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'A Strong International Spirit': Negotiating Co-operative Internationalism in the Women's Co-operative Guild during the Inter-war Period

Abstract

This article explores the internationalism of the Women's Co-operative Guild during the inter-war years. Drawing on the records of the national and international Guild, alongside the minute books of a local branch based in Darlington, County Durham, it positions the Women's Co-operative Guild in the vibrant political culture in Britain during the 1920s and 1930s. Building on recent literature that has sought to examine the phenomenon of inter-war internationalism, this article sheds light on an organization that represented the interests of working-class women. Internationalist in outlook, the association demonstrates how internationalist ideals played out on a day-to-day basis. The article demonstrates that the Women's Co-operative Guild played a unique and complementary role within both the British and international women's movements.

Key words: Internationalism, Co-operation, Peace, Citizenship.

In 1927, Margaret Llewelyn Davies – the former General Secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild – wrote that

> the future is not concerned only with national problems. The causes of International Co-operation and Peace are causes which will call forth the highest endeavour of the Guild. A strong international spirit is showing itself amongst Guildswomen. They have supported with enthusiasm the formation of the International Co-operative Women's Guild, to which response has already been made by women from over 20 countries, with the result that, throughout the world, women's importance in Co-operation is being more widely understood.[1]

As this statement illustrates, ideals and activities relating to internationalism shaped the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG) during the inter-war years. In the wake of the Great War and the opening of the League of Nations, internationalism influenced a range of associations that operated at the national and international level. In particular, the League of Nations provided the women's movement with a new forum to raise its campaigns for equality.[2] Inter-war internationalism took on numerous forms, including the feminist internationalism of international women's associations, liberal internationalism centred on the League of Nations, as well as socialist and communist internationalism. This article will unpick co-operative women's particular understanding and expression of internationalism, which was

[1] Margaret Llewelyn Davies, 'Introduction', in Catherine Webb, *The Woman with the Basket: The History of the Women's Co-operative Guild, 1883–1927* (Manchester, 1927), 14.

[2] Carol Miller, '"Geneva–the Key to Equality": Inter-war feminists and the League of Nations', *Women's History Review,* 3 (1994), 219–45; Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge, 2012); Laura Beers, 'Advocating for a feminist internationalism between the wars', in Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James (eds), *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500* (New York, 2016), 206.

founded on co-operative ideals and practiced through the International Women's Co-operative Guild (IWCG), after it was established in 1921.[3]

This article also situates the WCG in the vibrant political culture of the post-suffrage period. Its focus is on the organization's internationalism – a feature that much of the existing research tends to overlook.[4] There has been much literature on the growth of inter-war political culture, which predominantly focuses on middle-class associational culture.[5] Yet, as Peter Gurney has suggested 'the role of the Co-operative movement within the wider political culture remains understudied'.[6] This observation certainly applies to the WCG. A closer analysis of this association is particularly important as it claimed to represent 'that still more numerous and important section of the community, the working class housewives and mothers'.[7]

The case of the WCG is particularly well-suited to advancing our understanding of internationalism's role and resonance in inter-war Britain because of the organization's very nature: while internationalist in outlook, the majority of its day-to-day work was carried out

[3] Throughout this article, the abbreviation WCG will be used to refer to the English Women's Co-operative Guild and IWCG for the international association.

[4] Gillian Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London, 1998); Gillian Scott, 'As a war-horse to the beat of drums: representations of working-class femininity in the Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War' in Eileen Janes Yeo (ed.) *Radical Femininity: Women's self-representation in the public sphere* (Manchester, 1998), 197.

[5] Ross McKibbin, *Parties and the People: England, 1914–1951* (Oxford, 2010), 33; Helen McCarthy, 'Service clubs, citizenship and equality: gender relations and middle-class associations in Britain between the wars, *Historical Research*, 81 (2008), 531–552; Caitriona Beaumont, 'Fighting for the privileges of citizenship: the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), feminism and the women's movement, 1928-1945', *Women's History Review*, 23 (2014), 463–479.

[6] Peter Gurney, ''The Curse of the Co-ops': co-operation, the mass press and the market in interwar Britain', *English Historical Review*, CXXX (2015), 1481.

[7] 'A Mothers' International', *The Woman's Leader*, XIII, 44, 2 December 1921, 1.

by active local branches. By 1939, the WCG boasted 87,249 members in 1,819 local branches.[8] This article combines the use of national and international records with the consultation of one particular branch, located in Darlington, County Durham. This approach will make it possible to trace how Guild members negotiated different scales in their activism. While local studies have added depth to the historiography of the suffrage movement,[9] histories of international women's organizations tend to overlook the local level of activism. Placing this association in its wider international framework will contribute to growing interest in the local context of British engagement with the international sphere.[10] This article will shed light on how the Guild considered its interests in co-operation, citizenship and peace to be inherently international. It will firmly situate co-operative women in the network of the international women's movement and consider the WCG's unique expression of internationalism based on co-operative principles to broaden our understanding of British women's engagement with internationalism.

The Formation of the International Women's Co-operative Guild

Founded in 1883 to promote co-operation amongst the wives of male co-operators, the English WCG evolved into a radical campaign group during the twentieth century. As the so-called 'trade union for married women', the Guild conducted high-profile campaigns for maternity provision and divorce law reform, alongside its promotion of consumer co-operation. The iconic imagery of the 'woman with the basket' symbolised the Guild's

[8] Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 231.

[9] June Hannam, '"I Had Not Been to London": Women's suffrage—a view from the regions', in J. Purvis and S. Stanley Holton (eds), *Votes for Women* (London, 2000), 226–45; Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: A Regional Survey* (London, 2006).

[10] Tehila Sasson, James Vernon, Miles Ogborn, Priya Satia and Catherine Hall, 'Britain and the World: A new field?', *Journal of British Studies*, 57 (2018), 695.

emphasis on women's roles in the home and as a consumer. Other Guild campaigns promoted a minimum wage for female employees in the Co-operative Wholesale Society and reforms to improve the position of married working-class women, including housing reform and women's suffrage.[11]

Between 1889 and 1922, the WCG expanded significantly. In 1890 the association recorded 1,640 members in 54 branches, which increased to 87,246 members in 1,819 branches by 1939. The Guild was most popular in Lancashire – the home of the Co-operative movement – where there were 12,588 members by 1923, which was almost a quarter of the Guild's national membership.[12] However, membership did not reach the scale of the Women's Unionist Association, Women's Sections of the Labour Party or the Women's Institutes during this period. Its sizeable membership made it more popular than the Townswomen's Guild and 'feminist' women's organizations, like the Women's Freedom League or the Six Point Group. Yet, representing married housewives – a constituency that made up the majority of adult women by the Second World War – the Guild played a unique and complementary role in the inter-war women's movement.[13]

Although the Guild adopted a federal structure and local branches had a significant degree of autonomy, the General Secretary played an important role in determining the

[11] Report of the English Women's Co-operative Guild, First International Conference of Co-operative Women (1921), 2–3. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/1.

[12] Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, x; WCG, Fortieth Annual Report, May 1922–May 1923 (London, 1923), 17. Hull History Centre, UDCW/2/10.

[13] Peter Gurney, ''Redefining 'the woman with the basket': The Women's Co-operative Guild and the politics of consumption in Britain during World War Two', *Gender & History,* 31 (2019), 2. For membership details see Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928–64* (Manchester, 2013); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–1959* (London, 2000), 242.

direction of the association. All four General Secretaries of the inter-war period – Margaret Llewelyn Davies (1889-1922), Honora Enfield (1922-1925), Eleanor Barton (1925-1937) and Rose Simpson (1937-1939) – were committed to strengthening the internationalism of the women's co-operative movement. Yet, Gillian Scott argues that Eleanor Barton's decision 'to put pacifism ahead of all other considerations' led to a decline in the Guild's membership.[14] It is clear that all four Secretaries supported the peace movement and had connections to other anti-war associations, such as the Union of Democratic Control, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, National Peace Council and Peace Pledge Union. Moreover, as this article will demonstrate, pacifism was inherently linked to the Guild's co-operative internationalism.

