have to take potatoes out and cook in the pan. It takes hours to heat it to bake with, and I am poking and toiling all day. Well . . . I often sit down and cry.'⁷

A married woman could rely on at least some household help from her family, but most important was the help of other women. Mrs Scott was a felt-hat worker and described her life in the 1931

Guild publication, *Life As We Have Known It*: 'We had the nights to ourselves, though in those days there was housework to be done, baking at night and cleaning, but my auntie was very good and used to help me very-much.'⁸ She was also helped by 'that ministering angel, the good neighbour'. The basis of this assistance was reciprocity. You helped a neighbour because one day she would help you, and the survival of both families depended on this mutual aid. Most working women shared the grateful memory of activist Hannah Mitchell: 'If I had a genius I could write a book on the good neighbours who have helped me so much in life.'⁹

The informal communality of working women's lives could only help so much with the housework. Assistance was most readily available in emergencies, during childbirth or illness, or when a woman had to go out to work. The everyday tasks fell mainly on the woman by herself. Homes were not built for common housework and most neighbours were equally busy in their own kitchens. Guildswomen determined 'to lessen this constant drudgery and make life worth living'.¹⁰

One thing the Guild could do was help make working women 'better and more efficient housewives'. System and method in housework could reduce the drudgery and make time for another life. So guildswomen carefully studied recommended pamphlets and books about 'The Making of the Home', and at branch meetings regularly swapped household hints from their readings and from their own practical experience. In 1894 the Guild Annual Report noted that there had been ninety-seven courses of lectures in dress-making, cookery and washing, sick-nursing and ambulance work, and that topics of domestic economy were among the most common on branch agendas.¹¹

This domestic educative activity was particularly encouraged by the Guild's founding women. By the 1890s women with wider ambitions for the Guild questioned that emphasis. Household advice became a less frequent item in the 'Woman's Corner', and in the branches 'the study and practice of co-operation and other methods of social reform' became more important.¹² Yet domestic economy classes were always extremely popular among the working women of the Guild. They were not the condescending lectures of middle-class 'ladies' who blamed working-class wives and mothers for the appalling conditions of working-class life. Instead, working women were sharing their own skills, and gratefully received and offered

household hints which suited the practicalities of their lives and saved time and money.

Domestic education did not challenge the conditions in which housework was done. Some guildswomen who approved 'the woman's mission in the home' argued that individual improvement was preferable to altering the conditions of housework. Most agreed that domestic education was a useful adjunct rather than an alternative to other change. At the Guild's Manchester Festival in 1892, Mary Spooner from London argued that the working woman's domestic burden was 'due to lack of method, but still more to the conditions under which we live'. She concluded that Guild lectures and classes should educate women to 'demand a change of conditions which will ensure more leisure and variety to the hard worked wife'.¹³

In her paper on 'Future Guild Work', Mary Spooner referred to this reform of the conditions of housework as 'a new subject for Guild consideration'. It had probably got onto the Guild agenda when the innovative and energetic Margaret Llewelyn Davies became General Secretary in 1889. In 1890 she first proposed to the Sheffield branch that the Guild was a means of 'liberating them from the drudgery of housework', and strongly advocated for that purpose public kitchens and bakeries, 'associated homes' and improved home design.¹⁴ She and Mary Spooner agreed that working women needed to be 'educated up' to understand these reforms and then to demand them. A couple of months after the Manchester Festival an outline of 'Practical Work for Branches' was circulated by the Guild Central Committee. It was divided into four fields for Guild endeavour, which reveal the relative significance of housework as an issue for the Guild: 'The Home' was given equal priority with the store, trade unionism, and women's citizenship. For 'The Home', branches were advised to:

Arrange lectures and classes on sick-nursing, dress-making, cooking, clean-starching, ambulance etc. Arrange debates on the education of children, care of babies etc. Make out lists of all kinds of labour-saving articles and forward to general secretary. Promote co-operative wash-houses, bakeries, kitchens, gardens.¹⁵

Attached to the circular was a list of 'Popular Papers' which could help guildswomen to understand these proposals and which would foster branch discussion. An extraordinary, eclectic set of

papers about 'The Home' reveals the origins of the Guild's reforming ideas. At one extreme were papers on 'The Making of the Home', including one by Mrs H. O. Barnett, who believed that 'It is the woman's work to make the house into a home. It is a beautiful work.'¹⁶ But the list went beyond making 'better and more efficient housewives'. A significant recommendation was a biography of the early-nineteenth century English radical, Robert Owen. Owen and the Owenites wanted to abolish private housework. They thought it an 'unproductive and repulsive drudgery' which enslaved women in 'an eternal prison house'.¹⁷ Owenites planned and created model communities in which housework on modern scientific principles was to be a collective responsibility.

