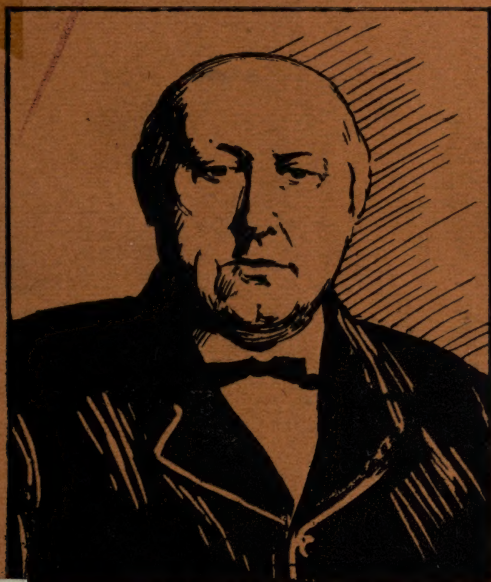


JOHN T. W. MITCHELL

PIONEER OF CONSUMERS'
CO-OPERATION



PERCY REDFERN



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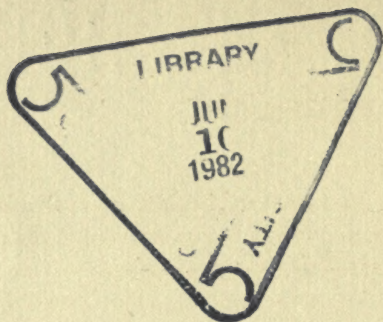
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PREFACE.

THOUGH neither a founder of the Pioneer Co-operative Society at Rochdale, nor of the Wholesale Society that followed, John Mitchell stands out as originating the conception of an all-inclusive consumers' movement. He wanted a democracy sovereign over capital and labour, and employing both in the direct service of the consuming community; and during twenty years he led in this direction.

His ideas were carried forward by others, in the co-operative movement notably by the late Thomas Tweddell; but they remain to be developed fully. Arising from a working life, and not from a theoretic mind, they embody a common-sense to which we must always return, however far we depart from it.

The pages following set out from this point of view to present John Mitchell as vividly as may be in view of the unusual scantiness of the materials. Even Mitchell's friend, then Mr. William Maxwell, visiting Rochdale in 1895, could find little to help him in writing the memoir which appeared in the C.W.S. Annual for 1896. Since then, except incidentally for the *Story of the C.W.S.*, nothing more has been gathered until now. There are no letters or MS. writings of any kind to be traced, and no other records exist to show the development of Mitchell's mind. Of what is now garnered much has had to be gleaned straw by straw.

Organisation from and for the consumer at least has the merit of giving a place to women as house-keepers, and to domestic life, that no other mode pro-

vides ; and here we can show that while Mitchell never married or made a real home, he was to an extraordinary degree a mother's son. For the elements of this story, all too slight as it still is, the writer is especially indebted to the Maxwell Memoir and to Sir William Maxwell himself, who has read proofs and readily responded to every request for assistance.

To the following helpers, also, the writer offers especial thanks : to Mr. J. Fountain, of Rochdale (who knew Mitchell on many sides, and who has read the proofs), for constant, invaluable kindnesses ; to Mr. J. B. Adamson, Mr. Barnish, Mrs. Golding (who nursed Mitchell in his last illness), Mr. Robertson and Mr. Wadsworth, all of Rochdale ; to Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb ; to Professor Hall and Miss Fountain, of the Co-operative Union (Rochdaliens who have also read the proofs) ; to Mrs. Bamford Tomlinson ; to Mr. Shotton, Mr. D. McInnes, Mr. Greenwood, and Mr. Mastin ; and to Sir T. Brodrick (for access to the Society's records), Mr. Lander, Mr. Goodwin, Mr. Lobb, Mr. Openshaw, Mr. Justham, Mr. Darch, Mr. E. Jackson, and Mr. Sheppard, all of the C.W.S. And to others whose help has contributed in this detail or that, the same grateful thanks are now extended.

February, 1923.

P. R.

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The Drawing on the Cover by Russell S. Reeve is from a photograph of the Educational Committee of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society Ltd., taken about 1890.

CHAPTER I

THE MOTHER'S SON

A VISITOR from sunlit cities of the Mediterranean or the verandahs of the Colonies would find it difficult at first sight to fall in love with Manchester. This great place of business might endear itself after long acquaintance ; but that is another matter. And leaving Manchester for East Lancashire the aspect would seem no more enlivening. On the bare, begrimed spaces amidst the factories and houses, nature, even in spring, mopes like a thrush in a cage. Eastward there are hills ; but they bristle with the shafts of a monstrous regiment of chimneys. The straight line of a canal is a relief, for water can never be ugly while there is a ray of sunshine to glint on it. But, in general, it is an outlook from which a Morris or a Galsworthy would fly, either enraged or pitying.

Yet a few miles further on, while little less industrial, the scene rapidly acquires an attractive quality. A little way beyond Rochdale railway station this better outlook is found. If fortunately guided, the stranger emerges on the brow of a short, steep descent. Right and left the view is open. In place of brick and mortar spreading without form there is a town, a civic unit. Just below is a town hall, with a square and a statue. The tower of an old parish church is close at hand, backed by the verdure of a park. Library and art gallery, hospital, schools, co-operative

central stores, banks and offices all appear, intermixed with the mass of houses and works. And from an embanked roadway by a little river, the whole rises far up, thinning out on the heights into green hill-side pastures, just under moorlands brown with heather and whin. Sunlit against the sky, the solitary moorlands contrast picturesquely with the busy town below.

The view, no doubt, is not extraordinary. It is no great city that one looks upon. It is a Lancashire factory town, still far from the Rochdale planned by municipal idealists for the twenty-first century. Yet it is a town so displaying its best aspects upon a natural site that, like Wordsworth on Westminster Bridge, one cannot do other than admire.

Go down into the stone-flagged and rain-washed streets, and you encounter a people racy of the grit-stone hills. "Rachda' felleys," close-buttoned, sturdy, and grey-moustached, are such as might have come straight from that great Chartist meeting of ten thousand people on a neighbouring moor in 1846. So far from being dead, the co-operative pioneers of 1844 brush past you; another deep-browed, firm-lipped Howarth, another slender, hopeful Cooper, another Quaker-like sober Smithies. These are still such men as gathered in mills of their own erecting to hear John Bright on household suffrage. The pawky humour of a "Tim Bobbin," rough and shrewd, lingers here, and the homely, fireside fun and native poetry of a Waugh. Whether in clogs and shawls, or twentieth-century coats and millinery, the women also are no less vigorous, no less tough-fibred, enduring, and strong. Perhaps the people do not differ greatly from the other masses of the Lancashire stock settled in the

townships that thicken along the road to Manchester ; yet they seem more to belong to these rough brown hills, which rise like walls against the stranger, while converging sociably toward Rochdale as a centre.

Prominent in the view over the town is the tall, grey, many-windowed stone building housing the Pioneers' store in Toad Lane. The streets adjoining the lane—High Street, Red Cross Street, Mill Street, and the rest—now struggle to be something better than slums. While a chapel, a school, and here and there a housewife's neat curtains announce a brave stand, many of the old weavers' houses exhibit broken panes and sorry decay. Though it is but afternoon a man reels homeward, and a child wearing old boots of parental size shuffles into a dirty court. And a Salvation Army shelter tells the rest of the story. Yet, with Toad Lane as an important thoroughfare, this was once a prosperous quarter. Flannel merchants lived here in substantial houses with large warehouses overhead ; and the cottages and gardens of the handloom weavers shared this same sunny slope rising from behind the old manor house of the Byrons.

Out of the misery of the decay of this quarter the Rochdale stores (and in consequence the modern co-operative movement) arose in protest ; and in this same district, on the 18th of October, 1828—a Saturday—John Thomas Whitehead Mitchell was born. The exact place is unknown ; for we have to deal with the most obscure and unhopeful circumstances into which any child may come. Mitchell, as Sir William Maxwell has noted, was always reticent about his birth, even to intimate friends, and we can understand and share the feeling. Until the day of his death, in provincial, Victorian Rochdale, a gulf lay between children en-

dowed with the sanctions of Church and State and the dark origins of those who, like Mitchell, could point to no legal father. Not only the mother and child, but (in the case of Mitchell) the grown man's dearest feelings in after years stood at the mercy of any cynical or brutal mind "in the know." A time came when universal respect sealed even the coarsest lips in the actual presence of the co-operative leader ; yet, to the last, there were people who could find in this circumstance something to take comfort in as being a blot.

The father is said to have been a man in good position, but of ungoverned character. Mitchell himself, if we are to accept a remembered death-bed statement, felt that he owed small moral benefit to this side of his parentage. It is evident that the mother and the father had little or nothing in common after John's birth, and possibly for some little time before. We are in a region of surmise ; yet perhaps it may be inferred that the mother set herself to undo a past, and strove with constant, unwearying effort to efface or prevent any trace of the father in the son. "His mother," writes his old friend, Sir William Maxwell, in a letter, "would not let him out of her sight." As a result "he did not make friends with other boys, and knew nothing of boyish games." Sir William adds that neither did he get into any boyish troubles "as most of us did in our early years." In the memoir in the "C.W.S. Annual" for 1896 the same writer has said that the mother "lived only for the boy," shielding him from every possible ill. "Although hard pressed, she would not allow her child from her side."

By common consent any boy tied to apron strings grows up a weakling. But Mitchell was attached to

his mother not by weakness but by the strength of his own affections. A common poverty, and a common struggle against it, also preserved mother and son from any merely fond and enfeebling association. So the two lived for each other, and, confined to a narrow channel, the child's vitality ran deeply. Concentration, self-sacrifice to duty, and independence of the world, became natural to boy and man. Late in his life these same qualities impressed an observer who saw him in "absolute command" of a C.W.S. quarterly meeting. The meeting over, Mitchell walked "straight from the platform, looking neither to left nor right. He seemed a man entirely alone. If the world went with him, well. If not, so much the worse for the world."

Under this home tuition the natural innocence of the child gained a strength which preserved it under all the circumstances of a long life both at home and abroad. Mitchell became such a man as some modern novelists seem not to have heard of. In the words of a shrewd observer of character who both knew him well and knew those who knew him, he was "sexually incorruptible." But it was a positive and not a negative quality, an outcome in part of the profound love which in early life he gave abundantly to his mother in return for her devotion. The undying love in popular ballads literally was Mitchell's love. Speaking of the C.W.S. chairman whom he knew so well in after years, Sir William Maxwell has said (in the letter already quoted) "I used to think it strange to hear an elderly man speaking of his mother with such affection."

While we may suppose that Mitchell derived vigour of body from his father, we know that the in-born energy was purified and directed to the best she

knew by a mother whose unceasing care had to struggle all the while against the poverty and disqualifications of her position.