Although, the Guild represented working-class women, its leadership tended to be middle class. For instance, Margaret Llewelyn Davies studied at Girton College before joining the WCG. Yet, Virginia Woolf's involvement with the Guild demonstrates an awareness of the class differences between the leaders and rank-and-file membership.[15] In contrast, Eleanor Barton came from a socialist background in Manchester. Indeed, the Guild can be situated at the interconnection of the women's and labour movements. For instance, Davies had been a founding member of the People's Suffrage Federation, which included the Women's Labour League and the National Federation of Working Women.[16] Likewise, Honora Enfield worked

[14] Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 5.

[15] Alice Wood, 'Facing life as we have known it: Virginia Woolf and the Women's Co-operative Guild', *Literature & History*, 23 (2014), 23.

[16] Gillian Scott, 'The Women's Co-operative Guild and suffrage', in Myriam Boussahba-Bravard (ed.), *Suffrage Outside Suffragism: Women's Vote in Britain, 1880–1914* (Basingstoke, 2007), 140; June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London, 2002), 12; Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations, *The Position of Women after the War* (London, 1916), p. 20. Modern Records Centre, 21/1546.

with the National Federation of Working Women before assuming her role as General Secretary of the Guild and Eleanor Barton represented the WCG on the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organizations.

Connections to the labour movement were facilitated by joint campaigns for issues that affected working-class women, such as adult suffrage and maternity care, as well as links to leading figures of the British women's labour movement, such as Margaret Bondfield.[17] This overlap is clearly illustrated by the cover image on *Labour Woman* in August 1924, which showed a woman holding a basket, captioned 'The Housewife'. The use of similar imagery indicates how both organizations sought to engage with the politics of women's daily lives.[18] However, at times, the Guild espoused a more radical feminist ideology on issues such as abortion and birth control. Moreover, its stance on divorce law reform led to withdrawal of the Co-operative Union's central grant to the Guild.[19] In contrast, many prominent Labour women – including Marion Phillips and Ellen Wilkinson – pragmatically conformed to party lines on the birth control campaign, despite pressure from the female membership.[20] Sharing a commitment to represent working women on the politics of the everyday, the Guild and labour women occupied a similar space. Yet the Guild differed in terms of its underlying commitment to consumer co-operation and its relative autonomy within the Co-operative movement. Both groups also forged international connections across borders. In 1907, labour

[17] Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (London, 1948), 127.

[18] *Labour Woman* (August 1924), 1; Karen Hunt, 'Labour Woman and the housewife' in Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green and Fiona Hackney (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939* (Edinburgh, 2018).

[19] WCG, Thirty-Second Annual Report, May 1914–May 1915, 8. Hull History Centre, UDCW/2/9.

[20] Pamela Graves, *Labour Women: British Women in Working-Class Politics* (Cambridge, 1994), 87; Laura Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 201.

women attended the first International Conference of Labour and Socialist Women in Stuttgart. Likewise, in 1921 co-operative women held an international congress in Basle, Switzerland.

The International Women's Co-operative Guild was founded following this international congress of co-operative women. Notably, the English WCG was a principal driving force behind this international venture, which built upon earlier attempts to forge transnational connections between female co-operators.[21] From the late 1880s, English Guildswomen were in correspondence with their 'sister co-operators' in other nations. Foreign visitors attended the 1894 WCG Annual Meeting, the 1899 Co-operative Congress and the 1904 WCG Congress. Four years later, proposals for an 'International Alliance for Co-operative Women' were discussed at WCG meetings. Early transnational links were strengthened by overseas travel, as English Guildswomen travelled to Belgium to study co-operative stores and medical aid. In 1913 an Austrian co-operator, Emmy Freundlich, attended the International Co-operative Congress in Glasgow. She would become President of the International Women's Co-operative Guild (IWCG) when it was established.[22]

This momentum was halted by the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. A group of English and Dutch Guildswomen had planned to hold a co-operative meeting to coincide with the 1915 women's peace congress, 'but wartime difficulties proved too great'.[23] After the

[21] The Scottish Guild was involved in the IWCG, see Valerie Wright, 'Women's organisation and feminism in interwar Scotland', PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2008, 35. The Irishwomen's Co-operative Guild was affiliated to the IWCG. Report of the International Co-operative Women's Committee, September 1924–April 1927 (1927), 3. Hull History Centre, UDCX/3/1-5.

[22] Webb, *The Woman with the Basket*, 166–168; Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 2.

[23] Webb, *The Woman with the* Basket, 170. On the Hague Congress see, Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, *Pioneers for Peace: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915–1965* (London, 1980), 17; Leila B. Costin, 'Feminism, pacifism, internationalism and the 1915 International Congress of Women',

war, Honora Enfield and Margaret Ferguson – a Darlington Guildswoman – attended the Austrian Co-operative Congress, where they witnessed the devastating famine in Central Europe caused by the Allied blockade.[24] In 1921, the first international conference of co-operative women laid the foundations for the IWCG and an international committee office opened in London. The IWCG was officially inaugurated at the second congress in 1924.

That first conference attracted delegates from Austria, England, Belgium, Ireland, France, Scotland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Holland, Czecho-Slovakia and the USA. Honora Enfield and Emmy Freundlich presided over the meetings that aimed to bring about 'a closer Union between the Co-operative women of all lands'.[25] As well as expressions of international sisterhood, the delegates discussed the idea of a transnational 'Co-operative Commonwealth'.[26] Moreover, Guildswomen asserted their unique position within the Co-operative movement as they aimed to work within the male-dominated International Co-operative Alliance, but intended 'to be international as Women and to live and work as Women'.[27]

Women's Studies International Forum, 5 (1982), 301–15; Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham Common: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (London, 1989), 101.

[24] Webb, *The Woman with the Basket*, 171.

[25] Report of the First International Conference of Co-operative Women, 23–25 August 1921. Hull History Centre, UDC X/2/1.

[26] Johnston Birchall, *The International Co-operative Movement* (Manchester, 1997), 47; Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester, 1996), 88; Mary Hilson, 'Rochdale and beyond: consumer co-operation in Britain before 1945', in Mary Hilson, Silke Neunsinger and Greg Patmore (eds), *A Global History of Consumer Co-operation since 1850: Movements and Businesses* (Leiden, 2017), 75.

[27] The Women's International and the International Co-operative Alliance, 23–25 August 1921, 1. Hull History Centre, UDC X/2/1.

Founders of the international Guild believed that transnational collaboration would strengthen the co-operative movement and provide a forum for 'rank-and-file women' to engage with the Co-operative Society.[28] Like many other international women's organizations, this new transnational network of co-operative women also set its sights on representation within the new international institutions created after the Great War. In addition to its focus on women as consumers, the Guild emphasised the international campaign for women's rights. In particular, the Guild lobbied the League of Nations for an international inquiry into maternity provision. The Guild also collaborated with a range of international women's organizations to promote equal citizenship, birth control and equal nationality for married women.[29]

Maternity had long been a central concern for co-operative women. As a result, the International Labour Organization (ILO), which considered legislation relating to the protection of working mothers, was of particular interest to the Guild.[30] In this respect, the IWCG joined the women's organizations and trade unions – including the International Federation of Working Women – engaged in debates surrounding women's work at an international level.[31] Co-operative women also contributed to discussions on 'protective' legislation with 'equal rights' feminist associations. Like many labour women, the Guild

[28] Report of the English Women's Co-operative Guild, 1921. Hull History Centre, UDC X/2/1.

[29] WCG, Forty-Eighth Annual Report, May 1930–May 1931 (London, 1931), 7. Hull History Centre, UDCW/2/11.

[30] 'Women and the International Labour Organisation', *The Vote,* 4 December 1931, 390; Ulla Wikander, 'Demands on the ILO by internationally organized women in 1919', in Jasmien Van Daele, Geert Van Goethem, and Magaly Rodríguez García (eds), *ILO Histories: Essays on the International Labour Organization and Its Impact on the World During the Twentieth Century* (Bern, 2011).

[31] Margaret Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (London, 1915); WCG, The Women's International and the International Co-operative Alliance, 2-3. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/1; see Lara Vapnek, 'The 1919 International Congress of Working Women: Transnational debates on the "Woman Worker"', *Journal of Women's History*, 26 (2014).

favoured measures of 'protection', which is indicative of the Guild's position to the left of the international women's movement.[32] Nonetheless, as the so-called 'trade union for married women', the Guild differed from the International Federation of Working Women, as the majority of Guildswomen were not engaged with paid labour. Despite this difference, it worked closely with working women's organizations. For instance, the Guild supported the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers campaign to unionize co-operative employees and Ellen Wilkinson represented the National Union at the 1934 IWCG congress.[33] As such, co-operative women played a significant role within the wider national and international network of labour and trade-union women.