In England, the seven Owenite communities established between 1821 and 1845 were crisis-ridden and short-lived, but memories of the attempt and its possibilities survived with Owenites who moved into the new-founded co-operative movement around the middle of the century. Edward Vansittart Neale was a late-nineteenth-century co-operator who retained an interest in the ideas of Owen and his French contemporary, Charles Fourier. Neale was particularly impressed by a Fourierist experiment, M. Godin's 'Famillistère' at Guise. In that community, Godin's factory employees and their families lived in a large block of apartments which opened onto a central hall. Each apartment included modern domestic conveniences, and the tenants had the use of a common washhouse and restaurant, infant nurseries, and schools. In the 1880s Neale promoted such 'associated houses' as a possibility for co-operative enterprise.¹⁸ But few apart from the women of the Guild took his ideas seriously. Co-operators were usually more interested in gaining control of economic relations than in reforming the relations of domestic life.

Edward Greening was one other male co-operator who thought the domestic arrangements at Guise were 'splendid for the ladies'. His story of *The Co-operative Traveller Abroad* described Godin's 'Famillistère' and was included in the Guild's list of readings about the home. Greening's daughter, who was an active guildswoman, supported such schemes which would 'see women relieved from their domestic drudgery'.¹⁹ Other daughters also brought the ideas of veteran Owenites and co-operators into Guild discussion. Miss Bamford of Manchester gained from her father, Samuel Bamford, editor of the *Co-operative News*, an interest in co-operation which

extended to domestic reform; in 1895 she was listed as a Guild lecturer on 'Associated Homes'.²⁰ Emilie Holyoake, daughter of the revered Owenite and co-operator, George Jacob Holyoake, was on the Guild's Central Committee in the 1880s and argued that guildswomen should fight for co-operative kitchens and wash-houses.²¹

Owenites and their ideas also had a continuing influence in North America. Between the 1880s and 1920s a distinctive group of American women, recently rediscovered and labelled 'material feminists' by Dolores Hayden in a magnificent history of their 'Grand Domestic Revolution', developed and practised the old Owenite ideals.²² For example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman campaigned for professional domestic services to end the primitive wastefulness of housework and to liberate women from the trap of the home. She was widely influential in British socialist and feminist circles. Working women read her haunting poems and revolutionary proposal in the labour and suffrage press, and her most powerful work, *Women And Economics*, was available in a 'popular library' circulated by the Women's Co-operative Guild.²³

'Leisure for workmen's wives', an 1892 article by labour activist Tom Mann, was also on the Guild reading list. Mann was deeply involved with the co-operative movement during the early 1890s, in ways which labour historians have not yet indicated. In this article he urged working women to rebel against their wretched lives and to set up communal kitchens and washhouses.²⁴ In another book on the list, Stanton Coit argued that 'Neighbourhood Guilds' would be one way to fight for these and other community services.²⁵ Last on the list was a pamphlet on 'Co-operative Housekeeping'. This was an early draft of a paper delivered by Catharine Webb at the annual Guild conference in Leicester in 1893.²⁶ Catharine Webb was a member of the Battersea branch of the Guild. She was a single woman of independent means, and she was one of a number of influential guildswomen who had the money and thus the time for administrative work. There was some tension between the domestic ideals of middle-class guildswomen like Mary Spooner, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, and Catharine Webb, and the practical needs and desires of the bulk of working-women members; Catharine Webb confessed that for her the details of domestic life were 'more a matter of theory than of practice'. Yet there were working women like Sarah Reddish who fervently argued for radical

domestic reform, and middle-class guildswomen were very keen to listen to working women and help them get the changes they wanted; Catharine Webb affirmed in her paper that she merely wanted to promote discussion of housework among more practically-minded guildswomen. Her ideas clearly benefited from those of the other recommended writers, though she reworked them to suit modern circumstances and the practical workings of Co-operation. Her arguments conveniently summarize the theoretical possibilities and limitations of the Guild's challenge to housework.