“Mitchell” is a common name in Ireland, and “The Mount,” which is the district from Toad Lane along High Street, is associated with the Irish in Rochdale. The Irish immigration began about the time of Mitchell’s birth. “Before 1827,” says Mr. W. Robertson, the Rochdale historian, in a letter on this point, “there was only one Irishman in Rochdale, a shoemaker . . . the Hibernians were regarded with terror.” Subsequently a company of Connaught Rangers stayed in the town, the barracks being near Toad Lane; and their stay had the effect of breaking down the anti-Irish prejudice. Irish workers were then sought for the cotton mills, which at that time were new to Rochdale. To house the new-comers, cheap houses—no doubt obliterating the gardens—were erected in the neighbourhood of High Street. But apart from the evidence that Mitchell’s mother was Rochdale born, this development obviously came too late for the boy’s birth in 1828. Moreover, the street in which we first have definite news of him (Red Cross Street) is reported by another old Rochdale townsman as never to have been Irish like the rest of the Mount. Mitchell himself gave an account of his ancestry when Mr. Robertson, in 1892, was, with very great difficulty, extracting a few personal details from the co-operative leader for the “Handbook” to the Rochdale Co-operative Congress of that year. He told the historian that his forefathers for generations had been engaged in the then extinct Rochdale hat trade, and it is clear that he referred to his maternal descent. The name “Mitchell” appears in Rochdale history from the

sixteenth century, although a Rochdale directory of 1841 records few Mitchells amongst the many Butterworths, Schofields, Kershaws, and Ashworths. Whiteheads were more common.

The mother's means of livelihood at the time of her son's birth again can only be guessed. Possibly she was in domestic service. At a little later date she kept a beerhouse, and supplemented this by letting lodgings to the humblest working men. "Home-brewed beer" is a sign still to be seen in the neighbourhood of High Street, and at this date of about 1835 in all likelihood the beer was made at home. For a woman trained in domestic service, brewing on a small scale would form a natural occupation. And the scale would be very small, for the Mitchells were exceedingly poor. "Many of us have been brought up from the cellar," said the C.W.S. chairman in 1893, speaking at the Bristol Congress in appreciation of Vansittart Neale's far different early environment. The beerhouses of 1835 were very rough places, and the Mitchells must have had the poorest and roughest of customers. "I never heard him say anything about his birthplace or his mother," writes Mr. W. H. Greenwood, who was intimately in touch with J. T. W. Mitchell for many years at Littleborough, "except that he was born in a poor home and had a very hard time of it when a boy."

Yet, according to her means, his mother gave royally. She kept her little child from going to earn money in the hungry cotton mills, and off and on she sent the lad to gain some elements of education at the Red Cross Street National School. In a rough but effective fashion she added to this her own moral teaching. Through her father's experience, that teaching may have been already associated, however

crudely, with economic and social ideas. John's grandfather had joined a co-operative society started about 1833 or 1834 at 15, Toad Lane. Although unregistered, trading for credit, and providing for profits to be appropriated by capital, this society nevertheless aimed at producing and distributing for the benefit and social gain of the "industrious classes." It was a humble effort, the rent of the whole building in which it began being no more than £6 a year; and by 1835 it had failed, leaving the grandfather a loser of no doubt badly-needed money. In later years Mitchell never tired of reminding audiences that co-operation began before the Pioneers and that what the Pioneers did was not to invent co-operation but to demonstrate the principles of success.

At about ten or twelve years the boy began work as a piecer in a cotton mill—the Townhead Mill. "I have been a servant all my life," Mitchell told the Royal Commission on Labour in 1892. "I worked for 1s. 6d. a week at the beginning of my days, and whatever profit might have been handed to me in the work, I do not see that I could have done more than I did." He was replying to a suggestion that men would work better as profit-sharers; and therefore he concluded, "I should not like to feel that the selfish instinct would give increased energy to the work of any man."

Love for his mother, and the strong wish to help her, if only by eighteenpence a week, together with the spontaneous desire of every vigorous, unsophisticated boy to put forth his energy and do his best, was a sufficient motive for the lad Mitchell. Besides working every day in the mill from six in the morning till after seven at night, with no more than a few half-

holidays in the year, on Sundays he attended classes in secular subjects, first improving his reading and writing under a clerk, Mr. Matthew Brearley, at Baillie Street, and then under a Mr. John Kershaw getting a glimpse of something less elementary. It was a life of toil sufficient to tire the strongest; and still, poor and ill-fed as John Mitchell must have been at best, it was perhaps fortunate for him that there were no temptations to interfere with the concentration of his energies. He grew up a quiet, reserved, solitary soul, absorbed in zealous industry.

As soon as the boy began to earn a few more shillings a week the beerhouse was given up. The Mitchells removed from Red Cross Street to the neighbouring Hope Street, tenanting one of the abandoned workshop-homes of the former small master-weavers. Here, with the help of her son, the mother lived entirely by letting lodgings. And here, in 1846, Mitchell at last found a door opening for him into a larger life. The congregation of the Providence Independent Chapel in High Street had become a vigorous body, whose church and schools provided both for religious worship and for something in the nature of social work as well. New schools having been built in 1846, it was decided in the interests of the schools to canvass every house in this poor and struggling district. The two visitors who called upon the Mitchells included the teacher of the young men's class, J. T. Pagan, an important flannel manufacturer and a leading citizen, who twice became mayor of the borough. John Mitchell, "a fine, big lad," was found reading, and his mother cooking. A short interview ended in the mother saying, "John, tha's never bin to Sunday Schoo; tha might go."

Mr. Pagan called for the seventeen-year-old youth the following Sunday and introduced him into his class. Here, for the first time, Mitchell came into touch with religious and political opinions intelligently conceived and conscientiously held. He realised that—apart from the love between his mother and himself and the help he had given her—he had lived until now a life little better than that of a beast of burden. Mixing with the more fortunate and better-educated of the Providence congregation, he saw that the small knowledge he had so far gathered served only to reveal his ignorance. He seemed to himself utterly deficient. Yet he was not crushed, but inspired with confidence in his power to learn and to better his state. Still more important, somehow he absorbed the broadest christian faith in human possibilities ; and so came to merge his ambitions for himself with his hopes and desires for the ignorant and poverty-burdened masses in all the dismal Mounts of the wider world.

Radical and puritan, the stripling of eighteen or nineteen held his new beliefs so strongly as, for the first time, to go against his mother's wishes by signing a total abstinence pledge. In 1847 it was an extreme thing to become a teetotaller. By departing from alcohol one recklessly defied every ancient tradition associating health, strength, and manliness with beer. One risked the unknown. The best of mothers might have doubts. But it was necessary now for the boy to go his own way. Ceasing to be a child, and saved from becoming a drudge, the time had come for him to live and act for himself.

CHAPTER II

THE ROCHDALE WORKER

JOHAN PAGAN did even more for Mitchell than bring him into a spiritual environment at Providence. He gave aspiration a material opportunity. It was not an extraordinary one ; yet it led to a position in which Mitchell was able to qualify for the great work of his life. Attracted by the serious character and manifest truthfulness and honesty of the threadbare recruit from Hope Street, Mr. Pagan offered John Mitchell a place in the warehouse of his flannel mill. The young man's wages were only 16s. a week ; on the other hand, 16s. was a valued wage in 1848. So Mitchell turned from cotton to wool.

In the new position, under the firm of Pagan and Stewart, he was happy in his work. Although the heads of the house changed again and again, he remained with it until 1867, rising to the managership of the warehouse. In these years he acquired a thorough knowledge of flannels, a still more important insight into the business of selling as distinct from producing, and, chief of all, an ability to manage men. In control he gained the character of supporting energy and ability, discouraging idleness, and acting generally with a fair and equal mind.

But this is carrying us far from the period of 1848, to which we must return. Promoted to Pagan and Stewart's, Mitchell began to count for more at home.

He gained the sole use of a small room at the top of the house in Hope Street. To this little room he was able to invite meetings of sub-committees of the Rochdale Temperance Society. He had joined this society and had become an active worker on its committee. Frequently he spoke in public for the temperance cause which, in those days, had need to be militant. Whatever our modern faults, it would be difficult to believe that we have not gained from the teetotal attack upon the hard drinking of the past. As late as 1868 certain notorious methods of Eatanswill prevailed here, and at every election drunken mobs made the lives of the police dangerous and democracy ridiculous. Alcohol provided an easy way of keeping electors on the other side from the poll.

Saturate him well with liquor,
 So to do the work the quicker ;
 Take him then and lock him up,
 Still supply the potent cup,
 And when polling day is o'er,
 Giving him the clothes he wore,
 Let him seek his home once more,
 With an aching head and sore.

This Rochdale rhyme, quoted by Mr. Robertson, illustrates the "bottling" of electors, and suggests the worse things that could happen with drinking habits so powerful, things against which Mitchell strove. Until his death he remained an office-holder in the local division of the Sons of Temperance. It was a delegate from the Sons of Temperance who, in after years, changed his mind at a conference and put the blame on "Mitchell." "Why," the delegate urged, "he'd wheedle a duck off watter!"

Mitchell appears to have been vigorous also in "wheedling" people on to "watter" or tea, which he drank copiously. With his boyhood's experience

behind him, he knew how to use the stock epigrams, for example, that the reason why men could not make both ends meet was because one of them was drink. In later life he worked for local option, though with little hope of its adoption "until women have the vote." But he stopped short of fanaticism. At a co-operative dinner a plum pudding was served with brandy sauce. "Mr. Mitchell won't have any of this," said the chairman. "Oh, sha'n't I?" replied Mitchell. "I sha'n't throw the cob away for the sake of the slack."

Returning again to the earlier days, Mitchell while at Hope Street was to some extent a reading man. It has been said that in his little room he gathered "the nucleus of a library" and found delight in Shakespeare. It is likely that he read fairly fully within the narrow limits of the Providence School library; and a few books that were old possessions he retained in after life. "Hudibras" was one, with its wit and sense of character, and amongst the others were three volumes of the homely realistic poet, Crabbe. Milton he knew something of, as befitted an Independent; but the poetry of Shakespeare, it is pretty certain, he had no more than looked at. Carlyle and Ruskin, as well as the orthodox economists, were, in Sir William Maxwell's words (in a private letter), "outside his range." Fiction he ignored. "The Bible was his book," says Sir William, "and he knew it well." The Bible, however, is poetry and prophecy, story and drama, as well as a library of religious and moral teaching; and, like thousands of men and women before him, Mitchell could pasture there his imaginative, emotional, and ethical natures alike. And the Bible sufficed him throughout his life. When he turned elsewhere it was

to the serious daily newspapers of his time, or to the "Economist," or the publications of the Cobden Club. To this list of his later days the co-operative publications naturally must be added. At that time, with the ideals of the prophets in his soul and a close grip upon what was to him a perfect material means to their realisation, he could surpass Shakespeare's exiled duke and find poetry in balance sheets.