Asserting the benefits of collaboration between working women and housewives, Marion Phillips – the British Labour Party's Chief Woman Officer – wrote that 'if we are to secure solidarity amongst the workers, we must have the wives and mothers, who are not wage earners as well as those that are, linked up with the great movement'.[34] The IWCG, which was familiarly known as the 'Mothers' International', made a significant contribution to the vibrant international women's movement, as it sought to speak for this under-represented constituency of women. Evidence of the IWCG's role in the international women's movement can be found in regular reports in *International Woman Suffrage News*.[35]

[32] Ulla Wikander, 'Some "Kept the Flag of Feminist Demands Waving": Debates at international congresses on protecting women workers' in Ulla Wikander, Alice Kessler-Harris and Jane Lewis (eds), *Protecting Women: Labor Legislation in Europe, the United States, and Australia, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 1995), 29.

[33] Darlington WCG Minutes, 19 November 1929. Durham County Record Office (DRO) D/XD/85/8; Matt Perry, *'Red Ellen' Wilkinson: Her Ideas, Movements and World* (Manchester, 2014), 103.

[34] Marion Phillips, 'Organising the Working Women's International', *Labour Woman*, October 1922, 161.

[35] See 'Women Co-operators at Ghent', *International Woman Suffrage News*, October 1924, 10; 'International Meetings', *International Women's Suffrage News* (September 1937), 84. See, Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, 'Women's international activism during the inter-war period, 1919-1939', *Women's History Review*, 26 (2017), 165.

Despite this contemporary coverage, the IWCG has often been overlooked in histories of the international women's movement. Likewise, the internationalism of the WCG has not been interrogated.[36] The IWCG participated in both the Liaison Committee of International Women's Organizations and the Peace and Disarmament Committee of International Women's Organizations, indicating that the association joined a vibrant international network, but represented a unique internationalist ideology based on women's role in consumer co-operation.[37]

'But the local branches, too, have their international tasks'[38]

In *Life as We Have Known It* – an edited collection of memoirs – many Guildswomen recorded their enthusiasm for the IWCG. For instance, a member who had attended the first international congress remarked that 'during the last years, events of great interest to me were the international meetings of Co-operative Guildswomen'. Many members were working-class housewives, and therefore time and money limited their ability to travel. That said, the Guild facilitated some members' travel through its Testimonial Fund, which was also used to cover the costs of receiving international visitors. The Co-operative and Workers'

[36] Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*; Barbara J. Blaszak, *The Matriarchs of England's Co-operative Movement: A Study in Gender Politics and Female Leadership, 1883-1921* (Westport, 2000); Birchall, *The International Co-operative Movement*; Jean Gaffin and David Thoms, *Caring and Sharing: The Centenary History of the Co-operative Women's Guild* (Manchester, 1993), 112; Naomi Black, 'The Mothers' International: The Women's Co-operative Guild and feminist pacifism', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 7 (1984), 471.

[37] Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations, 'An experiment in co-operation, 1925–1945' (c.1945), 6. Muriel Pierotti Papers, The Women's Library at LSE, 7AMP/F/08/06; Christine Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned? Race, Class and Internationalism in the American and British Women's Movements, c.1880s–1970s* (London, 2004), 118.

[38] IWCG, *The Meaning of International Co-operation for Women* (London, 1934), 10. Hull History Centre, UDCX/5/52.

Travel Association's ran assisted tours and some Guildswomen managed to finance their own travel.[39]

For most members, however, internationalism was facilitated through their local branch meetings. Correspondence exchanges were also established between Guildswomen and colleagues in USA, Canada and Australia.[40] Moreover, international fraternal delegates regularly attended English WCG congresses. For instance, representatives from Norway, Sweden, Belgium and USA attended the Guild's congress held in Portsmouth.[41] Many Guildswomen read widely on the proceedings of the international co-operative movement and international affairs. *Woman's Outlook* – the Guild's magazine published from 1919 to 1967 – helped Guildswomen stay in touch with work in other countries.[42] The magazine published articles relating to peace, disarmament, international trade and the work of the international women's movement, including the campaign against the traffic of women and children.[43] These items were printed alongside branch news and domestic features, including knitting patterns, recipes and beauty advice. In Darlington, members were encouraged to buy the 'valuable little paper', as the magazine facilitated engagement with the national and international network of the Guild. [44]

[39] Margaret Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Life as We Have Known It by Co-operative Working Women* (London, 1931: 1977), 53–4; WCG, Fortieth Annual Report, 55.

[40] Darlington WCG Minutes, 16 May 1922; 6 November 1928; 18 June 1929. DRO, D/XD/85/7-9; WCG, Fortieth Annual Report, 10; the British Federation of Cooperative Youth also had correspondence exchanges, see Selina Todd, 'Pleasure politics and co-operative youth: the interwar co-operative comrades' circle', *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 32 (1999), 129.

[41] WCG, Fortieth Annual Report, 8.

[42] Natalie Bradbury, 'Woman's Outlook 1919–1939: An educational space for co-operative women' in Clay, DiCenzo, Green and Hackney (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain*, 421.

[43] *Woman's Outlook*, Vol. XIII, No.256, 5 March 1932; *Woman's Outlook*, Vol XV, No. 315, 9 June 1934.

[44] Darlington WCG Minutes, 29 May 1934. DRO, D/XD/85/9.

The minute books of the Darlington Central branch shed light on how the Guild's commitment to internationalism played out on the local level. In 1894 – fifty-five years after the opening of the Darlington Co-operative Society – a local WCG was established. This town in the North-East of England had a longstanding tradition of women's activism. There was also a strong Quaker presence in the town, with the Pease family dominating local business and politics. Elizabeth Pease established a local branch of the Women's Abolition Society in the 1830s and one of the first sections of the Women's Liberal Federation was founded in the town. Local women signed the 1866 suffrage petition, leading Elizabeth Crawford to assert that 'Darlington, rather than Durham, was more important in the county as a centre of the women's suffrage campaign'.[45] During the inter-war years the Women's Section of the Labour Party was particularly active in the town. Notably, the WCG collaborated with the local Women's Section and sent delegates to Labour Advisory Committee meetings.[46] Darlington women also joined branches of the Women's Freedom League, Women's Citizens Association and Townswomen's Guild. Moreover, from the mid-1930s the local press regularly reported on the popular activities of the Women's Institutes around the region. As was the case in other provincial towns, a wide range of voluntary organizations offered a political, social and

[45] Crawford*, The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland*, 36; Clare Midgley, 'Women anti-slavery campaigners, with special reference to the North-East', *North East Labour History*, 29 (1995), 22; Linda Walker, 'Gender, suffrage and party: liberal women's organisations, 1880–1914', in Boussahba-Bravard, *Suffrage Outside Suffragism*, 84.

[46] 'Women's Day: Short Records of its Celebration', *Labour Woman*, July 1923, 110; Darlington WCG Minutes, 29 June 1920. DRO, D/XD/85/6; Christine Collette, *For Labour and for Women: The Women's Labour League, 1906–18* (Manchester, 1989), 61.

educational space for women, making the Darlington WCG a useful case-study to explore this aspect of co-operative women's activism.[47]

During the Great War, this local WCG branch had only 44 members. Much like the national Guild, the branch expanded in membership and activity during the inter-war years; by 1938 the branch counted 178 members. Despite its growing membership, it is difficult to assess the impact of the branch in the town and it is unlikely that the majority of working-class married women living in Darlington joined the WCG.[48] Notably, there was significant competition for members from other women's organizations, especially the Women's Institute and the Women's Section of the Labour Party. Nonetheless, branch meetings regularly attracted visitors and it was integral to the wider co-operative network in the region, working with the local Men's Guilds and other WCG branches across County Durham and North Yorkshire. As the self-titled 'Mother Guild', the branch hosted the first meeting of the Joint Guilds' Council in 1929.[49] This indicates that co-operation – through the WCG, Co-operative Society and Co-operative stores – was a stable and informative presence in Darlington.