To understand those possibilities we need to ask what Catharine Webb wanted to free working women from, and what she hoped to free them to become. She wanted to free women from 'the unending burdensomeness' of housework, simply 'to make life worth living for working women', to give them more time for a life of their own. She also wanted them to have more time for public life. Perhaps the Guild's most impressive success was that it gave working women the confidence and skills to speak and fight for their needs. Mrs Layton of London concluded in her contribution to *Life As We Have Known It* that, in lectures and readings and campaigns:

the Guild has been the means of making its members think more of themselves than ever they did before. The Guild training altered the whole course of my life. . . . From a shy, nervous woman, the Guild made me a fighter.²⁷

But women needed time and energy for fighting, and guildswomen recognized that housework was a major obstacle. Catharine Webb agreed with Lancashire millworker Sarah Reddish that reform was needed so that housework could be done 'with the least possible expenditure of time and force . . . so as to leave time for the wider claims of citizenship'.²⁸

Working women needed more time for themselves and for public life, but Catharine Webb contended that the Guild did not want to 'upset the relationships of domestic life', to draw women away from their obvious duties to husband and children:

All that is good in domestic life - the sanctity of the home, the loving solicitude for the comforts of the husband, the increasing watchfulness and care for little children - these things we would not lessen, but rather encourage to a higher perfection.

Unlike their Owenite mentors, Catharine Webb and other guildswomen almost never challenged the different 'ideal' roles for men and women. With a few exceptions,²⁹ they were opposed to women entering the paid workforce, and argued instead for an improvement of women's nurturing role as mother and wife, as 'homemaker' (guildswomen rarely considered crèches as a co-operative possibility, and then usually with disapproval).³⁰ Indeed, their ideal woman would be both 'homemaker and citizen'. Conversely, though in private they may have pleaded or shouted at their husbands to give more of a hand, guildswomen almost never argued publicly that their husbands should share the work of the home and the family. But they did believe that they could abolish the hard work of the home and radically improve the quality of their lives.

Catharine Webb was quite convinced that domestic drudgery would become a thing of the past. She explained how women's domestic work of an earlier era, weaving, spinning, grinding corn, had been taken over by modern factory production, and that bakeries were ending the work of home-baking:

We do but keep pace with the still onward march of civilization when we suggest that there are yet other tasks, equally laborious, pertaining to domestic life which could be performed by co-operation in place of individual effort.

Practically, she argued that the co-operative movement could make this revolution available to working women. Washhouses and laundries, kitchens and bakeries, connected to local co-operative stores and financed by the many small shares of working-class co-operators, could buy the best new domestic machinery. With this economy of scale, and without a private profit-making owner, working-class families could afford to use such co-operative domestic services. Co-operation would thus benefit the worker of the home as well as her husband in a factory.

Catharine Webb's proposals for 'Co-operation as Applied to Domestic Work' provoked enthusiastic debate at many Guild conferences and meetings. After she first read her paper at Leicester in 1893, delegates unanimously resolved:

That it is desirable that the modern methods of production, namely, machinery and association, should be applied to

women's domestic work, and in this view, Co-operative societies are urged to use a portion of their capital in the establishment of co-operative washhouses, laundries, bakeries and cookshops.³¹

Washhouses and laundries were most seriously considered. A focus upon these co-operative alternatives to women's work of washing will reveal arguments and tensions in Guild debates, the tactics which the Guild used in its domestic campaigns, and the practical possibilities of and obstacles to this new world for women.