About 1850, Mitchell was affected by a movement of the new generation at Providence. An issue arose there over the appointment of a new minister. It ended in a secession, led from the Sunday School, and the founding of the present Milton Church. The spirit of the new movement was shown in what the "Rochdale Sentinel" described as "a splendid effort of architecture." With its ecclesiastical spire, rose windows, and flying buttresses, the Gothic building certainly marked a break-away from Puritan and Evangelical severity. Of the minister, too, the Rev. W. H. Parkinson, it is still remembered that he wore a gown. Yet at the opening in 1854 his text from the humanist words to David of the wise woman of Tekoa, showed his liberal quality. And, indeed, the new minister was a living force, taking part in politics, writing leaders for the local press, developing popular services, and ready in his preaching to find illustrations either in literature or in common objects like a pawnbroker's sign.

Secession never was a process that appealed to Mitchell, and though as a young man he went over with the new movement, he went reluctantly. At Milton Church, however, he found, spiritually, a permanent home. In a material sense, moreover, the Church and school were to become for him more of a

home than the house he slept in. Meanwhile, little as the ecclesiastical note of the buildings accorded with his simple beliefs, it is probable that he gained much in mind and spirit from this vigorous religious development. From 1854 he taught in the Milton Sunday School, where afterwards he was superintendent until his death in 1895. At one time, despite the "chaff" which never ruffled his good humour, this Benedick who found no Beatrice to alter his mind, boldly taught a class of young women.

John Mitchell had now passed into manhood, presenting at this time a tall and energetic figure, large-limbed, with a fine head scantily covered with fair hair, full blue eyes, a fresh complexion, and equable, good-humoured, mobile lips. Already he was clean-shaven, presenting an appearance comparatively rare amongst the bearded Victorian working men. He was twenty-four when on the 7th of February, 1853, he joined the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers' Society. Co-operation, as we have seen, was not a new thing to him. But when the new co-operative movement began he was only sixteen and, moreover, completely immersed in the individual struggle with ignorance and poverty. Now he was to unite his efforts with those of others. Already the young men at Providence frequently had discussed the new society which was making such a stir in the town. Mitchell knew many of the first Pioneers and, there is little doubt, understood and felt with them. At the store, too, a newsroom and library had grown up; and in Toad Lane this room was not so many yards from Hope Street. Again, Mitchell had found a friend, a young married man, Abraham Howard. Already co-workers in other movements, in joining the society Mitchell became a fellow co-operator

with his friend. All these things brought him into the co-operative movement.

Yet for two or three years the young Mitchell took no active part. He lived the life we have seen at Hope Street until, in 1855, it was ended by a heavy blow. In the summer of that year, on the 11th of June, his mother died, and with her death he lost one who had been mother and father and friend. A generation earlier she had set herself to save her boy from the evil she had found in the world and in mankind. She had worked, stinted, watched, struggled all for him. And she had lived to see, amidst weaknesses, misfortune and frustrate hopes in neighbours around her, something almost miraculous. Her branded child of the slums out of that mud had grown tall and erect like a tree. He had become an active, earnest, kind soul, a young man already prospering and honoured in the world. He had not been spoiled by his dawning success. Still true to her teaching, he sought less his own than the common good of many.

Except that John Mitchell's mother thus laboured to bring good out of evil we know scarcely anything of her. Three generations have arisen since she died. The people who "saw her plain," and "stopped and spoke," have all vanished, and there are no records. But we can surmise that she died content.

John Mitchell remained. He was always a man who felt deeply. Twenty years later he praised his fellow co-operator and adversary within the movement, Tom Hughes, because of the latter's strength of feeling. Mitchell did not care, as he said, for men who could not feel strongly; for abundant feelings went with good hearts and sound minds. But a capacity for emotion means suffering as well as joy. "Where there is most

power of feeling," said Leonardo da Vinci, "there of martyrs is the greatest martyr." And how deep those feelings were in the mother's son may be guessed from an incident of later days. Perhaps thirty years after her death the co-operator attended a meeting of the Rochdale Pioneers Educational Committee which had to caution certain boys for writing obscene words on papers in a newsroom.

"What would your mother have said to you if you'd done that?" was the sudden, sly question of the chairman to Mitchell.

The words touched a spring; and an observing friend across the table saw his colleague almost overcome. Then Mitchell's face twitched, and his throat cleared, as he mastered himself; but he said nothing.

Yet in his sorrow Mitchell found companionship. His friend, Abraham Howard, at about the same time, lost his young wife. Two griefs do not make a joy; but sorrows shared become lighter. Doubly drawn towards his friend, Mitchell transferred to Howard much of his affectionateness. "He looked upon him as an elder brother, whom he trusted," writes Sir William Maxwell, "and I saw that feeling in word and deed when I was with them." After a couple of years his friend re-married, and John Mitchell then went to lodge with the Howards, and in doing so found a second home.

To its credit the Rochdale Society, about 1856, found employment for Hungarian exiles, followers of Kossuth, and Mitchell's name is to be seen in the Rochdale press of the day as speaking with Greenwood and Cooper at a co-operative meeting in their honour. Thus he appears at this time associated with leaders of the Pioneers as a foremost member. It was naturally

felt that such a man ought to be secured for the Pioneers' committee, and early in January, 1857, he was elected to office. The paid (but badly paid) full-time post then held in the society by William Cooper was that of cashier. Mitchell became the still less-rewarded spare-time secretary to the committee. He took this lion's share of the work for two years. It was a time when the membership was doubling and trebling every few years and when new branches and departments were opening. Moreover, on the same January evening he was appointed to the Library Committee, and there was plenty of work in that direction, too. In 1853, the occasional grants to education had given place to a regular grant of $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of profits. The library grew with this money; the newsroom was opened daily; and even on Sundays there were adult classes in this room for teaching writing and English, arithmetic and mathematics, to old and young men. It is clear that John Mitchell's zeal to employ all his great energies for the good of others had full scope before 1860.

CHAPTER III

BUSINESS FOR OTHERS

THAT J. T. W. MITCHELL was the father of the idea of consumers' co-operation, is a view supported by the authority of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb. "As far as we know," they have told the writer, "Mitchell is to be credited with the idea; he is the earliest to whom the consumers' idea can be traced." Knowing, as we do, by what contrary and devious roads great ideas are reached, it is not so surprising that Mitchell's most prominent early co-operative activities were in another direction. In 1854 he was working with the Pioneers' leaders to promote the Rochdale Co-operative Manufacturing Society. The story of that society, and of the cotton mill these co-operators built on the plot of land westward of the town called "Mitchell Hey," is instructive. In their store the Pioneers, in essence, had taken the whole world into partnership. But when they followed the productive ideal, and began to use in their own Lancashire cotton trade the capital that the store had accumulated, they found themselves part of the capitalist system, and not joined in one organisation with their customers. And if they were to go on, and enter that promised land of production, they had to accept the position. So they formed a society, not to buy or produce for their own use but to sell in competition with others in the open markets.

Thus in the strict sense they ceased to be co-operative. But that they had so ceased did not occur to them ; for under rules revised by E. V. Neale they intended to share profits with labour.

From 1856 to 1860, with a rugged steadfastness not less praiseworthy because exerted by them as small capitalists, they worked toward success, and they divided profits with the workers. At first (after meeting interest and depreciation) the division was half and half. Then this simple reckoning was altered to one of paying out the surplus in an equal ratio of pence for every sovereign of capital invested or wages paid. The reasons given for this payment were somewhat contradictory. It was passionately defended as due to the worker in his own right, in discharge of the co-operative obligation to regard him as a partner and not a hireling. At the same time it was urged as a shrewd means of obtaining more profitable workers.

Between these two contrary views (both championed by Holyoake) of the bonus being a gift yet not a gift, perplexity and dissatisfaction arose. The shares were widely held. There was a total of about 1,400 shareholders and only 300 workers. Few of these workers were shareholders, the share list having been closed ; and in any case the workers received the bonus whether members or not. To the shareholders, themselves nearly all poorly-paid wage-earners, it seemed that they were giving something for nothing. And after a first attempt to alter the rule in 1860, the bonus was finally revised out of existence by a three-to-one majority in March, 1862.

Besides having been one of the founders of the society, Mitchell was a member of the committee, both in 1860 and 1862. And in Holyoake's " History of

the Rochdale Pioneers," Mitchell is reproached in this connection for "unfaithfulness" to profit-sharing principles. The mill's own records (it is still successfully carried on under the old co-operative name, though now registered under the Companies' Act) go back only to 1867; but from "The Co-operator" of 1862 it seems possible that the leader from Milton Church may have been one of the "religious persons" who advocated the abolition. One speaker is reported in "The Co-operator" as having been determined to give the practice a trial and having become convinced in practice that it was a source of dissension and disunity which should be abolished. This sounds rather like the voice of Mitchell, especially as from another source it is stated that Mitchell was against the bonus, his opinion being that with fair wages workpeople interested in the mill could acquire shares and so participate in any profits.

Though it abolished "Participation," the manufacturing society proved its working-class sympathies during the cotton famine by providing employment when other mills were closed, and incurring losses in so doing. This was a benefit worth many times the payment of about 33s. 4d. a year which William Cooper, in defending the bonus, took as typical of its bounty. Either during this period of the famine, or a little later, Mitchell became chairman of the committee; and from that time onward his bold, flowing signature appeared below the minutes regularly until July 30th, 1870. Then he seems to have failed to secure re-election to the committee. By that time, however, he was beginning to find, outside Rochdale, a larger—and a more co-operative—field.

Meanwhile, the scene of our story must remain in

Rochdale. In 1867 the chairman of Mitchell Hey had left the wool warehouse, where he was manager, to enter into business for himself. Man of affairs though he was, his motive in launching his own venture was not the usual one. Work for other people was demanding more and more of his time, and he wanted to be free to give it. To gain this freedom he set up for himself. In this business he sold cotton cloth woven at the Mitchell Hey mills. Thus committee work and daily work were brought together, and, in the same way, when Mitchell travelled to sell his goods and establish connections, he travelled also, without payment or charge, for religious, co-operative, temperance, and political causes. Often it must have been a huge relief for puzzled committees and officials, in those days of slender funds, to hear Mitchell remark that business would take him to a distant town, and that while there he could, at no cost, represent the common cause.

Similarly, Mitchell combined his place of business with his home. Only four years after his happy establishment with the Howards he had suffered a lodger's fate. Abraham Howard was appointed to a post in Liverpool and, perforce, removed to Merseyside. Mitchell had to seek another habitation. His friends looked to the rising leader to make a "proper" home, amidst the solid domestic comfort that Rochdale appreciated. Mitchell was at least half-engaged to an Elizabeth Wynn, whom, it is said, his mother had wished him to marry. But, as we shall hear again later, he did not marry. As Thoreau whimsically wished to do, the co-operator had disappointed his friends by taking a house adjoining the wool warehouse—this was in 1861—and installing a pair of caretakers, man and wife.