As well as fortnightly meetings, social events were a significant feature on this Guild's calendar. Unfortunately, the planned day trip to Sunderland and Roker was cancelled in June

[47] 'Women's Life and Work', *Northern Echo*, 21 October 1919; 'Round the Women's Institutes', *Northern Echo,* 14 November 1933. See Esther Breitenbach & Valerie Wright, 'Women as active citizens: Glasgow and Edinburgh c. 1918-1939', *Women's History Review*, 23 (2014), 409; Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London, 2015), 70.

[48] Darlington WCG, List of members and attendance books, 1916–1950. DRO, D/XD/85/29-31. In 1939 the Darlington population was 77,528, including 25,303 women aged 20-65. Thus, the Guild did not recruit a significant proportion of the female population. Great Britain Historical GIS Project, *A Vision of Britain through Time* (2017), http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10136829/cube/TOT_POP accessed 12 November 2019.

[49] Darlington WCG Minutes, 17 December 1929. DRO, D/XD/85/8.

1926, due to the cost of train fare. This incident indicates the financial situation of branch members, many of whom were affected by the General Strike. Similarly, in the early 1930s the Guild agreed to use its benevolent fund to assist its own members, whose families were faced with the effects of unemployment and the Means Test.[50] Notably, membership in Darlington temporarily dipped around the time of the General Strike in 1926 and the economic depression of the early 1930s. The national Guild described this period as a 'dark and anxious time', noting that many of its members 'felt the pinch of poverty'.[51]

Despite the economic situation of Darlington Guildswomen, the branch supported the internationalism of the co-operative movement. Branch President, Margaret Ferguson – who was also prominent in the regional and national Guild – was a keen advocate of internationalism, writing that 'I must admit that everything I can get hold of relating to International matters have a keen interest for me'.[52] On her recommendation, the branch paid its annual affiliation fee to the IWCG and she was nominated as a delegate to the international conference in 1927. Provincial branches could maintain contact with international work by sending representatives to national and international conferences. For instance, Mrs Hall – who became branch President in 1934 – reported to the branch on the 'rare occasion' to host such an international conference in London.[53]

[50] Darlington WCG Minutes, 22 June 1926; 15 December 1931. DRO, D/XD/85/8-9. See Stephanie Ward, 'The Means Test and the unemployed in south Wales and the north-east of England, 1931–1939', *Labour History Review*, 73 (2008), 122.

[51] Darlington WCG, List of members and attendance books, 1916–1950. DRO, D/XD/85/29-31; WCG, Forty-Eighth Annual Report, 1.

[52] Mrs Ferguson in Llewelyn Davies, *Life as We Have Known It*, 116.

[53] Darlington WCG Minutes, 1 March 1927. DRO, D/XD/85/8; 'Cooperative Women at Stockholm', Third International Conference, 12–13 August 1927. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/3; Darlington WCG Minutes, 13 November 1934. DRO, D/XD/85/9.

The records of the Darlington Guild reveal the priorities of a local branch. Darlington Guildswomen were concerned with issues affecting everyday life including local housing and town-planning schemes, old age pensions, food prices and maternity care. As co-operators, members deliberated on issues relating to the wider co-operative movement and the branch's relationship to the Labour and Co-operative parties.[54] Feminist campaigns, such as equal franchise, guardianship of children and the position of working married women also feature in the minutes. Resolutions relating to international issues increased in volume throughout the late 1920s and 1930s. This was influenced by WCG's National Executive, which encouraged local branches to study international concerns. For example, a 1922 WCG circular urged branches to focus on the Guild's 'special subjects', including 'international co-operative trade' and 'the Women's International'.[55] These 'special subjects' reveal that the Guild's internationalism was centred on three main concerns: co-operative principles, women's citizenship and peace.

The Woman with the Basket: Co-operation and Internationalism

The IWCG considered itself an 'integral part of the Co-operative International'.[56] At a local level, the Darlington branch promoted the work of both the IWCG and the International Co-operative Alliance, with the aim of establishing a 'Co-operative Commonwealth' that would traverse national boundaries. These local discussions illustrate that Guildswomen considered co-operation to be inherently international and that local members participated in the national and international programme of the Co-operative movement. At the heart of the

[54] Darlington WCG Minutes, 16 December 1924; 19 November 1929. DRO, D/XD/85/8-9.

[55] WCG Circular, 17 November 1922. DRO, D/XD/85/7.

[56] 'Position of Women in the Co-operative Movement', Report of the Fifth International Conference of Co-operative Women, 3–4 September 1937. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/5.

Guild's agenda was a commitment to consumer co-operation, as depicted through the 'woman with the basket' image. These commitments and identities also contributed to the expressions of co-operative internationalism found in the IWCG.[57]

The Guild actively promoted a feminist consumer co-operation at the international, national and local levels of the association. In a rallying cry to Guildswomen, Margaret Llewelyn Davies asserted that 'you represent the people organised as consumers, whose interests over-ride national boundaries. You, with your basket power, are indispensable to the success of our national Co-operative movements'.[58] Guildswomen's politics focused on women's political and economic influence as consumers. Yet, as Karen Hunt has argued, the Guild did not engage with radical consumer politics, such as the boycotting of goods and producers, which was advocated by the Women's Council of the British Socialist Party.[59] Rather, the WCG promoted a more gradualist approach; encouraging women to use their agency as consumers to shop at co-operative stores. The Guild's opposition to capitalism was moderate. Rather than advocating revolution, the association aimed to eliminate the influence of Communism within its ranks.[60] The Guild focused its critique on the excessive

[57] Rachael Vorberg-Rugh, 'The unit of the co-operative movement…is a woman': gender and the development of the co-operative business model in Britain', in Anthony Webster, Linda Shaw and Ruth Vorberg-Rugh (eds), *Mainstreaming Co-operation: An alternative for the twenty-first century* (Manchester, 2016), 97; Gurney, 'Redefining 'the woman with the basket''.

[58] Margaret Llewelyn Davies, *Death or Life? A Call to Co-operative Women* (London, 1924), 7. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/2; See Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in 20th-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2003), 44; Peter Gurney, 'Co-operation and the 'new consumerism' in interwar England', *Business History* 54 (2012), 907; John Wilson, Anthony Webster & Rachael Vorberg-Rugh, *Building Co-operation: a business history of the Co-operative Group, 1863–2013* (Oxford, 2013), 178.

[59] Karen Hunt, 'Negotiating the boundaries of the domestic: British socialist women and the politics of consumption', *Women's History Review,* 9 (2000), 393–4.

[60] Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 153.

competition inherent within capitalism. For instance, Ferguson addressed the Darlington branch on the danger posed by combinations of private traders, urging Guildswomen to strengthen the co-operative movement. Moreover, Guildswomen argued for 'economic equality' through co-operation.[61] For the Guild, the capitalist world economic system prioritised producers, rather than consumers. In particular, the IWCG noted that the period had been defined by 'economic nationalism' and that as a consumer, the unpaid housewife had little influence in a 'corporative State'. Although the Guild did not challenge traditional gender roles, it asserted that consumer co-operation could 'safeguard at once both the housewife's purse and her husband's earning'. The Co-operative movement aimed to secure a new system, with the consumer-housewife integral to the economic and political organization of society. Guildswomen were encouraged to educate and recruit members to secure this 'Co-operative Commonwealth'.[62]

However, the economic model of international co-operation was a subject of debate in the IWCG. In particular, Russian co-operative women challenged the Guild's emphasis on a gradualist transformation of the capitalist system. There was strong support for co-operation in the Soviet Union; by 1934 over 23 million women were members of the consumer co-operative movement.[63] Although there was no Russian WCG, Russian co-operators were represented at IWCG congresses and English Guildswomen followed developments in the Soviet Union. For instance, Davies chaired the Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR, while Barton was a member of the

[61] Darlington WCG Minutes, 19 November 1929. DRO, D/XD/85/8; IWCG, 'What Women can for Co-operation' (1934). Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/2.

[62] IWCG, Present Economic Tendencies: where does the housewife come in? (1934), 10. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/2

[63] 'Co-operative Women "Out for Peace"', *Northern Daily Mail*, 6 June 1934, 5.