When guildswomen looked for alternatives to the weekly work of washday, the first issue was always whether or not washing should be done out of the home, either in a laundry, or by the woman herself in a well-equipped common washhouse. They eagerly debated this question. All women worried about the cost of putting the washing out, and some complained that public washhouses or laundries might lead to infection, or might mistreat clothes.³² Other guildswomen were proud of their washing work and the way they did it, and objected to any change. Mrs Sibley of Willesden Junction told an 1896 conference on 'The Home' that washing 'could be very well managed at home, and she told us how she did it, and then made the beds and cooked the dinner too'.³³ Sometimes this was a regional pride: women in the North-West were less enthusiastic about taking the washing out of the home than guildswomen in the Midlands or the South. Sometimes it was a question of status: common washhouses were fine in the poorer districts, 'but the ladies of Leicester were too independent for that; they liked to do their own washing and cooking'.³⁴

Despite these objections, the majority of guildswomen agreed that it would be better if washing could be done out of the home. It was sometimes argued that the transformation was natural, almost inevitable, for nothing was 'so silly as the present waste of time and money of each household doing its own wash'; it was contrary to the trend of a mass-produced, mechanical age.³⁵ The common provision of modern machinery was especially necessary for many working-class families which simply did not have the room or the equipment to do the wash properly at home. Guildswomen went further than that and declared that all working-class families needed such a reform, for Monday washday was 'an abomination in every home'.³⁶

The cheapest available alternative to washing at home was the municipal washhouse. There, for a couple of pence, a woman could use a compartment well-equipped with tubs for boiling, washing, and rinsing, a wringer and drying cupboards. Washhouses were few and far between, and working women in the Guild, and in the Social Democratic Federation and the Women's Labour League, urged local councils to build more of them.³⁷ Yet the main strategy of Guild domestic campaigns was to seek change through co-operative rather than municipal action, and to promote co-operative laundries rather than washhouses. Laundries were a more hopeful campaigning possibility than washhouses, which local co-operative societies scorned as a charitable service which could not possibly provide a safe return on invested capital. The steam laundry was a recent innovation, and it at least conformed to the usual model of co-operative enterprise, of shareholders paying for a service performed by co-operative employees and receiving a dividend at the point of service or purchase. It might even be a profitable investment and, for the women, it offered a complete relief from washing.³⁸

From the early 1890s, guildswomen actively canvassed local co-operative societies to invest surplus share capital in a laundry. Quick off the mark were the women of the Dewsbury branch, who in 1894 urged their store committee to open a steam laundry as well as a bakery. Both would be profitable, they argued, and would be 'a boon to many overworked women. . . . Labour leaders agitate for better wages and a better distribution of wealth; we women ask for a better distribution of work'.³⁹

At first, committees of men co-operators were wary of this pressure. They were not so enthusiastic about reducing women's work. One male co-operator advised guildswomen 'not to aspire too high' when he first heard Catharine Webb's domestic proposals (from across the Leicester hall: 'It is better to aim high.' ('Hear, hear').⁴⁰ They were even less keen if it would cost them. A laundry demanded a large investment for any society, and no one was sure that this most modern innovation could pay for itself.

But, in 1896, Glasgow co-operators led the way with a meeting to discuss 'the desirability of Co-operators entering on laundry work'. They concluded that a federation of local societies could best afford the full use of modern machinery, and a building project was begun.⁴¹ Before the turn of the century, the Glasgow Co-operative Laundry

Association at Barrhead was proving that a federation of co-operative societies could successfully build and operate such a venture. For an investment of about £3,000 it could rely on a weekly trade of perhaps £100, which assured an adequate return on share capital and the dividend for users. Over the next few years other regional co-operative federations, prompted and supported by the Guild, followed Glasgow's example.⁴²

Ironically, lessening the work of wearied wives was not high among the motives of men co-operators when they decided to invest in a laundry. Answers to the question, 'Shall we establish a co-operative laundry in our district?' were usually those of hard-headed businessmen co-operators. Would the investment of share capital pay? What sort of dividend could it provide? When a laundry was opened, speeches celebrated another co-operative triumph but neglected the hard-won relief for women. Sometimes women of the Guild were not even given a chance to use their practical experience in the planning or management of a laundry: in 1907 three guildswomen who asked to join a laundry committee were laughed at by a meeting of northern co-operators.⁴³ The Guild responded to these taunts and this neglect with an official policy to get members elected to Laundry Committees.⁴⁴ They wanted to work out a way of bringing the luxury of a laundry service to as many working women as possible. Mrs J. Green suggested in 1896 that those who could afford to put their washing out should share their dividend with the less well-off, and so also share the service.⁴⁵ But guildswomen could not resolve the problem of providing a cheap laundry service from limited co-operative resources. They were defeated by the politics of the economics, which deemed that the social needs of working women were not worth a 'non-economic' service. This was men's politics. As husbands and on co-operative committees, men were not willing to pay for a service which was usually provided for free. When guildswoman Mrs R. Nash lectured in 1907 about 'Married Women and Their Work - How Freedom May Be Gained', the editors of the *Co-operative News* were appalled by calls for co-operative laundries, for improved home-working conditions, and for the power of the vote. They feared that the speech foreshadowed a woman's domestic strike, and denounced the Guild as 'a militant trade union'⁴⁶