When he commenced his own business he had removed from this house to John Street, a short street of mills and better-class cottages tilted up and down hill from the main Yorkshire Street to the valley, near Milton Church. Radical though he was in ideas, in his personal life Mitchell rarely sought any change. It was the incorporation of his former home with the wool warehouse beside it that drove him to John Street. Arrived in John Street, with the same caretakers in charge, he used this house—number 15—as his own warehouse, according to the custom of the merchants of old days, who had lived and flourished on “The Mount.” Then his male caretaker died, and, some time later, the widow married again. She went away, and Mitchell was left alone. “From this time,” wrote Maxwell, in his Memoir of 1896, “he lived absolutely by himself, and many who have been stirred by his eloquence and warmed by his bright presence will now think sadly of him returning to such a home—no one to welcome him after his long and thankless journey for the good of others. And yet in that dark and sullen abode lived one of the brightest and happiest men on earth.”

Separated from his oldest friend, Mitchell had a spare bedroom fitted up at John Street in which Abraham Howard could spend a night whenever in Rochdale. But, says Maxwell, “a visit to his house showed distinctly that if he provided liberally for his friend he had no thought for himself. His own bedroom was furnished with some of the old furniture his mother had when he was a boy, humble in the extreme.” The five-roomed house in John Street was less a home than a sleeping place, a study and a cell where the busy man could read his Bible in peace.

“There was scarcely a chair to sit on for books and papers,” says one who visited him there. “The table was full o’ papers and you mustn’t touch nothing,” is the recollection of Mr. Butterworth’s former house-keeper. “One room was just letters.” Number 13, next door, is a three-roomed cottage, and this little house Mitchell also tenanted, having a door through from the one to the other.

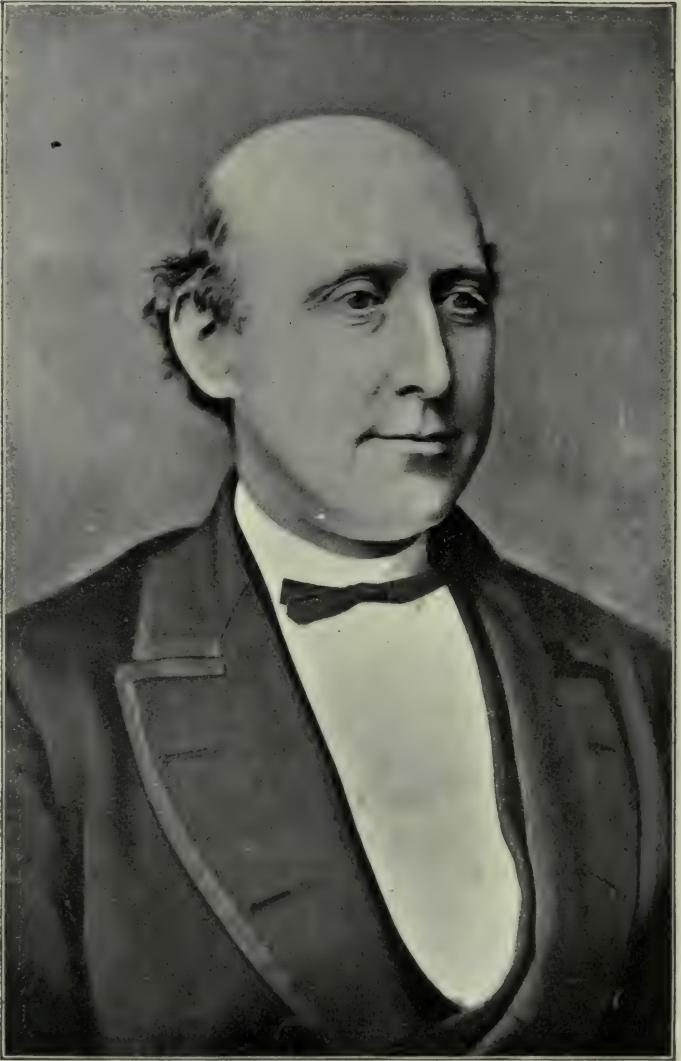
After his last caretaker married, though alone in the house, Mitchell found in a neighbour a devoted servant. The story of the attachment is such as might have come from *Les Misérables*. This neighbour was one Thomas Butterworth. About 1872 Butterworth was caretaker at one of the newsrooms of the Pioneers’ Society. The newsroom was separated from the branch storeroom only by a matchboard partition, and this storeroom, in turn, communicated with the shop. By unscrewing certain boards the caretaker of the newsroom found a way through. Money began to be missed. The branch manager reported the losses, and a watch was set. Butterworth was caught, prosecuted, and sentenced to eighteen months’ imprisonment.

The ex-caretaker was released to find every face turned against one who, through robbing the store, had robbed his fellow-workers. But Mitchell saw only a man broken by suffering and despair. Generously he held out his hand. Perhaps he understood what it meant to be under a stigma ; perhaps it was that fidelity of his to anyone whom he had liked ; or perhaps it was just human goodwill and faith in goodwill. At any rate, heedless of any remark upon a co-operative leader seeming to be the friend of a convicted thief, Mitchell stretched out a helping hand that was eagerly grasped. To the trust of a man respected as Mitchell



J. T. W. MITCHELL AS A YOUNG MAN.

From a Photograph lent by Sir W. Maxwell.



J. T. W. MITCHELL AT ABOUT THE AGE OF 40.

was—a man standing high at Toad Lane and Milton Church—Butterworth's whole nature responded. He became the co-operator's devoted servant. Later on the ex-employee inherited property and developed into Mitchell's landlord, himself living a few doors lower down John Street, but the new status made little difference. Butterworth's servant was Mitchell's servant at need, and Butterworth himself was as ready as any valet. The attachment grew into a personal friendship that increased with the years, Mitchell confiding in Butterworth absolutely. Neighbours said that if Mitchell died Butterworth would soon follow him; and this prophecy was remarkably fulfilled.

Another of Mitchell's connections with the Pioneers' Society was through the science, art, and technical classes instituted by the co-operators in 1872. "The smallest society in the country," he said (Plymouth, 1886), "could afford the small sum of money necessary for such classes." In Rochdale the good work grew until taken over by the Rochdale Corporation and incorporated in the present Municipal Technical School. Mitchell was secretary. Though he retired in 1873, he accepted the office again in 1881 and kept it until his death. He was no secretary born, disliking secretarial details. But he patiently did the work, helped occasionally by Mr. Barnish, then the society's librarian. Another witness still living, Mr. Fountain, was intimately associated with Mitchell in the later days of these classes. Mr. Fountain remembers how on one occasion a chairman of the committee in charge of the classes insisted upon appropriating an extra fee, due to those who sat amongst the students at examinations to ensure fair working. "It's mine by right," said the chairman in question, when appealed to

in the interests of a poorer man, "and I'm going to have it."

"Mitchell screwed up his shoulders but said nothing," Already he had declined the paid appointment. But during the examination he dropped into the room. The sitting lasted four hours, and the overlooking was rather tedious. To one and another Mitchell said, "If you like to go and stretch your legs a bit, I'll look on."

At other times also the secretary of the classes did the same. A member of the committee who had thus been relieved for a couple of hours demanded that Mitchell should share the half-guinea fee. "I never shall," replied Mitchell; and at no time did he take any fee, though his interest in the classes and the students was of the keenest.

Through the secretaryship, Mitchell came into touch with many of the teachers. Occasionally, assuming that the organiser would have tickets to give, a teacher would ask for a seat at some one or other of the society's teas and entertainments. The request was rarely or never refused; but payment to the society for the ticket was made out of Mitchell's own private pocket.

He gave readily at his own expense but he would not replenish at the cost of others. When he was sent as delegate to Manchester or elsewhere it was often open to him to draw expenses on two or three different accounts; but if one journey had been made to serve three purposes only one journey was charged for. It was in this spirit that all J. T. W. Mitchell's co-operative and other public work in Rochdale was done.

CHAPTER IV

LEADER AND CHAIRMAN

UNTIL he was 40 years of age Mitchell belonged almost entirely to Rochdale, despite his occasional journeys; and in Rochdale one must seek for the few public evidences of his existence. But the year 1869 marked a new period. On the Whit-Monday of that year (May 31st) the first of the present series of Co-operative Congresses was convened in the theatre of the Society of Arts in London; and "John J. W. Mitchell" (as his name appeared) was officially listed as delegate from the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers' Society.

The Co-operative Wholesale Society of those days held its meetings in its back-street warehouse, the delegates finding rough seats on boards laid across barrels. But the first co-operative congress, assembling in the West End, was almost a society function. An Earl of Litchfield was there; a Comte de Paris looked in; Sir Louis Mallet and Henry Fawcett, M.P., attended; Florence Nightingale and John Stuart Mill sent benedictions. Organically, nevertheless, this was the more primitive gathering. It included private employers calling their firms "industrial partnerships," and trade unionists present in the interest of trade unionism; and odds and ends like the "Radical Newspaper Company" of Birmingham. Amongst the miscellany of 57 delegates a minority of

about 26 represented the co-operative store movement.

The debates extended over four days, and Mitchell took a modest part in all. When Capital and Labour discussed production, Mitchell, alone amongst a score of speakers, reminded the Congress of the consumer. The success of the store, he pointed out, was due to both custom and capital being at hand. In commencing with production it was different. "Even if they managed to get the capital they had the customer to seek." Yet the practical-minded delegate from Rochdale was also idealistic. He saw no insuperable difficulty in establishing model co-operative villages "provided we begin low enough and proceed by natural growth." And he was confident that with due caution co-operative banking could also be managed.

Six months later, on the 20th of November, 1869, the C.W.S. recorded that the nominee of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, J. T. W. Mitchell, third with 78 votes on a list of six elected candidates, had been placed on the C.W.S. directorate "for the ensuing year." A fortnight later the new member was appointed to the finance committee. Through the C.W.S. and the Co-operative Union the Rochdale representative thus had come fully into the national co-operative movement.

Though not recorded as present at the next Co-operative Congress, Mitchell attended again at Birmingham in 1871, and suggested—and in this way originated—the present district conferences of the Co-operative Union. District and county conferences, he declared, would lead to an increase of mutual confidence. He had now to speak for the C.W.S. board also, defending that body against a charge of neglecting

to open boot and drapery departments ; and he won the respect of the delegates, as reported at the time by Holyoake, for his good sense in resisting temptation and declining to pursue an irrelevant local issue. At the same Congress, too, he spoke in favour of a co-operative newspaper, possibly to be called "The Citizen"—"a delightful name," he said, "for we are all citizens of a great and free country which we hope by co-operative enterprise to make brighter and better than it has ever been in times past."

As we shall see, Mitchell continued to attend the Congresses, being present at every one until his death. But in these critical years from 1870 onwards the weight of a moral demand was upon him to translate ideals into practice in the C.W.S. Boardroom at Balloon Street, Manchester. The C.W.S. in 1870 was no more than six years old. Developments were upon it which worried and frightened some of the leaders. Branches were wanted far away from the co-operative homeland round Manchester. Risky businesses like that of selling draperies had to be faced. Manufacturing was talked of, and banking. All these things meant launching into seas as unknown as the Caribbean to Columbus. Committee-men wanting security and a quiet life drew back. Mitchell, by the evidence of C.W.S. minutes and by common consent, led on. He it was who proposed that the C.W.S. should manufacture boots and shoes ; his was the experience drawn upon for starting the drapery business ; he was at London with Hughes (M.P.), Morrison, Holyoake, Ludlow, and Hodgson Pratt to discuss with them a C.W.S. London branch ; he watched, defended, and developed every C.W.S. opportunity toward banking.