'Hands off Russia' campaign during the Civil War.[64] There was also an exchange of visitors to and from the Soviet Union. For example, Basia Vasilevskaia represented the Soviet Consumers' Co-operative Society at the WCG Congress in Hartlepool, where she emphasised the 'great importance upon friendly relations with the British Co-operative movement'.[65]

However, collaboration between Guildswomen and Russian co-operators was not straight-forward. Although co-operative women often worked in collaboration with labour women, their relationship with socialist and communist women was more ambivalent.[66] A representative of the International Women's Secretariat of the Communist International had planned a speech for the 1927 IWCG Congress. Yet, there is no reference to it within the official congress report, perhaps indicating the discord between co-operative and communist women. The speech was critical of the IWCG as it had 'not yet broken through the narrow limits of the purely co-operative movement in order to establish jointly with the other workers' organization a wide front for a fight against the offensive of the world's capital'.[67] Similarly, in 1934 Russian co-operators called for a united front to challenge capitalism and fascism, castigating Eleanor Barton's emphasis on 'basket power' as a 'dangerous utopia'.[68] Some English delegates did support a more direct challenge to capitalism. For example, one

[64] WCG, Forty-Eighth Annual Report, 10; Emily Lygo, 'Promoting soviet culture in Britain: The history of the Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR, 1924–1945', *The Modern Language Review*, 108 (2013), 574; David Doughan, 'Barton [née Stockton] Eleanor', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

[65] The Co-operative Union, Report of a Group of Co-operators on a Visit to Russia, August 1929, 19. Hull History Centre, UDCX/5/28; 'Co-operative Women "Out for Peace"', 5.

[66] Hunt, 'Negotiating the boundaries of the domestic', 397.

[67] Representative of the International Women's Secretariat of the Communist International, Speech of Welcome, August 1927. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/3.

[68] Mrs Pilatskaya (U.S.S.R.) in Official Report of the Fourth Conference of the International Co-operative Women's Guild, 30 August 1934, 2. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/4.

Guildswoman argued that 'as in Russia the co-operative movement is part and parcel of the state, so I want to see it the Government in this country'. Yet, most English delegates did not support communism, preferring to focus on 'peaceful methods of fighting the capitalists' through 'going to your own store'.[69]

The debate centred on whether co-operative women should work through existing systems or whether a more fundamental challenge to capitalism was required to secure an international 'Co-operative Commonwealth'. Concluding the discussion, Barton declared that 'each country has got to settle its difficulties in its own way. Russia has settled hers in one way'.[70] National differences proved to be an obstacle for many international women's organizations during this period. This episode demonstrates that debates between co-operative women in the Soviet Union and 'in capitalist countries' threatened to undermine the harmony of women's co-operative internationalism.[71]

Despite these difficulties, international conferences tended to focus on matters that affected co-operative women worldwide, attempting to create a sense of international sisterhood. For one Darlington Guildswoman, international congresses were 'very important and interesting for it brings one into close contact with our Guild sisters all over the world'.[72] These common themes included the development of co-operation, education, peace,

[69] Mrs Matt Lewis, Mrs Harvey and Mrs Dale (England) in Official Report of the Fourth Conference, 9-11; See Peter Gurney, 'Co-operation and communism cannot work side by side': Organized consumers and the early Cold War in Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019).

[70] Eleanor Barton in Official Report of the Fourth Conference, 12.

[71] Mrs Pilatskaya (U.S.S.R.) in Official Report of the Fourth Conference, 10; See Laurie R. Cohen, 'Early endeavors to establish a (Soviet) Russian WILPF section, 1915–1925: A little known episode in feminist transnational peace history', *Deportate, Esuli, Profughe*, 18–19 (2012), 182.

[72] Darlington WCG Minutes, 15 February 1938. DRO, D/XD/85/10.

economics, international politics, as well as home management. For instance, a session at the third international conference was devoted to 'a typically housewife's subject, "The Family Wash"', concluding that women of all nations desired for the 'drudgery' of washing to be alleviated to allow them to take up social work. The feasibility of co-operative house-keeping was also considered by Guildswomen. Significantly, the Guild recognised that 'this is probably the first time that working women have met to discuss internationally the problems of their home life'.[73] To some extent, co-operative women built an international network through shared domestic experiences, as working-class housewives and mothers. Honora Enfield claimed that 'co-operative women represent the working-class housewives and mothers … whose interests as housewives and mothers, are the same throughout the world', indicating that the 'woman with the basket' became a shorthand expression for the Guild's international sisterhood.[74]

However, IWCG national sections were concentrated in western Europe. Catherine Webb's assertion that the 'common objects discussed enable every Guild to contribute its share to the experiences of co-operative women in all lands',[75] was no doubt facilitated by members' shared backgrounds. The association did attempt to build connections with women in India, China, Japan and North America throughout the inter-war years and the IWCG welcomed an Argentinian Guild in 1934. Yet, the spread of IWCG branches remained limited.

[73] IWCG, Report of the Third International Conference of Co-operative Women, 12–13 August 1927, 2. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/3.

[74] Honora Enfield, 'The International Organisation of Co-operative Women' (1921). Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/1.

[75] Webb, *The Woman with the Basket*, 174.

Moreover, the English delegation was the largest at the first two international congresses.[76] Although the inter-war congresses were always held in western Europe, the IWCG's President seemed to recognise this limited scope and the Guild's role in constructing 'artificial barriers between the two sides of Europe'.[77]

Moreover, the Guild's focus on the unity of motherhood does not appear to have been critically examined. When asked about the rise of reactionary attitudes towards motherhood in Nazi Germany, Emmy Freundlich simply responded that women's maternal roles could thrive 'where women are really educated for democracy'.[78] The IWCG did not question its own understanding of motherhood, or how it might affect non-Western co-operators, particularly colonial women. Rather, the association emphatically reasserted the role that co-operative women could play 'as consumers and citizens in the home and in the state to build up a world of peace'.[79] Despite these limitations, the English WCG did lobby the Secretary of State for the Colonies to initiate an inquiry into the 'status of women of non-European races in British territories', perhaps indicating an awareness of the different experiences of colonial women.[80] That said, co-operative women's internationalism based on expressions of shared identities as mothers and housewives was limited by the narrow make-up of the IWCG.

[76] 'Twentieth Anniversary of the International Co-operative Women's Guild', *International Women's Suffrage News*, 7 November 1941, 28; IWCG, Report of the Committee, 1930-1934. Hull History Centre, UDCX/3/6; Report of the Second International Congress of Co-operative Women, 1924. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/2.

[77] IWCG Circular Letter, 23 February 1938. Hull History Centre, UDCX/8/1.

[78] 'International Co-operative Women's Guild: Interview with Frau Emmy Freundlich', *Manchester Guardian,* 20 June 1933, 14.

[79] 'Resolution on Peace', Second International Congress of Co-operative Women (1924), 2. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/2.

[80] WCG, Forty-Eighth Annual Report, 24.

The Mothers' International: Citizenship and Internationalism

Maternal identities were crucial to the Guild's internationalism. This is indicated in Freundlich's rousing speech that called on Guildswomen 'to be mothers of the world'.[81] Like other women's associations, the Guild often used maternalist rhetoric to frame its response to war, peace and international citizenship. Although Barbara Blaszak criticised the Guild's 'relational feminism', WCG campaigns extended and subverted essentialist gender roles.[82] For instance, Davies encouraged more mothers to serve on local councils and public bodies to legitimate their domestic concerns. This form of active citizenship was integral to the wider British women's movement after 1918. Likewise, the IWCG promoted women as 'the new or coming force in the political life of all countries' during the inter-war years.[83]

The IWCG's rhetoric emphasised a transnational vision of citizenship. Throughout the inter-war years, it lobbied both the League of Nations and national parliaments to raise the status of women. Guildswomen were involved in the campaign for women's suffrage and legal rights, including the nationality of married women.[84] Moreover, a substantial aspect of the Guild's work for citizenship was the provision of civic and political education for its members in the wake of the extension of the franchise. As Freundlich argued, if women 'are given

[81] Emmy Freundlich, *The Call of the Mothers Goes Forth* (February 1932), 4. Hull History Centre, UDCW/7/43.

[82] Blaszak, *The Matriarchs of England's Co-operative Movement*, 23; Sarah Hellawell, 'Antimilitarism, citizenship and motherhood: the formation and early years of the Women's International League (WIL), 1915–1919', *Women's History Review*, 27 (2018), 551–564; Eileen Yeo, 'The creation of motherhood and women's responses in Britain and France, 1850–1914', *Women's History Review*, 8 (1999), 201–218.