Bread-baking was already a successful co-operative venture by the end of the century. If there was any resistance it was from

women, especially in the North-West, who were proud of their home-made bread. But many more were glad of relief from baking day.⁴⁷ Certainly, the local store committees were eager to erect co-operative bakeries, which kept stores well-supplied with bread and profitably used share capital. But few, apart from the women of the Guild, promoted bakeries expressly to lessen housework.⁴⁸ Guildswomen sometimes hastened the establishment of a bakery, but the women were successful because bread-making was a task which could easily be capitalized, whether by co-operators or capitalists, at a price which working people could afford.

Co-operative kitchens did not get far beyond the imaginations of Guild idealists. In 1893 Catharine Webb produced detailed plans of how a kitchen attached to every co-operative store could provide cheap and nourishing cooked meals.⁴⁹ Other Guild domestic pioneers, Louisa Martindale in Brighton, Emilie Holyoake, and Margaret Llewelyn Davies,⁵⁰ agreed with her that well-equipped common kitchens with food and fuel economies of scale could provide cheaper meals than a woman cooking at home, possibly of a better quality. This was not an 'unnatural' alternative, for the well-to-do had no qualms about employing cooks. In association, working women could afford this luxury and end 'the tyranny of meals' and the most constant household labour of cooking, day in, day out.⁵¹

The Guild did have one opportunity for a practical experiment along these lines. In 1902 the Guild combined with the Sunderland Co-operative Society to establish a 'People's Store' in the poor East End of that city. It was hoped that, eventually, many such 'People's Stores', with low entrance fees and moderate prices and dividends, would allow the people of poor districts to benefit from Co-operation.⁵² One of the many innovations in the Guild scheme was the 'Coffee and Cooked Meat Shop', which would provide cheap cooked food to be eaten on the premises or taken away.⁵³ A 'cookshop' was attached to the Sunderland store, and within a couple of weeks Margaret Llewelyn Davies reported it was 'perhaps the greatest success. . . . Its corner window, where the steaming food is in full view, is never without its admiring gazes.' Customers were two rows deep, queueing for soup, pease pudding, boiled pork and other meats, and one morning over 40 gallons of soup were sold.⁵⁴ The cookshop was so successful that another was opened at a second co-operative branch. Overworked wives and

mothers, without the time, energy, or equipment to cook decent meals for their families, were glad to pay a little.

Guild hopes for 'Coffee and Cooked Meat Shops' were dashed when two years later the Sunderland Society decided that 'People's Stores' too radically departed from usual co-operative methods, and withdrew its special support. Once again, men co-operators refused to extend the benefits of Co-operation to the less well-off, or to women. Significantly, the Guild did not fight so hard for co-operative kitchens as it had for laundries and washhouses, and the cause lapsed. There was much more opposition within the Guild to the idea of common kitchens. Home-cooking was more important for a working woman's self-respect than laundering or bread-baking. It was also a crucial part of the image of 'true womanhood'. And public or even co-operative kitchens resembled the despised charity of soup kitchens, and seemed to threaten working-class independence.⁵⁵

We need to look more closely at the uncertainty and opposition which crippled this and other similar experiments. For example, the 'cost price restaurants' and National Kitchens inspired by Sylvia Pankhurst during the Great War were extremely popular among working women. They welcomed a domestic alternative which did not undermine their self-respect, and which they could afford. Unfortunately, as soon as the war ended, councils decided that women should be back at their stoves and wash-tubs, and withdrew funding.⁵⁶ To realize their domestic dreams, women needed power as well as conviction.