In one way his spirit of energy and confidence was helped by the times. A cycle of good trade, beginning about 1869, became a "boom" under the influence of the Franco-German War. As wages and prices rose, both the courage and the dissatisfaction of working people increased. They wanted a bigger share in the benefits and control of industry, and these they felt they had the power to win. But if this ambitious spirit helped men like Mitchell it also harassed them. Profiteers were taking advantage of the times to get rich quickly, and even co-operators were carried away. Looking only at the diffusion of shares under co-operation, and seeing diffusion under the small capitalism of working-class joint-stock companies, they reasoned from one to the other and slid into company promotion.

Amidst this confusion of thought, a number of these speculative companies were admitted into membership of the C.W.S. In 1872 the C.W.S. had begun a Deposit and Loan department—in reality, banking under another name; for the law as it stood was read as forbidding banking to a society like the C.W.S., and, as Mitchell said in 1893, "ever since co-operation began we have done things illegally (*i.e.*, illegal things) and made them legal afterwards." It was the fate of this new-born department at once to encounter the dubious customers. The companies lodged their deeds with the C.W.S. in return for money, and came for more and more money as "slump" followed "boom." Large advances were made even when, in one case, a modest co-operative request had to be declined. The then chairman of the Wholesale Society was himself manager of a company not only selling to the C.W.S. but also asking for a loan of £30,000—in this instance not granted.

It must be admitted that to the extent of being a junior member of the committee Mitchell was party to these dealings, which, in a few years' time, were to bring losses of tens of thousands of pounds upon the young and still comparatively poor C.W.S. With his tolerant nature and willingness to learn from events, it is likely that Mitchell waited to be sure of his ground. But at the C.W.S. Quarterly Meeting of November 15th, 1873, it came out that in committee the position of the occupant of the chair had been challenged. No names were given; but "it was considered by a certain gentleman that he (the co-operative chairman and private manager) occupied a very false position as a member of the board." That the "certain gentleman" was Mitchell is at least probable; for, as the minutes show, the coming chairman was now the active spirit on the committee. It was he who was moving that voting on the committee be "open and not secret," and pressing for right methods in other matters, like that of separating the banking from trade accounts. Forty years later on it was remembered, by one present at a vexed meeting of the C.W.S., how Mitchell "rose like a lion," and how leadership seemed to belong to him afterwards. This vividly-remembered detail is in accord with the statements of others who knew those days—that it was Mitchell's work and leadership at this period which established the Wholesale Society for what it became.

The chairman of 1873 secured a vote of confidence, and though he retired a few months later it was to the accompaniment of an illuminated address and assurances that his name would go down to history, and that co-operators would have "some difficulty in finding an equally competent person to fill his place."

Yet it is not on record that the task of discovering a successor caused any hesitation or anxiety. At their next general meeting, on May 22nd, 1874, only six days after the vacancy, the C.W.S. Committee resolved "that Mr. J. T. W. Mitchell (already in the chair *pro tem.*) be president."

There was no room for doubt. It was urgent for the C.W.S. to have a captain on the bridge compact of honesty, courage, and will, who both knew the principles of co-operative navigation and how to apply them. Mitchell had all these qualifications. In addition he had the physical gifts of a commanding presence and sonorous voice—gifts without which few leaders can do much with democracy, which likes to be dominated as well as guided. That is to say, it likes, and naturally likes, to follow a leader who is transparently dominating for the common good; and there Mitchell took hold. "He was a born chairman," writes Mr. T. Goodwin, the present manager of the C.W.S. Bank, "gifted with eloquence, a fine presence, and a native tact."

"I have known him" (continues Mr. Goodwin) "by some happy remark or witticism or good-natured satire, followed by a practical suggestion, straighten out a meeting which seemed to be getting hopelessly tangled and irritated. He could instinctively feel the moment when to take a vote. Summing up a discussion in a few words, he would obtain a decision—of course, the decision desired by the chair—before the delegates fully realised what had happened. . . . The meeting would find itself laughing at how it had done exactly what the chairman wanted. In fact, the delegates seemed to enjoy the process, even when they did not altogether agree with the result. M. Coue's

auto-suggestion only mildly suggests the irresistible manner in which Mitchell at his best could pick up and carry a meeting with him. He never really lost this power, though there were times in his later years when he halted a little and was not so swift and sure in his judgment."

"At his best he was beyond reproach," wrote Mr. Ben Jones, in 1895, of Mitchell as a chairman; and in the same appreciation the then manager of the C.W.S. London Branch dwelt upon Mitchell's "good-humoured sallies, never without point," his "bonhomie," and his "extraordinary tact and delicacy of judgment."

There was steel under the velvet. "Sit down! Sit down!" the chairman would cry to delegates seeking to prolong a closed discussion; and they sat down. The meetings, an old observer has said, were more amenable a generation or so ago. "They wouldn't take it from him now." That may be so; yet there is a wide difference between autocratic rule and genuine leadership; and it was as a leader that the chairman prevailed.

Sometimes Mitchell failed to carry a meeting with him. On the question of employees' pensions, for example, he was too broad-minded or too far-seeing for the delegates. But usually he succeeded, aided most of all by the common knowledge that here was a man actually whole-hearted for the common good, and not secretly seeking any sectional, personal, or other undeclared object. And in the final years of the eighteen-seventies, when lame ducks were fluttering home, a strong leadership was sorely needed. Paper companies, land companies, collieries, had to be salvaged by the C.W.S. as mortgagees, just when the

Ouseburn and Industrial Bank failures were absorbing money and destroying confidence. The C.W.S. own new productive works demanded close attention, too; while the drapery departments were losing money. "The Wholesale Society," Mitchell confessed in 1881, "was in very great straits."

On the other hand, at every congress, conference, and C.W.S. quarterly meeting, the chairman had to contend with a misjudging idealism. The situation was almost tragic. Nearly all the disinterested, educated, high-minded ability of the co-operative movement, embodied in men like Hughes, Neale, Morrison, Holyoake, Sedley Taylor and others, was set upon courses which, for practical value, were dreams from beyond the ivory gate. They wanted to separate the C.W.S. Bank from the C.W.S., or at least so to alter things as to make the federation and its treasury virtually separate. They sought to divide production from distribution and bring the C.W.S. workshops more or less under the group control of the particular workers in each factory. And except for the unfailing sagacity of Dr. John Watts, the great educationalist who possibly influenced Mitchell's views, there seemed little on the other side except a dull, uninspiring common-sense, which by the idealists was dubbed "materialism" and damned.

Absorbed in practical work, it was Mitchell's fate to be ranked with the "materialists." But though he may have failed to get his idealism "over the foot-lights," in the real sense of taking every present step for the sake of a far-off goal, he was as idealistic as any of them. Thus, as he told different congresses, he wanted the C.W.S. Bank to become the co-operative bank for the whole country, utilising trade union and

all other capital. Trade unions he especially invited to bank with the C.W.S., saying that "as long as there are two classes in the community, capitalists and labourers, trade unions would be necessary." He wanted C.W.S. depôts in America with the long view of "uniting the purchasing power of American, Canadian, and British co-operators." At Leicester, in 1877, he looked forward to co-operative representation in the House of Commons, commenting on there being no such representation at the time, although co-operators were "taxed to pay for the government of the country." When the Congress of 1875 was tender toward joint-stock companies, Mitchell, while careful not to condemn companies of a public utility or philanthropic kind, and ready to admit that commercial companies, "though not altogether right," still "divided the profits of trade amongst a greater number of people than before," nevertheless "understood co-operation to mean that the profits of trade should go to all the people."

"The best means," he added at this Congress, "originally devised for carrying this principle out, was the distribution of profits upon purchases." For, as he told a public meeting during the 1879 Congress, the co-operative object was "to change the world," "to create a new state of things" wherein "none will have too much and none will have too little." Thus (Glasgow, 1876) they would "enable all to enjoy more fully this world of beauty and plenty." "Let them persevere (he told Leicester co-operators in 1877), and the time must come when all the trading and distribution in the country would be done in the interests of the whole people. Let them have confidence in themselves and each other, let them promote that

education which would drive away superstition and extinguish suspicion and jealousy, and they would have that condition of united interests no power could break." And this commonwealth was to be world-wide ; for as Mitchell continually spoke of no more war, and of treaties made in future by the peoples, so he now declared that the highest form of co-operation was that which bound nations together by mutual interest and sympathy.

In 1874 Mitchell was elected to the Central Board of the Co-operative Union, and in 1871 to the Board of the Co-operative Newspaper Society—being an original member of the directorate—and when the Congress of 1879 had suffered a surfeit of presidential addresses, and wanted a president for the day who would get to work without talking, they put Mitchell in the chair.

CHAPTER V

TRAVELS AND CONTENTIONS

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW has recalled a conference at which great captains of industry rose one after the other to declare solemnly that each owed his business success to following the golden rule. Simple at heart though he was, Mitchell was not simple in any comic sense. He found himself obliged to choose. Either he could work for others or for himself. After the London agent of his private business failed, some time during the eighteen-seventies, more and more he chose the former course. As Sir William Maxwell has recorded, "he allowed his business quietly to slip away from him." His secular time and energy went to the co-operative movement, in which the Wholesale Society came first. The latter was "the principal object of his existence," said the "Co-operative News," in recounting his life; and the same authority remarked that, where other people might ask "how will this affect me?" the question that Mitchell put to himself was, "how will this affect the Wholesale?"

Yet his chairmanship provided him with nothing beyond a livelihood. He received no more than other members of the committee, and even after 1885, when the directors were promoted to 7s. 6d. a meeting and second-class railway fares, the chairman's income from the society, including travelling allowances,

could not have exceeded £150 a year. The members of the C.W.S. ruled that chairmen should not receive more than the ordinary committee payment; and considering that on one occasion a member of the committee in a week with few meetings went home with no more than 16s. for his full-time work, the chairman's rewards of office may have averaged less. But careful to the last farthing with others' money, Mitchell was indifferent about his own. The cashier would reckon the fees and fares due to him, and Mitchell would accept the sum always without check or question. On one occasion, when the cashier overpaid him, and Mitchell innocently endorsed the error, this indifference seemed a fault.

In 1884, with Sir William—then Mr.—Maxwell, Mr. Shotton, and other members of a joint English and Scottish deputation of six, the C.W.S. chairman visited America for the Society, sailing on April 3rd, in the "Britannic." The faithful Thomas Butterworth saw him off at Liverpool; and for a little while all went well, Mitchell rapidly making friends with passengers of both sexes. But it was to be a stormy passage; and it has been rather unkindly recorded that, after this too sanguine beginning, not until April 8th did Mitchell make his first appearance at table. Even then a new gale, increasing to a "perfect tempest," kept everybody below until the 11th. But, arrived in the United States, the chairman permitted himself no compensation for his sufferings. "We tried to get him out once or twice in New York to see the sights," writes Mr. Shotton in a letter, "but, no! that was not his business."