[83] 'What Co-operative Women can do for Peace', Second International Congress of Co-operative Women (1924). Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/2; see Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 4.

[84] The Status of Women Report, (c.1935); Liaison Committee of International Women's Organizations, 'A New Status for Housewives: What shall we demand' (c.1931). Hull History Centre, UDCX/8/5. See also, Ellen Carol DuBois, 'Internationalizing married women's nationality: The Hague campaign of 1930' in Karen Offen ed., *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789–1945* (Oxon, 2010).

political voting rights and are not qualified by propaganda and education for their use, they become privileges on paper rather than living rights'.[85] This was not a new dimension of the Co-operative movement; educational activities had long been a significant element of its programme. Yet, this work took on a new resonance after 1918. The WCG sought to elevate the position of women within the community and the association's structure provided vital political education for members.[86] This was recognised by Margaret Bondfield – an honorary member of the Woolwich WCG – who noted that 'these working housewives were determined to be citizens in the widest sense'.[87] Likewise, Mary Stott – editor of *Woman's Outlook* – claimed that 'the most remarkable thing about the Women's Co-operative Guild was the training it gave in the art of government'.[88]

Guild activities granted members both the experience of public speaking and space to discuss political, economic and social issues. Testimonies reflect the value of these educational activities. For instance, one member mentioned that the WCG 'brought new visions and opened doors and windows', providing a forum for housewives to 'become articulate'.[89] Likewise, a speaker at a Darlington branch meeting asserted that 'we learn to be citizens and prepare women in all organizations in life, train them as Speakers and give women confidence in themselves'.[90] Notably, the branch sent representatives to local day

[85] Emmy Freundlich, 'President's Address', Second International Congress of Co-operative Women, 2. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/2.

[86] Nicole Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914–1960: Minding their own business* (Farnham, 2010), 94–95; Gillian Scott, 'Darkness at the end of the tunnel: pacifism, democracy and the Women's Co-operative Guild in England in the 1930s', in Emmanuel, MacPherson and Paz, *The Relevance of Co-operatives to Peace*, 74.

[87] Bondfield, *A Life's Work*, 127.

[88] Mary Stott, *Forgetting's No Excuse: The autobiography of Mary Stott* (London, 1989), 33.

[89] Mrs Scott in Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Life as We Have Known* It, 101.

[90] Darlington WCG Minutes, 16 March 1926. DRO, D/XD/85/8.

schools, week-end schools and lectures, working closely with the Darlington Co-operative Educational Committee and the Northern Co-operative Educational Association, demonstrating the centrality of education for this local Guild.

Discussion of party politics was supposedly kept out of the Darlington Guildroom to create a non-partisan forum. That said, the branch encouraged its members to be politically active by posing questions to parliamentary candidates.[91] In reality, however, the branch regularly discussed party politics, particularly in relation to the Co-operative and Labour parties. One member questioned the branch's neutrality, stating that 'many say that the Co-operative Guilds should not go into politics but that is quite wrong as until we do, we cannot expect to get the representation in the House of Commons'.[92] Notably, the branch encouraged its members to 'understand' the aims of the Co-operative Party. Founded in 1917, the Co-operative Party forged a pact with the Labour Party in 1927 and a WCG rule ensured that members could only hold office if they supported the Co-operative Party. The Darlington WCG affiliated to the Co-operative Party in 1930.[93]

The Guild's commitment to citizenship was not simply educational, the Guild lobbied for the representation of women within the Co-operative movement, as well as national and international political institutions. The WCG regularly recorded the 'Representation of Guildswomen in the Movement', reporting in 1923 that there were 271 women on the management committees of local co-operative societies, albeit often in peripheral roles. The Guild also encouraged its members to take up positions on local councils and boards.[94] In

[91] Darlington WCG Minutes, 15 March 1927; 26 February 1928. DRO, D/XD/85/8.

[92] Darlington WCG Minutes, 28 September 1926. DRO, D/XD/85/8.

[93] Darlington WCG, Minutes, 4 June 1930. DRO, D/XD/85/9; Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women*, 154.

[94] WCG, Fortieth Annual Report, 18.

1919, the Darlington branch backed 'the Woman Candidate' in the local Board of Guardians election. That same year, a local councillor addressed the branch, encouraging Guildswomen to stand as 'working-class representatives' on the municipal council.[95] Eleanor Barton was a Labour and Co-operative councillor in Sheffield and stood unsuccessfully as a Parliamentary candidate in 1922. The Guild was keen to support a female Co-operative MP and suggested potential candidates, including Margaret Ferguson of Darlington. Although no female Co-operative MP was elected to the British Parliament until after the Second World War, the IWCG's Emmy Freundlich was elected to the Austrian Parliament in 1919.[96]

The IWCG also lobbied for greater representation of women within the League of Nations and hoped that Freundlich's selection as Vice-President of the League's Economic Conference in 1927 indicated international recognition of co-operative ideals.[97] Moreover, Gabrielle Radziwill – Acting Head of the League's Social Section – congratulated the IWCG on its work with the League of Nations' Health Organization on maternal mortality and encouraged the Guild to enhance this 'very practical form of collaboration' between international women's organizations and the League.[98] These developments reached the local branches through addresses on the theme of 'women's work in international life'.[99]

As such, the Guild's interest in citizenship and female representation spanned the local, national and international. In Darlington, there is evidence that Guildswomen saw

[95] WCG, Forty-Eighth Annual Report, 16; Darlington WCG Minutes, 26 March 1919; 18 November 1919. DRO, D/XD/85/6.

[96] WCG, Fortieth Annual Report, 4. Caroline Ganley, Edith Wills and Mabel Ridleagh were elected as Labour–Co-operative MPs in 1945.

[97] Emmy Freundlich, 'President's Address', Third International Congress of Co-operative Women, 1927, 2. Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/3.

[98] Gabrielle Radziwill to Honora Enfield, 21 November 1931. Hull History Centre, DCX/8/1.

[99] Darlington WCG Minutes, 26 August 1930. DRO, D/XD/85/9.

themselves as 'citizens of the world', although it is difficult to assess how far this sentiment was felt amongst the rank-and-file. The branch reinforced strong links with their 'co-operative sisters' in other nations, including the work of the IWCG and humanitarian efforts through associations like the Workers' International Russian Relief Committee.[100] The branch also encouraged support for the League of Nations, the International Co-operative Alliance and co-operative trade across national borders. Members discussed the possibility of using Esperanto as a universal language, indicating an interest in the wider cultural internationalism of the 1920s and 1930s.[101] Yet, this did not preclude the branch's patriotism. In 1937, the symbolism of the 'Union Jack' was the subject of a meeting in Darlington. The minutes report that 'after hearing the tragic circumstances under which our fellow sisters and brothers of other countries live then we ought to be proud to live under the colours of the Union Jack Flag'. Thus, the members of the Darlington Guild demonstrate Glenda Sluga's argument that twentieth-century internationalism was often expressed through images of national differences. For Guildswomen, national identities and international citizenship were compatible.[102]

'Co-operation is peace':[103] Peace and Internationalism

This sense of international citizenship was underlined by the Guild's concern for peace. The International Co-operative Alliance had promoted peace since its establishment in 1895,

[100] WCG, Fortieth Annual Report, 12.

[101] Darlington WCG Minutes, 1 October 1935. DRO, D/XD/85/10; see Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, 1997).

[102] Darlington WCG Minutes, 12 October 1937. DRO, D/XD/85/10; Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia, 2013), 150.