The Guild waged other domestic campaigns. In 1898 it began a campaign to improve the quality of working-class houses, so they would be healthier and more comfortable, but also to reduce women's work. From intensive investigations and local discussions, guildswomen developed plans of well-equipped houses which would be easier to work in and to clean.⁵⁷ They tried to get elected to co-operative house-building committees to put these plans into effect. In association with the Women's Labour League (WLL), the Guild also tried to get its ideal working woman's house incorporated into the post-war council-house building programme.⁵⁸ Other histories will need to look more closely at the ambitions and effectiveness of these campaigns. What is striking is that working women were fighting to improve the quality of their lives. As a WLL pamphlet concluded in 1919, 'the working woman of today is

neither contented with the conditions of her home, nor apathetic with regard to its improvement'.⁵⁹

Efforts to make the home a better workshop for women did not challenge the fact that housework was women's work. But Guild and Labour League campaigns went beyond mere home improvement, to develop the old Owenite idea of 'associated homes'. Surely modern housing estates could include common domestic services?⁶⁰ Guildswomen tentatively suggested that co-operative building societies could include common laundries and kitchens and bake-houses in their housing projects.⁶¹ In conjunction with women in the Labour League, they argued that this 'co-operative house-management' should be an essential part of post-war council housing estates.⁶² Again, the dreams and campaigns for twentieth-century associated homes need a history. A 1907 report in the Guild's 'Woman's Corner' of an International Housing Conference suggests that it will be a history of bold enthusiasm, but also of scorn and obstruction and failure:

In spite of the community ideals of Owen, and the enthusiastic advocacy of E. V. Neale for 'associated homes', co-operators, we know, have not looked kindly upon these schemes. . . .

Probably had working women a say earlier . . . we should be much nearer a true ideal of home-building than we are today. Even today, we women have a far smaller share of this work than ought to be the case.⁶³

The dreams of these women recall forgotten possibilities for Co-operation. Guildswomen favoured co-operative solutions to domestic drudgery because they could not afford private domestic services, and because working through the state seemed too indirect.⁶⁴ Catharine Webb concluded her 1893 plea for 'Co-operation as Applied to Domestic Work' with typically ambitious fervour:

The day of 'association and mutual helpfulness' in all stages and phases of life is slowly but surely dawning upon the world, to drive out the black night of individualism and competition, and shall we Co-operative women be last to awaken on the morning of the day? Rather, let us be the heralds of the dawn, rousing the world to take notice of the 'good time coming'.⁶⁵

NOTES

Many thanks to Fi Black, Katie Holmes, Jill Norris, Melanie Raymond, Gill Scott, Judy Thomson, Eileen Yeo, Stephen Yeo, and Deb Zion for helping me to make this chapter.

- 1 M. L. Davies, *The Women's Co-operative Guild 1883-1904*, Westmorland, Women's Co-operative Guild, 1904, p. 148.
- 2 *Co-operative News*, 15 February 1890. (Unless otherwise noted, all *Co-operative News* references are to the Guild's 'Woman's Corner'.)
- 3 *ibid.*, 22 February 1890.
- 4 *ibid.*, 15 March 1890.
- 5 Davies, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-3.
- 6 'Characteristic Working Days' by 'Agnes', *Co-operative News*, 10 June 1896; 'Betsy', 27 June 1896; 'Ever Onward', 11 July 1896; 'Hypatia', 25 July 1896. See also M. L. Davies (ed.), *Life As We Have Known It, By Co-operative Women*, London, Virago, 1977 (1931); G. Mitchell (ed.), *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel*, London, Virago, 1977 (1968); and D. Nield Chew, *Ada Nield Chew: The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*, London, Virago, 1982.
- 7 Mrs Haworth, 'House of the poor', *Co-operative News*, 10 November 1900.
- 8 Davies, *Life As We Have Known It*, p. 92.
- 9 Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 203; see E. Ross, 'Survival networks: neighbourhood sharing in London before World War 1', *History Workshop Journal*, 15, Spring 1983.
- 10 J. Green, 'Characteristic working days, the home', *Co-operative News*, 7 November 1896.
- 11 *Co-operative News*, 7 July 1894.
- 12 C. Webb, *The Woman With the Basket: The Story of the Women's Co-operative Guild*, The Guild, 1927, p. 59; see also *Co-operative News*, 2 February 1895.
- 13 M. Spooner, 'Future Guild work', *Co-operative News*, 8 October 1892.
- 14 M. L. Davies, 'Guild work', *Co-operative News*, 22 November 1890; see also S. Reddish, 'Our Guild work', *Co-operative News*, 4 January 1890.
- 15 *Co-operative News*, 8 October 1892.
- 16 H. O. Barnett, *The Making of the Home*, London, Cassell, 1885, p. 1.
- 17 W. Thompson, 1856, quoted in B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, London, Virago, 1983, pp. 50 and 246-52; see also quotations from W. Thompson and A. Wheeler, 1825, in D. Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighbourhoods and Cities*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1981, p. 35.
- 18 E. V. Neale, 'Associated Homes': A Lecture, Manchester and London, MacMillan, 1880.