The deputation was there to visit meat packers chiefly; and besides making contracts they inquired

closely into wages and working conditions. The Chicago Exchange shocked them: they saw buyers more like madmen than merchants . . . screaming and yelling, a den of bulls and bears." Mitchell had provided himself with a bag specially made to hold copies of C.W.S. balance sheets, and it gave him great satisfaction to present one to the President of the United States. In Canada a most enthusiastic welcome awaited the party at Toronto. Co-operators there met them with carriages, gave them dinner, kept them busy addressing an enormous public meeting until midnight, talked to them until 3 a.m., and then finally let them go to bed and snatch a few hours before leaving Toronto at eight in the morning. Throughout the busy trip the chairman's Bible was still more dear to him than the bag of balance sheets, and every journey was planned to leave him an undisturbed Sunday for visiting churches and Sunday schools.

For the federation of which he was president this period of the eighteen-eighties was one of strength renewed after the trials of the 'seventies. In the early autumn of 1884 the society celebrated its "coming-of-age." It was extending to Bristol, expanding in London, launching steamships on the East Coast, buying fruit in Greece, entering into fresh manufactures at home. In the midst of these activities Mitchell spoke at the opening, in 1887 (November 2nd), of the Leman Street offices and warehouses in London. His duties and engagements, he said, left him little time for preparing any formal address; and his characteristically vigorous speech was apparently discursive, yet it was held together by a main idea. "Power," he said, "followed the possession of capital." Through co-operative trade the people could acquire

capital, property, and power. They could influence relationships with other countries, and require diplomats to pursue policies of peace. Looking out at London, whose workers were agitated by the movements shortly to culminate in the prohibited Trafalgar meeting of "Bloody Sunday," he advised his hearers to get water, gas, and other public services into public hands, to work for equalised rates between rich districts and poor, and to defeat vested interests. "Co-operators should fight for the general good and insist on improved government for London."

In this speech Mitchell said he "would not trench on politics, for co-operators belonged to no party or sect," but here, as at many other times, the C.W.S. chairman looked over the boundary hedge, and talked of work to be done beyond the hedge, as if only waiting for the day when the movement would break through.

While London strove toward a new era under the London County Council, commercial Manchester was fighting for the Manchester Ship Canal, and this large project equally appealed to Mitchell's enthusiasm. As a "stalwart champion" of the canal he figures in the official history by Sir Bosdin Leech of the promotion and construction. In 1885 he gave evidence before a House of Lords committee. His opening statement (together with "his quaint appearance, loud voice, and bluff manners") caused the chairman of the committee to ask in amazement, "what are the objects of your society?" For reply, we are told, Mitchell dived into a black bag, produced a large book, stalked across the room, and astonished the chairman by placing the volume in his hands. In stentorian tones he counselled the chairman to read; he would then know a great deal about the society. "The com-



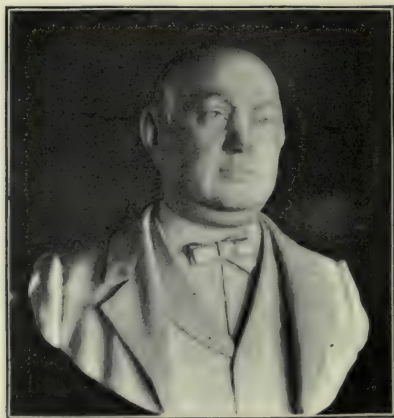
NO. 15, JOHN STREET, ROCHDALE, WHERE J. T. W. MITCHELL
LIVED FOR MANY YEARS AND WHERE HE DIED.

THE NEXT HOUSE WITH THE SINGLE WINDOW IN JOHN STREET IS NO. 13, WHICH
MITCHELL USED AT FIRST AS A WAREHOUSE AND AFTERWARDS AS A STUDY.

Photo: C.W.S.



THE MITCHELL MEMORIAL HALL, AT THE C.W.S. HEADQUARTERS,
MANCHESTER.



THE BUST OF J. T. W. MITCHELL IN THE MEMORIAL HALL.

mittee," says the historian, "enjoyed the episode, concluding that Mitchell was a typical Lancashire man, who had little fear of dignitaries"; furthermore, they now gave him "marked attention."

Supported by his fellow-directors and their constituents, Mitchell pledged the Wholesale Society to the project, and the C.W.S. lent £20,000, while writing off the investment as one not likely to bear interest. Mitchell lived both to see ocean-going vessels at Manchester and to be the first man to land merchandise at the new port. The C.W.S. ss. "Pioneer" held the post of honour amongst all merchant vessels at the opening; and it was Mitchell who wheeled off the first case from her cargo of sugar.

As if the many-sided activities of the national co-operative trading federation were not enough to occupy him, Mitchell during all these years had a special task of his own. It replaced his private business, with the important difference of being—in the words of a biographer in the "Co-operative News"—"an anxious work for which he did not receive a penny." Amongst the ventures which came to wreck in 1878 was the Lancashire and Yorkshire Productive Society, which had flannel mills at Littleborough, near Rochdale. Of this society, in November, 1878, Mitchell was appointed liquidator. The shares were then worth nothing, for the money on loan, which had preference, did not seem to be worth more than 10s. in the £. It looked like a case of winding-up; but the old Rochdale flannel warehouseman felt himself in his element, and he decided to hold on. And from 1878 until his death in 1895 he stuck to this unconventional liquidating until every loan was paid off with interest, and the previously worthless scrip of the society shareholders was con-

verted into sound assets. He began by obtaining an overdraft from the C.W.S. Bank, and for this apparent recklessness he had to answer to critics made properly careful by the previous losses. Had this "liquidation" failed, it would have been very awkward for him; but he did not mean it to fail. And this anxiety and risk he not only accepted without pay but without receiving anything for expenses, until at length a sum of £20 was specially voted to him for the purpose. But even this money he promptly reinvested in the business, from which eventually it was paid over, with interest, to the executors of his will.

"Mitchell was a good judge of wool," says Mr. Fountain, of Rochdale, who did business with him in those days, "and he took a pride in making flannel that would do somebody some good." About half-past seven of a morning he would leave John Street to go by steam car to Littleborough, and any agent with wool to sell had to be early at the mill and get his samples out while Mitchell opened his letters, for C.W.S. business at Manchester wanted attention and there was no time to waste. By half-past nine the "liquidator" was off again. The chief clerk at the mill, who also remembers these details, also recalls how at Christmas time a person continually brought into touch with Mitchell by his duties in Littleborough begged a small present of flannel. The "liquidator" had eight yards cut for the gift; but Mitchell added to the clerk, "tell me what it is and I'll pay you, and you can make me a receipt." And pay he did, out of his own pocket, as was his practice, for "he would not take a yard out without paying for it." And this was the man but for whom, writes Mr. Greenwood, of Birkenhead, who was manager under J. T. W. Mitchell,

there would not have been any C.W.S. flannel and blanket works to-day—the mills having been bought by the federation as a prospering business after Mitchell's death.

Disinclined to controversy, preferring always to affirm and act in a world large enough for all, Mitchell still was compelled to labour amidst opposition. As we have seen, the "intellectuals" of the co-operative movement welcomed and aided C.W.S. warehousing and selling while opposing vehemently C.W.S. banking and manufacturing. "The Wholesale Society," said Holyoake (Glasgow Congress, 1890), had "neither mission nor capacity" for production. Hughes, Holyoake, Neale, and others all demanded that the Wholesale Society should be simply an agency for self-governing workshops, whose independence would be only "qualified" (in Neale's words) "by federal union with consumers." Even while confessing that consumers' societies were "inexhaustible sources of the profit that is the mother of capital," E. V. Neale, in the last appeal that prefaced the Congress report of 1891, still pleaded for courses "by which this capital may be converted into the patrimony of the workers."

Characteristically, Mitchell made no objection to these opinions for argument's sake. He was at first fully content that the C.W.S. should exercise its liberty to develop, and prove by results whether or not it had the capacity to employ its members' capital in making things for its members' use. Active dissent was only wrung from him after the strike of 1886 at the C.W.S. Leicester boot factory. The strike itself was a small matter. It arose over the sending of work from an over-crowded factory into the country at town rates less cartage, and it ended three days after the

Wholesale committee met the workers. But in 1886 a strike of co-operative employees was almost—though not quite—unprecedented. In 1887 the famous old Rugbeian, Tom Hughes, opened the Congress Exhibition at Carlisle by speaking of the strike as “deeply humiliating,” and denouncing C.W.S. production as “contrary to the most vital of our principles,” and having the “sole end of dividend-hunting.” In the evening of the same day Professor Sedley Taylor followed by declaring that the C.W.S. system was that of “ordinary private enterprise” and “could not be called co-operative.” And during the subsequent Congress debate Holyoake, “bowing his head in shame and humiliation” as he surveyed the connection of Mitchell (“one of the most remarkable men in this movement”) with so desperate a state of affairs, lamented “the disastrous day” when the Wholesale Society went to Leicester.

Mitchell permitted himself one reply. This was on the Saturday evening, when Taylor following Hughes had proved a last straw. He reaffirmed his belief in a co-operation that was for all, and not for any less number; that blessed all alike, for “God made all men alike.” Then, with a cry from the heart, as one deeply wounded, he said, “The Wholesale had that evening been slandered.” “There was no higher form of co-operation,” he added; and then he said, “what we want to accomplish by co-operation in our co-operative works is absolute equality in the distribution of wealth, though that seems hardly possible.”

In other words, Mitchell evidently looked forward to co-operators, through the federal or C.W.S. system, employing everybody (“possessing all railways and canals,” besides finding employment for themselves)

at approximately equal pay, and distributing industrial surpluses to all, through their consumption, for "profit was made by the consumption of the people" (*i.e.*, through their payments for goods to be consumed), "and the consumers ought to have the profit."

Probably it was the bitterness of this controversy which produced that "more bellicose" spirit in these disputes noted by his friend Maxwell as replacing in later years the C.W.S. chairman's earlier sunny tolerance. Mitchell was no gay contender. If he took hard words he felt them, and they affected him. Hence at later congresses we find him retaliating. He protested against "the new system of competition" arising from the congress recognition of independent productive societies each in search of a market. He objected to a grant from "common funds" to enable productive societies which included "private interests" (*i.e.*, worker or private shareholder) to exhibit. And he asked whether he had come to a co-operative congress or not when Holyoake advocated production by large retail societies more or less in opposition to their general federation for supply. But in the main his good humour remained unimpaired. At Edinburgh in 1883 he spoke humorously of a Rochdale shopkeeper who, though "interested in the teetotal movement," had refused to shake hands with him (Mitchell) because he belonged to that "renegade lot," the co-operators. And with equal enjoyment, during the Dewsbury Congress of 1888, he told a Huddersfield audience how it was said that "co-operators were a selfish lot, who, if they went to chapel, sat in the free seats, and came out before the collection."