[103] Emmy Freundlich, 'President's Address', Third International Congress of Co-operative Women (1927). Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/3.

lobbying to replace capitalism with co-operation to remove the economic causes of war. As Andrew Flinn suggests the Guild's 'uncompromising pacifism' was linked to 'co-operative internationalism'.[104] Freundlich's writing on the causes of the Great War explored economic nationalism and overproduction. She called for a 'complete reorganization of the world' on co-operative lines.[105] The Darlington branch also discussed the origins and consequences of war, particularly its impact on food prices and on women as consumers. Likewise, *Woman's Outlook* highlighted the underlying economic nationalism in the 'Buy British' campaign and promoted 'Buy Co-operative' as a more constructive alternative.[106] The Guild's pacifism was clearly linked to its co-operative economics. The association also emphasised that peace and co-operation had a particular resonance for women, as 'under the competitive system women can never hope to regain her influence' as a housewife and consumer at the heart of the family economy.[107]

This woman-centred approach to peace is articulated in the lyrics of the IWCG's anthem, *Mothers' International*. The tune was often sung at Darlington branch meetings and concluded with the lyrics, 'Linked in one Co-operation, Peace o'er all our final goal'.[108] The

[104] Andrew Flinn, 'Mothers for Peace', co-operation, feminism and peace: The Women's Co-operative Guild and the anti-war movement between the wars', in Lawrence Black & Nicole Robertson (eds), *Consumerism and the Co-operative Movement in Modern British History: Taking Stock* (Manchester, 2009), 138; Rita Rhodes, 'The International Co-operative Alliance during war & peace, 1910–1950', in Joy Emmanuel & Ian Macpherson (eds), *Co-operatives and the Pursuit of Peace* (Victoria, B.C, 2007), 53–56; Birchall, *The International Co-operative Movement*, 47.

[105] Emmy Freundlich, 'The Cooperative movement in the present world order', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (July 1935), 119.

[106] Darlington WCG Minutes, 7 October 1919. DRO, D/XD/85/6; 'This 'Buy British' Campaign', *Woman's Outlook*, 5 March 1932, 269.

[107] 'The World's Size. Women its Builders', *The Co-operative News*, 13 September 1924, 12.

[108] 'The Mother's International', *Songs for Co-operators* (Manchester, 1919, 7th edition). DRO, D/XD/85/41.

IWCG asserted that the 'mothers of the world, united internationally on the common basis of co-operation can destroy the very roots of war'. Many Guildswomen were moved by their memories of the Great War. One member stated that 'there's no mother or wife in England or Germany that would give their loved one to be killed. Now we are working for peace'.[109] Davies urged women to educate children to avoid the idealisation of war, to encourage 'feelings of friendship towards other countries' and to inspire youth movements to co-operate across national borders. Guildswomen also opposed military drills for school children and lobbied for the League of Nations to be included on school curricula.[110]

Anti-war sentiments were shared by the wider international women's movement during the inter-war years. This led the IWCG to work with the Peace and Disarmament Committee of International Women's Organizations, which presented petitions at the opening of the World Disarmament Conference in 1932.[111] Yet, the Guild had its own position within the international women's movement, as it emphasized consumer co-operation to secure peace. The 'Peace Programme for International Guildswomen' incorporated practical instructions to build a strong Guild in each country, buy co-operative, vote progressively, read the co-operative press, study international developments and promote an International Co-operative Wholesale Society and Bank. As citizens, members were instructed to elect governments who would support 'a real League of Nations' that would embody 'the spirit of the Covenant'. Davies was highly critical of member-states of the League who paid lip-service

[109] Mrs Wrigley & Mrs Yearn in Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Life as We Have Known It*, 65 & 107; 'What Co-operative Women can do for Peace', Second International Congress of Co-operative Women (1924). Hull History Centre, UDCX/8/1.

[110] Davies, *Death or Life?*, 15.

[111] Thomas R. Davies, *The Possibilities of Transnational Activism: The Campaign for Disarmament between the Two World Wars* (Leiden, 2007), 92.

to its aims while continuing to resort to old methods of diplomacy. Moreover, she argued that 'no real progress can be made until Russia and Germany are included' and the 'help of America' secured to ensure the League as an effective international body.[112] In Darlington, Ferguson authored a proposal for a 'Peace Ministry' within the British Government and lobbied the local MP, urging 'the Government to press for total Disarmament as being the only genuine method of ensuring World Peace'. Like other branches, Darlington WCG held public peace meetings and performed a peace play on Armistice Day.[113]

The branch also collaborated with other anti-war associations. For instance, it paid fees and sent representatives to the No More War Movement, the socialist-pacifist successor of the No Conscription Fellowship. The work of the IWCG often featured in its publication, *No More War*.[114] There was also a close link between national WCG and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. For instance, Guild representatives attended WILPF's congress at The Hague in December 1922. However, unlike many WCG branches, the Darlington WCG did not affiliate to WILPF and opted out of the Peacemakers' Pilgrimage of 1926. The Darlington WILPF was a small branch, which perhaps explains its limited collaboration with the local WCG.[115] Nonetheless, Darlington Guildswomen did contribute to the League of Nations Union's Peace Ballot. The WCG's own peace questionnaire had

[112] Ibid., 8.

[113] Darlington WCG Minutes, 30 March 1926; 18 October 1932. DRO, D/XD/85/8-9; 'Co-operative Women out for Peace', *Northern Daily Mail*, 6 June 1934.

[114] Darlington WCG Minutes, 27 June 1922; 3 December 1929. DRO, D/XD/85/7-9; A. Honora Enfield, 'The Only Working Women's International: What it is doing for Peace', *No More War*, May 1926, 5; Lucy Cox, 'Co-operators Demand World Peace', *No More War*, July 1926, 5.

[115] WCG, Fortieth Annual Report, 10; WIL, Ninth Yearly Report, January–December 1924, 19. WILPF MF, Reel 68; Darlington WCG Minutes, 27 April 1926. DRO, D/XD/85/9.

apparently inspired Lord Cecil to initiate a nationwide ballot under the auspices of the LNU.[116] Women's organizations were crucial to the infrastructure of the Peace Ballot. This was certainly the case in Darlington, where the majority of the LNU Executive were women and 40 members of the WCG volunteered to help with the distribution of ballot papers in the area.[117]

Despite this collaboration with the wider peace movement, the WCG's commitment to peace is most closely associated with its production of the white poppy from 1933. Most branches sold the white poppy, but the initiative caused controversy.[118] In Darlington, WCG members faced resistance from the British Legion as questions were raised over whether the Guild profited from the sale of poppies. It was agreed that Guildswomen would 'refrain from selling the W.P.s [white poppies] during November' but could 'wear them on Armistice Day'.[119] Darlington women continued 'to wear their white poppies to show their determination' for peace. In fact, many Guildswomen chose to wear both a red and white poppy to 'let both tell their story'.[120]

However, the early unity of the peace movement started to dissolve from the mid-1930s. Officially, the WCG retained its absolutist stance against war, but support for pacifism became a divisive issue amongst co-operative women. As Emily Mason has shown, the British

[116] Report of the IWCG Committee, 1934–1937 (London, 1937), 10. IWCG, UDCX/3/7; Martin Ceadel, 'The first British referendum: The peace ballot, 1934-5', *English Historical Review*, 95 (1980), 810–39.

[117] Darlington WCG Minutes, 3 January 1935. DRO, D/XD/85/10; Helen McCarthy, 'Democratizing British foreign policy: rethinking the peace ballot, 1934–1935', *Journal of British Studies*, 49 (2010), 372; Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations* (Manchester, 2011), 186.

[118] Gaffin & Thoms, *Caring and Sharing,* 110; Scott, *Feminism and the Politics of Working Women,* 214; 'White Poppy Plan Off', *Daily Mail*, 4 November 1933, 9.

[119] Darlington WCG Minutes, 13 November 1934; 24 November 1934; 3 April 1935. DRO, D/XD/85/10.

[120] Darlington WCG Minutes, 15 October 1935; 8 November 1938. DRO, D/XD/85/10; 'Women's Co-operative Guild: The White Poppies', *Manchester Guardian*, 21 June 1935, 9.

policy of non-intervention during the Spanish Civil War initiated debates about pacifism within the Co-operative movement.[121] The threat of fascism and disputes over the appropriate use of sanctions led many women to question their earlier pacifist commitments. Yet, there was consensus on providing assistance for the victims of conflict. The IWCG issued a resolution expressing 'sympathy with all their fellow Co-operators in Spain' and local branches sent funds to the Spanish Relief Fund.[122]

The rise of fascism in Europe had a significant impact on the IWCG as its President was imprisoned by the Austrian authorities in 1934. Members of local and national Guilds, as well as other international women's organizations – including the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom – lobbied the press and politicians to support Freundlich's release. This incident places co-operative women within the network of international women's organizations.[123] On her return from an IWCG congress, a Darlington Guildswoman reported that 'she had been very impressed by Frau Freundlich and other Guild sisters from overseas who told of their sorrowful plight'. This provincial branch was deeply concerned with the international crises of the 1930s, particularly the threat of fascism in Europe.[124]

[121] Emily Mason, ''The Co-operative Commonwealth is the Only Answer to the Fascist Empire': Support for republican Spain within the British co-operative movement, 1936-1939', *Labour History Review*, 82 (2016), 202; Emily Mason, *Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas: Support for the Spanish Republic within British Civil Society, 1936-1939* (Eastbourne, 2017), 92.