- 19 *Co-operative News*, 24 June 1893.
- 20 *ibid.*, 28 December 1895.
- 21 E. Holyoake, 'Neighbourhood Guilds', *Co-operative News*, 30 October 1891 and 14 November 1891.
- 22 Hayden, *op. cit.*
- 23 C. P. Stetson (Gilman), 'Six hours a day', *The Clarion*, 5 January 1895; *Co-operative News*, 6 July 1901; C. P. Gilman, *Women and Economics*, New York, Harper & Row, 1966 (1898); see also C. P. Gilman, *The Home: Its Work and Influence*, London, McLure, Phillips, 1903.
- 24 T. Mann, 'Leisure for workmen's wives', *Co-operative News*, 12 March 1892, also published in *Labour Prophet*, February 1892; *Trade Unionist*, 6 February 1892; *Halfpenny Short Cuts*, 28 June 1890.
- 25 S. Coit, *Neighbourhood Guilds: An Instrument of Social Reform*, London, Swan Sonnenschein, 1891.
- 26 All uncited references to C. Webb are from *Cooperation as Applied to Domestic Work*, Women's Cooperative Guild, 1893.
- 27 Davies, *Life As We Have Known It*, pp. 48-9.
- 28 S. Reddish, 'Women and co-operation', Women's Co-operative Guild, n.d.
- 29 See the discussion of this issue in R. Nash, 'Married women and their work: how freedom may be gained', *Co-operative News*, 6 July 1907; and see generally D. Nield Chew, *op. cit.*, for the radical arguments of Ada Nield Chew; contrast these with more typical Guild responses: I. Nicolson, *Co-operative News*, 6 September 1902; A. Haworth and Mrs Grocott, *Co-operative News*, 6 October 1894; Mrs Burrows, 'Does it pay for married women to work in the factories?', *Co-operative News*, 29 December 1900.
- 30 See I. Nicolson, *Co-operative News*, 6 February 1897 and 13 March 1897; Nash, *op. cit.*, and M. L. Davies, 'The claims of mothers and children', in M. Phillips (ed.), *Women and the Labour Party*, London, Headey Bros, 1919. For more radical responses to the issue of childcare, see A. Nield Chew, 'Mother interest and child training', *The Freewoman*, 22 December 1912, and E. Brown, 'A Freewoman's attitude to motherhood', *The Freewoman*, 11 January 1912.
- 31 *Co-operative News*, 24 June 1893.
- 32 *ibid.*, 24 June 1893.
- 33 *ibid.*, 28 November 1896.
- 34 Mrs Clarke, *Co-operative News*, 24 June 1893.
- 35 'F.G.', *Co-operative News*, 21 November 1896.
- 36 C.M.M., 'A Yorkshire weshin' day', *Co-operative News*, 30 January 1897.
- 37 'Christabel', 'The use of the franchise for women: co-operative, municipal and parliamentary', *Co-operative News*, 8 August 1903; M. Bondfield, 'The Borough elections - the washtub', *The League Leaflet*, October 1912; E. Watson, 'Socialist women and the Borough councils', *The Link*, October 1912; E. Keeling, 'Our women's column', *The Clarion*, 9 March 1895.
- 38 C. Webb, *op. cit.*, 1893.