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN HIMSELF

DURING one of those congress battles through which Mitchell so unwillingly was compelled to join issue with fellow-co-operators, the chairman of the Wholesale Society complained of the unfair assumption that the system he advocated did not "make men." "He had felt somewhat keenly," he said in this connection, "though he had said little."

For the Rochdale leader it was a sufficient answer to say that the Wholesale Society was the backbone of co-operative store organisation, and that this body was all the time lifting men out of poverty and training them to work together on an ever-increasing scale. But in addition the chairman was contributing the force of personality, and so helping to make the C.W.S. not altogether ineffective in his opponents' sense of encouraging personal initiative and responsibility and rewarding personal achievement.

A present official of the society commenced work as a boy in the C.W.S. Bristol office, occupying, in his own words, "the humblest position the C.W.S. had to offer." The chairman came to Bristol, and the shy lad was brought to his notice. The latter now remembers how "the words of encouragement that Mr. Mitchell gave me at that time have always been a source of inspiration. The introduction was followed up by his kindly greetings on every occasion he visited

the depôt. With his usual cheery manner he would greet one after this manner, 'Well, my lad, how are you getting on now? Be sure that the co-operative movement offers the best opportunities for bright young lads. Do your duty, and a future is before you.' "

Another official recollects the chairman's personal fairness: how the latter once went out of his way to admit his own information on a point of business mistaken and the official's opinion right. Another remembers a piece of work being done, and a colleague of Mitchell's on the directorate wanting to know every detail of its progress since Mitchell had last made an inspection. At the next committee meeting the chairman would certainly enquire, and would only be satisfied by a real answer. Another recalls "a feeling in the air" under Mitchell's presidency, a feeling that the capable man would be helped, and the erring man as frankly criticised whatever his rank.

In the boardroom or out of it Mitchell was the same. Absolute punctuality, no smoking, no coarseness (diamonds were sometimes rough in those days), and complete attention to business he insisted on to the full limit of his power as the elected chairman of a democracy.

"This institution has a great future in front of it," he would tell his colleagues. "What you have to think of is what is best for the C.W.S. The C.W.S. must come first."

To each colleague he conceded a full opportunity. A new-comer to the boardroom put a searching question in committee.

"Tha' wants to know more than we know as have been here twenty year," scornfully interjected a senior member.

But the chairman intervened. "All right, Mr. Lander," he said. "Go on. Make your enquiries."

For the good manager Mitchell's rule was a free hand, with help and backing in any trouble; but with no weakness in grasping a nettle in any case of trust betrayed. Behind everybody was the encouragement of his own absolute devotion and absolute faith. When the C.W.S. sales were less than ten millions he prophesied twenty, and wished he could live to see it. Always he was confident for the future of the society as a manufacturer, and the actual development since his day has followed very much as he foresaw. Yet, with all his optimism, he was prudent. The ambition to develop and produce before the co-operative market has been organised and tested—an old seductive ambition—did not ensnare his judgment. The Irish developments of his time failed through political causes; and, apart from that, no step of Mitchell's time has had to be retraced. On the other hand, his policy of building up reserves (only superficially in contradiction to his enthusiasm for distributing wealth) has proved invaluable long after his death. To a newly-appointed official of a large retail society he said: "You are young for such an important position. Remember—depreciation and reserves, and what I said in my speech this afternoon, and try your best to carry it out." The words were both remembered and followed, to the benefit of the thousands in that society.

When he erred it was through excess and warmth of feeling, and through a narrowness of training that sometimes was too much even for a mind and spirit naturally large and tolerant. When Lord Monteaigle went to the Lincoln Congress of 1891 to gain friends

for the new co-operative movement of Irish peasant farmers, the Rochdale radical, in the face of the co-operative peer, protested against subscribing funds "to enable the Irish landlord to get a higher price for his land"; and this blunt attitude again showed itself a little later when Sir Horace Plunkett was dismissed from the C.W.S. boardroom.

These, as we can see, were unfortunate errors. And, apart from prejudices, Mitchell conceived strong personal likes and dislikes. An observer has noted how "at the mere sight of certain persons his whole face would cloud visibly." On the other hand, there was at least one colleague whose self-indulgent manners were far from being Mitchell's, yet who appealed to the chairman in some way that saved him from rebuke. If John Mitchell felt a dislike he felt it, and through feeling unwittingly did injustice. The same tenacity made him unwilling to turn against a man he had liked, and it is said that unworthy men thus found protection. Nevertheless, it would have been difficult for any mere ingratiating schemer to take advantage of the weakness. The native shrewdness that very well can go with simplicity of heart, remained as a barrier against wilful deception. And whenever he realised that feeling had led him too far, there was a willingness to admit and be just. He strove to control the tides of feeling. "At public meetings," says Mr. Wadsworth, of Rochdale, "I've seen him bite his lips to master himself; but he did master himself."

And whatever his dislike of an individual, charity was ever a greater motive. He was appealed to in Rochdale by Mr. John Fountain on behalf of one in need.

"No," he said; "I never cared for that man."

“ Ah,” came the reply, “ but he’s in a bad way ! ”

“ Is he ? ” exclaimed Mitchell, instantly touched. And five shillings were at once handed over.

“ Mr. Mitchell has wisely said ”—so Holyoake quoted him at Carlisle in 1887—“ that men may not do what you instruct them but will do what you request.” Although Mitchell could make himself feared, and sometimes seemed austere, his manners with employees as with colleagues usually were easy, homely, democratic. One has even met with a reference to a “ professional smile.” That ready smile, open and winning as a child’s, was more the outcome of a real inner grace. Of E. V. Neale, his fellow-worker and occasional antagonist, Mitchell said that “ he never knew a person who, when he had lost his own point, tried more to put the points of other people in the best possible form.” Mitchell’s appreciation of this fine unselfishness reflected a like quality in himself. In his day he was *the* man in the Wholesale Society ; yet (each in his place) he wanted and did his best to make every other man *the* man too. “ Co-operation,” he said (Gateshead, 1880) “ made the humblest occupation of as great importance and value as the highest.”

The case against captains of industry who encourage individuals is that they neglect the mass. The mass pay for the individuals as under trade union and collective rule individuals may be sacrificed to the mass. So far as man could Mitchell tried to compass both ends, his care for the thousands of C.W.S. employees collectively being well shown by his leadership in putting before the C.W.S. quarterly meetings of March, 1887, the committee’s scheme for the superannuation of old servants. Boldly he emphasized the

non-contributory character of the scheme, adding that the proposal "was not only benevolent but prudent." The subsequent discussion—or denunciation—showed how far ahead of his time he then was. Unsupported by any one of the dozen speakers, he had to bow to his constituents. But in so doing he reaffirmed his belief that the proposals remained worthy of "further consideration" and "ultimate adoption."

Devoted to Balloon Street as he was, one magnet unfailingly came into operation every week to draw him home to Rochdale. This was the Milton Church Sunday School. Whatever happened during the week, if it was physically possible the superintendent was there every Sunday to preside over the hundreds of scholars—there were six hundred due to attend. Sometimes a train from the south or west would turn him out into the Manchester streets at an early hour on Sunday morning. With the help of his good friend the C.W.S. watchman he would then make himself comfortable in the boardroom, until roused for the first train onward in the civilised part of the day. One way or another he would reach Rochdale in time for morning school.

Upon his characteristics in school every old teacher and pupil is agreed. As with adults, his powerful presence and voice commanded instant attention. "The discipline was perfect"—although when in the schoolroom he gave word to his flock to pass into the church, and the boys doing so before his eyes rather pardonably contrived to escape by going out through a church exit beyond his observation, the victory was to human nature. Yet he did not rule by fear. Though he was stern, "there was no need to be afraid." Tears were noticed upon his face when, on one occa-

sion, he had been driven to shake a particularly troublesome boy. He had "a wonderful patience," said Mr. Wadsworth. And besides great patience with the scholars he showed impartiality. "He was not like most fathers," remembered an old scholar; "he had no favourites. Boys and girls—they were all his children." Another former scholar declared he favoured the boys, at which his wife, who also had been a scholar, replied "no, he leaned to the girls." Almost secretly out of his own pocket he had children shod in winter or tattered girls clothed in white Whit-Sunday frocks, for "he spent money freely"; and "what he did to help no one knew." Yet he exerted himself even more in trying to find employment for the boys, and in giving them a start in working life. In this connection young and old came to him for testimonials; but he wouldn't testify to a character "unless he'd bottomed it."

While a professional man of independent position like E. V. Neale found his inspiration to help the producer in the thought of the comparatively hard lot and dull life of "hands" in the factories, it is not unlikely that Mitchell, the ex-factory hand, renewed his zeal for the consumer in thinking of the little ones whose mothers said they could not attend school because they had no boots.

The superintendent's address was always of a brevity welcome in a Sunday school; and his religious teaching, though less remembered than his personality and influence, has been described as "broad and original." He was not lukewarm. On the contrary, when his friend Maxwell's life was despaired of by the doctors (in 1892) he went out of his way to visit him and pray beside him "as only a true Christian

can pray." "His presence," says Sir William, "did me good, and I recovered." But in church "he let others teach." School play he enjoyed with the same zest as the work. It is still remembered, for example, how he gave up a co-operative excursion and travelled all night from Plymouth after a Whitsuntide Congress to be present at the annual Whit-Friday festival of the school. "He was one of ourselves," says Mr. Wadsworth; "ready to do anything wanted." "There's been no one to fill his place," added another old teacher after thirty years, "nobody like him."

During many years the engagement of the superintendent to Miss Elizabeth Wynn was a matter of natural interest to the teachers and older scholars at Milton School. The engagement, it is said, was entered into by Mitchell in earlier life partly under his mother's influence. Miss Wynn is reported to have been "a fine woman, something like Mr. Mitchell himself in appearance." She had the character, however, of being eccentric—"very odd." Mitchell was "very kind to her"; but somehow the engagement dragged on. When it passed into the "teens of years" it became a subject for sly jokes at the school, jests which the superintendent received in perfect good humour. He was too busy, it was said, to look after a matter like that. Others assumed that the delay came from the other side, and were sorry to see Mitchell kept waiting so long. But one evening Mitchell declared that the question was to be decided one way or another. He called upon Miss Wynn, and, whatever happened at the interview, afterwards "he bothered no more."

No one seems to have regretted the ending of this unhopeful engagement; but many well-meant

thoughts and remarks were directed against the superintendent's continued solitariness. It was inexplicable that a follower of the thrice-married Milton should choose so lonely a life. The church held to a home-like faith intertwined with domestic happiness. Its temperance workers probably would never have cared what or how much men drank had the latter been no better than bachelors; while the consumers' co-operative movement aimed first of all at turning the raw material of wages into the real final product, food, clothing, and comfort of body and mind in the home. Yet Mitchell, faithful leader in each sphere, had neither wife nor fireside guardian.