[122] IWCG, Resolution on Spain (September 1937). Hull History Centre, UDCX/2/5; Darlington WCG Minutes, 14 March 1938. DRO, D/XD/85/10.

[123] IWCG, Report on Action taken for Release of President (1934); Scottish Co-operative Women's Guild, Letter to the Government of the Austrian Republic, 6 March 1934. Hull History Centre, UDCX/7/1; Birchall, *The International Co-operative Movement*, 50.

[124] Darlington WCG Minutes, 20 June 1938; 13 September 1938. DRO, D/XD/85/10.

However, the combination of international political and economic crises and national differences made the Guild's internationalism based on opposition to war difficult to maintain. Responding to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the IWCG reported that 'never has a united Peace Policy been more difficult', as the debate on sanctions created a 'cleavage of opinion' amongst co-operative women. [125] Not all national guilds adopted the IWCG's 1936 peace programme, which included commitments to self-determination, an International Court of Justice, an International Office for Economic Affairs and Disarmament. The International Executive Committee struggled to find a 'line of action that commends itself to all members'.[126] In 1938 the committee made plans for an 'International Conference on Women, Peace and Democracy' to consider the impact of rising militarism on the rights of women and nations. However, plans were aborted due to 'luke-warm interest' and increasing polarisation on the issue of peace. The congress had been planned in consultation with the World Committee of Women against War and Fascism and there was concern within the Guild that the proposed Congress would be dominated by this 'very left-wing group'.[127] Although Leila Rupp suggests that opposition to war helped to bridge the ideological gap between women's international organizations and socialist women's associations, this coherence began to break down in the 1930s.[128] This is indicated by the Guild's ambivalence towards the Comintern-sponsored World Committee of Women Against War and Fascism. Some WCG members did support the British Committee of Women Against War and Fascism and the

[125] IWCG, Report of the Committee, 1934–1937, 24. Hull History Centre, UDCX/3/7.

[126] IWCG, Basis for an International Peace Programme (1936). Hull History Centre, UDCX/8/1; IWCG, Report of the Committee, 1937-1939, 3. Hull History Centre, UDCX/3/8.

[127] IWCG Circular Letter, 4 February 1938; 26 February 1938. Hull History Centre, UDCX/8/1.

[128] Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, 1997), 35.

Darlington branch sent funds and delegates to local anti-fascist committee meetings.[129] Yet, as Julie Gottlieb has demonstrated, debates over peace and anti-fascism threatened to split the women's movement. Similarly, the Guild wrestled with the issue.[130] By the late-1930s the IWCG claimed it was divided into three camps on the issue of peace: absolute pacifists, neutrals and those 'who work in close collaboration with and hold the same views as a particular political Party'. Thus, it had become increasingly difficult for the IWCG to 'express the views of a majority of its members'.[131]

As a compromise, the association adopted a 'cautious' approach to its peace campaigns to avoid alienating national sections and continued to call on women as mothers to unite for peace. In 1939, amid the 'thud of bombs, the screaming of shells, the death groans of innocent women and children', the IWCG urged its members to build peace through international co-operation.[132] The English Guild officially refused to participate in war precautions, although individuals were permitted to join the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS). The Darlington Guild considered arranging First Aid classes, but withdrew its representative from the local WVS committee. Even in 1939 the branch continued to protest against the introduction of conscription and hoped that peace would prevail.[133]

[129] May Edmunds, 'Guildswomen and Peace', *Women Against War and Fascism Bulletin*, 1 (November 1935), 20; Darlington WCG Minutes, 6 March 1934; 3 April 1935. DRO, D/XD/85/9

[130] Julie Gottlieb, 'Varieties of feminist responses to Fascism in inter-war Britain' in Nigel Copsey and Andrezej Olechnowicz (eds), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period* (Basingstoke, 2010), 116.

[131] IWCG, Report of the Committee, 1937–1939, 3. Hull History Centre, UDCX/3/8.

[132] IWCG, Declaration of Peace, December 1939. Hull History Centre, UDCX/8/1.

[133] Darlington WCG Minutes, 11 October 1938; 9 May 1938. DRO, D/XD/85/10. 'Women's Co-operative Guild and its Peace Policy', *Manchester Guardian,* 22 June 1938, 7; James Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: Continuities of Class* (Oxford, 2002), 72; Darlington WCG Minutes, 20 June 1939. DRO, D/XD/85/10.

Much like the national WCG, the Darlington branch dwindled from 151 subscribing members on the outbreak of war to 66 by 1943. The practical difficulties of organising during wartime contributed to this decline. Notably, WCG membership had temporarily declined during the Great War and recovered.[134] Although Scott attributes the Guild's decreasing membership to its misguided pacifism, Gurney notes that Guildswomen contributed to home front efforts and membership levels actually deteriorated in the late-1940s. Moreover, Caitríona Beaumont has demonstrated that most women's organizations struggled to maintain their membership during the war, including the Women's Institutes.[135] Rather than dismissing the Guild's pacifism, it is important to recognise this dimension of its work, as it reveals how the organization engaged with anti-war internationalism through a co-operative lens.

Conclusion

The internationalist dimension of the WCG during the inter-war years is a vital element of the history of this working-class women's association. This article has established that the internationalism of co-operative women was facilitated through the movement's commitments to consumer co-operation, active citizenship and peace. Margaret Llewelyn Davies made these connections when she wrote that 'just as International Guildswomen, as Co-operators, must use their basket-power on behalf of Peace, so as Citizens they must use their votes in support of the International institutions needed to build up a world without war'.[136]

[134] List of members and attendance books. DRO, D/XD/85/30; WCG, Thirty-Second Annual Report, 3.

[135] Gurney, 'Redefining 'the woman with the basket', 16; Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 137.

[136] Davies, *Death or Life?*, 10.

This article has unpicked the local, national and international aspects of the women's co-operative movement. It is clear that 'a strong international spirit' infused the WCG, as internationalism became an integral part of the social, political and cultural dimension of the association.[137] This article has also shed light on the formation of the IWCG in 1921 and its combination of feminist and co-operative internationalism as the so-called 'Mothers' International'. The IWCG, therefore, can be situated alongside the host of international women's organizations active during the inter-war period. The nature of the Guild's internationalism places the association at a unique position within both the British and international women's movement, as it represented predominantly working-class housewives and advocated feminist co-operative internationalism. Yet, the internationalism of co-operative women has received scant attention in the historiography. This article deepens our understanding of both British women's engagement with internationalism and the diversity of the international women's movement during the inter-war years by highlighting women's expressions of co-operative internationalism. Although the Guild shared an anti-capitalist and anti-war approach with women of the labour, socialist and communist internationals, women's co-operative internationalism focused on women's potential in a global economy structured on co-operative lines. Likewise, co-operative women promoted peace and women's citizenship alongside other women's and feminist international organizations. However, the 'Mother's International' differed from these associations as it used the imagery of the 'woman with the basket' to express international sisterhood through the ideals of consumer co-operation. These overlaps between the Guild and other forms of internationalism illustrate the diversity of internationalist thought,

[137] Davies, 'Introduction', in Webb*, The Woman with the Basket*, 14.

expression and activity during the inter-war years. Yet, the association stands out as a unique thread in the network of internationalist engagement due to its co-operative principles.

As was the case for many women's organizations, the internationalism of the Guild faced intense pressure in the late-1930s, particularly over the issue of pacifism and collective security. Co-operative women continued to negotiate their own internationalist principles and commitments during this period, addressing national priorities and interacting with a range of other international associations. As such, this article emphasises the complexities of inter-war internationalism. The local, national and international dynamics of women's co-operation offers a significant example of how internationalist ideals and activities influenced the national conversations and local activities of the British women's movement in the inter-war period.