- 39 *Dewsbury Pioneer*, May 1894, quoted in *Co-operative News*, 26 May 1894.
- 40 *Co-operative News*, 24 June 1893.
- 41 *ibid.*, 7 November 1896 and 25 November 1899.
- 42 See Davies, *The Women's Co-operative Guild*, p. 155 (Bradford); *Co-operative News*, 11 May 1907 (North West Section); 29 July 1907 (Northern Section); 28 September 1907 (South Yorkshire); 19 July 1909 (Sheffield).
- 43 *Co-operative News*, 11 May 1907.
- 44 *ibid.*, 29 July 1907.
- 45 Green, *op. cit.*
- 46 *Co-operative News*, 6 July 1907 and 29 July 1907; see also M. L. Davies, 'An appeal to co-operative men', *Co-operative News*, 29 June 1907.
- 47 *Co-operative News*, 21 November 1896; cf. Green, *op. cit.*
- 48 *Co-operative News*, 5 January 1901 (Kettering); 7 September 1901 (Dewsbury); 27 February 1897 (Bingley women unsuccessfully agitating for a bakery).
- 49 Webb, *op. cit.*, 1893.
- 50 L. Martindale, 'Co-operative kitchens', *Co-operative News*, 6 January 1900; see also H. Martindale, *From One Generation to Another 1839-1944*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1944, p. 41; E. Holyoake, *op. cit.*; Davies, 'Guildwork'; see also 'People's kitchens', *Co-operative News*, 24 November 1894; *ibid.*, 21 March 1896; 'Domestic services and distributive kitchens', *ibid.*, 20 July 1901.
- 51 Mitchell, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-13.
- 52 M. L. Davies, *Co-operation in Poor Neighbourhoods*, Westmorland, Women's Co-operative Guild, 1899; in 1895 'The People's Society' had been started in London by the CWS and the CU to adapt Co-operation to London conditions. But it only lasted till 1900; see C. Webb, *Industrial Co-operation*, Manchester, Co-operative Union, 8th edn, 1919, pp. 99-100.
- 53 Mrs Knight, 'Coffee and cooked meat shops', *Co-operative News*, 5 May 1900.
- 54 *Co-operative News*, 15 November 1902 and 14 February 1903.
- 55 See Mrs Sudall, I. Nicolson cf. Mrs Brown, *Co-operative News*, 21 April 1900.
- 56 E. S. Pankhurst, *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England During the World War*, London, Hutchinson, 1932, p. 43.
- 57 C. M. Mayo, *Co-operative House-building*, Women's Co-operative Guild, 1898; Mrs Haworth, 'Co-operative house-building', *Co-operative News*, 10 November 1900.
- 58 A. D. Sanderson Furniss and M. Phillips, *The Working Woman's House*, London, Swarthmore Press, 1920.
- 59 *ibid.*, p. 22.
- 60 References to 'associated homes' in the 'Woman's Corner' of the *Co-operative News* include: Dr Nichols, 'Co-operative housekeeping', 31 May 1890; Holyoake, *op. cit.*; 'Co-operative housekeeping', 30 April 1892; Spooner, *op. cit.*; 'Winter circular', 20 October 1900. Re-

- ported lectures and discussions include: 26 March 1892 (Oxford); 24 June 1893 (Leicester); Miss Bamford, 'Associated homes' (Bury); 'Co-operative homes', 12 September 1896 (Hull and Halifax); L. Martindale, 'Simplification of housework', 31 March 1900 (Brighton).
- 61 *Co-operative News*, 24 June 1893 (S. Reddish); Martindale, 'simplification of housework', 1900; Mayo, op. cit.
- 62 Sanderson Furniss and Phillips, op. cit.
- 63 *Co-operative News*, 17 August 1907. Another history might look at E. S. Pankhurst, 'The house and the housewife', *The Worker's Dreadnought*, 13 October 1917, for housing reforms advocated by the famous socialist feminist; *The Link*, October 1912, for E. Watson of the British Socialist Party on women fighting for municipal housing; C. Black, *A New Way of Housekeeping*, London, Collins, 1918, for this women's trade union activist's dreams for 'Domestic federations'; and E. Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, London, Faber & Faber, 1944 (1902), for Howard's plans for co-operative quadrangles of houses with common kitchens and laundries as the basic residential unit of the ideal Garden City; see the discussion of Howard's plans in Hayden, op. cit., p. 232.
- 64 Sylvia Pankhurst argued in 1917 that for domestic reforms, 'The co-operative plan has the advantage of avoiding the necessity for moving the far-off personages who man Government departments.' Pankhurst, 'The house and the housewife'.
- 65 Webb, op. cit., 1893.