It would, of course, be foolish not to admit that he missed much which goes to the making of a full life. Nevertheless he kept his warmth of nature, and in spirit grew neither old nor crusty. When William Maxwell announced to his old friend his approaching second marriage, the latter confessed himself jealous of the lady; "for I shall see less of you and shall miss our friendly discussions, but," he continued, "I am glad and happy for your sake." And at the wedding at Formby on the 26th of February, 1894, only a year before his death, he took part both as best man and as the one to bestow the bride, "coming to Formby at some inconvenience." "At the wedding breakfast," writes Sir William Maxwell, "he was the life of the party, extolling the happiness of married life, until he was reminded that he knew nothing about the subject."

There was no case of sour grapes, or a fox without a tail. On the contrary, cheerfully content with the fullness of his activities, Mitchell probably envied none and could rejoice with all. And it may be that, going home to his quiet retreat, in plain Roch-

dale fashion, Mitchell rediscovered for himself the secret of St. Anthony and the generations of his followers—the mystic happiness, ever springing up afresh within, which may be felt by the man of devoted life who in uninterrupted seclusion every day renews his purpose and faith. Perhaps that was why Mitchell always came forth so cheerfully from the cloisters of John Street.

Be that as it may, certainly he kept one mark of the single-minded devotee, which is pure innocence and simplicity. It is remembered how in London a woman of the streets once was paid to accost the chairman by name, and how his simple yet courteous friendliness on hearing himself greeted quite defeated the mischievous intent. How, in Manchester, he was once riding outside an open tramcar with a social student, a lady who pulled out her cigarette case, and how he begged leave to retire inside the car, since he was “so well known” in Manchester and “had to be careful.” And how, in the drapery warehouse of the Scottish Wholesale, at Glasgow, he chose a sprig of milliner’s flowers to wear as a button-hole. “You could know his character in two minutes,” an old fellow-worshipper of his has said.

Man of the world and president of a huge business, and masterful in character as became a leader, yet still a child at heart, thus he came and went. And the teachers and scholars who on Sunday evenings at Rochdale met his tall figure hastening back to the railway station, with bag and travelling rug, bade good-night to one going out to his world of labour as religiously as any missionary monk of old.

CHAPTER VII

THE CONSUMERS' ADVOCATE

ABOUT the year 1890 the old co-operators came into touch with the new generation of socialists ; and congress records began to be sprinkled here and there with names made familiar since then through the labour movement. One such contact, both interesting and fruitful, was that between Miss Beatrice Potter, afterwards Mrs. Sidney Webb, and J. W. T. Mitchell. The investigation begun in London by Charles Booth had enlisted her in the social movement and then sent her out to discover what co-operation was doing to help the masses as consumers. She reached Manchester and established friendly relations with the leaders of the Co-operative Union, and still more with Mitchell and through him with the committee and officials of the Wholesale Society.

To the lively young student—a woman educated and widely travelled—the northern co-operators no doubt seemed a curious company. The first impression was of people rough cut. They ate heavy food and drank quantities of tea ; and they indulged in platitudes and tea-party perorations. Their leader was one of themselves. His northern speech, adapted to ruling large meetings, seemed slow and pompous, and apparently he was obsessed by his belief in the C.W.S. as solving all social problems. But it was clear that this man with the full good-tempered

mouth and the strong chin, this real democrat whose solemnity would melt into laughing bonhomie, was not self-seeking, and the organisation he championed most certainly represented a real method of social reconstruction.

Mitchell kept no diary. What he first thought of the young lady from London we do not know. But he welcomed enquiry, especially enquiry on the consumer's side. And finding a serious student, he took pains to exhibit the C.W.S. from within. To see the bachelor chairman entertaining a lady at Balloon Street was sufficient to excite badinage from the homely humorists about him; but the former teacher of a Rochdale young women's class was well used to this harmlessness. He attended to the serious business of the visit. Later on "The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain" appeared, and the value of his hospitality became apparent. In modern terms and with unusual insight, the book set forth a conception of co-operation similar to that which Mitchell constantly was labouring to convey.

Throughout these years this labour also was freely given through unstudied addresses delivered in every corner of the country, and illustrated with figures, from C.W.S. official sources of money gains through co-operation to the society represented by his hearers. Sometimes the labour was paid; sometimes not. Occasionally the speaker received neither fees nor fare, and went away the poorer in pocket. But to Mitchell that mattered nothing. He spoke because he was invited to speak; and if a poor society fifty miles from his nearest point of call gave the invitation because at a pinch the visit need cost nothing, probably Mitchell never suspected the flaw in the welcome.

In the year 1892, however, the movement brought its chief platform to his door, and invited him to honour it. He was offered the presidency of the Co-operative Congress, which met in that year at Rochdale. The great gathering still kept to the odd method of changing its president daily, to ensure that each had his day and ceased to be, but to the C.W.S. leader was given the special honour of the inaugural day. In his native town he found himself in a new place. The Town Hall being occupied by the Congress Exhibition, the Congress had been glad to find accommodation in the large Baillie Street Chapel, and Mitchell had to mount the pulpit. He proved a vigorous preacher.

Like many other speakers to the people, whether lay preachers, political orators, or social advocates, Mitchell had the habit of throwing off bunches of remarks without any particular order or design. The faith and purpose of the speech gave it cohesion, and neither speaker nor audience troubled to look for anything more. The Rochdale Congress address was rather of this kind; yet the practical perceptions expressed or implied in it possessed a unity of their own; while it was original as all fresh observation of life is original. On the previous day, the Whit-Sunday, without meaning to disparage the store, the minister at Milton Church (Rev. Hirst Hollowell) incautiously had urged co-operators to "do more than keep grocery stores." He had asked them to "apply the principle" in the workshops, and on the land, and in housing and education. Now Mitchell, with his actual experience, had not found co-operation a thing to be "applied" here and there. He had seen it as something organic—an instrument of different parts for attaining one

end. He felt the sermon as a challenge. Next day he said that some of his statements would not have been made "but for the sermon I heard last night," from one who was "a capital adviser on spiritual matters but not altogether reliable on co-operation."

So he told his hearers that co-operation began many years before 1844. For centuries the industrial classes had struggled against selfishness in control of "the legislative and other forces of the nation," this control using the masses "to sustain and strengthen that selfishness." As a ready illustration of this contention he touched on the site values created by the communities of Rochdale and Manchester, values belonging to all yet taken by "a section of the community." To end sectional aggrandisement a method of business was wanted based on unity of interest, and aiming at "the common good of all." A common interest was sought by the Rochdale co-operators of 1832, and unity of interest was aimed at by the Pioneers of 1844. They "did not start with capital or labour but with consumption." They started with the store, and, said Mitchell, "I say to all never despise the store."

The Congress President went on to defend consumption or use as the region in which the desired common interest was to be found. Use was the basis of all values. All charges (*i.e.*, material and wage costs, profits, rates, taxes, interest, as Mitchell made clear elsewhere) came back to be borne by the consumer, "and the humblest contribute most largely, in proportion to their means, to the luxury of the rich." This process (of every private and sectional interest taxing the public, on public consumption) should be reversed. "My desire is that the profits of

all trade, all industry, all commerce, all importation, all banking and money dealing, should fall back again into the hands of the whole people." (Or, as he said elsewhere, "Let those who pay the profits get them back.")

Ahead of his time in perceiving (though, perhaps, crudely expressing) a danger which the "boom" of the great war made clearer, Mitchell continued: "The plan of some capitalists is to get Labour united in order to crush the poor consumer. I want as much as anyone to see the elevation of Labour. I think Labour ought to be elevated. But how? . . . simply by making the interests of our common humanity equal all round."

If the last sentence was obscure we can tell from other declarations what Mitchell was driving at.

Elsewhere in this address the president warned co-operators against selfishness corrupting the movement from within, that is to say, against individual interests coming in to divert the aim from that of the good of "the entire body politic"—a favourite phrase in his latter years. And with a naturally characteristic but undiplomatic directness he attacked men in the movement who received bribes and presents from private firms, saying bluntly, "There is a gentleman in this room who for several years has received a cheque, and has passed it through his cash account."

A member for so many years of the committee of the Co-operative Newspaper Society—now the National Co-operative Publishing Society—Mitchell pointed to the power of the press "in this and every country," a power neglectful of co-operation. Co-operators and trade unionists were alike in having few papers and very little press influence. To be of

“greater influence in the nation and the world,” co-operators would “have to control the press more largely, and it must be of our own colour.” That the reference to the world was designed was proved by his reply to the vote of thanks later, when he spoke of a society in Rangoon trading with the C.W.S., and on this Burmese peg hung some remarks friendly to India.

Later in the same year (1892) the president's social creed came under examination by the Royal Commission on Labour, a government mouse that had come out to appease a mountain in travail. Mitchell was the first of four witnesses before the commission, the second being his old friend William Maxwell. All were appointed by the Co-operative Union. The evidence put in had been very carefully prepared, and included a fairly full history of co-operation right back to the dim years before Rochdale. This document was duly printed and circulated by the government with the report, no doubt to the great annoyance of the private traders, represented by Mr. Walker. This same gentleman attended later, to rebut the co-operators' statements, and innocently to remark that if the government could take steps to refuse co-operative societies permission “to declare a dividend,” “that of itself would be a solution of the question!”

Mitchell attended on October 25th, 1892, handing in, according to the official statement, “the Annual Report for 1892 issued by the English Co-operative Wholesale Society.” Alas, for Scotland's participation in that joint volume!

The eighth Duke of Devonshire, as chairman, naturally sought relief from the documents, “especially the historical parts,” and the witness

complied, reciting the facts in outline only. Along the way he had to mention the big new C.W.S. flour mill at Dunston-on-Tyne, which had just caused a loss of nearly £20,000. Mitchell's frankness is noteworthy. "We are sorry for our loss," he said, "but we cannot help it. No doubt if we had bought at the right time we should not have made that loss; but we did not, and we cannot help it."

The co-operative leader passed on to labour's advantages in working for the organised co-operative market; steadier work and steadier wages; greater continuity of work; a full and friendly recognition of trade unionism; a minimum of trade disputes. "No business can exist," he said, "except what is produced is sold." In other words, the workers' conditions must always depend ultimately upon the value-in-use of his products, or alternatively upon the goodwill of consumer-workers in buying what worker-consumers produce. Hence Mitchell declared that, "We want the consumer to own the capital" and "get the limited interest on capital," and labour to work for "generous remuneration," and "the extra share" to "come to them (the workers) through . . . the trade which (as consumers) they give."

The statesmen and capitalists on the Commission at once became anxious for the worker *as* worker. They pressed Mitchell in the direction of profit-sharing, asking what his society was doing to give the worker a fair share of the wealth he helped to produce. Mitchell replied that if there was no possibility of a wider distribution he would support the giving of a bonus to labour; but the wider distribution was better. Anything less would not accomplish the end desired; for sectional distribution would lead again to accumula-

tions in a few hands, to "a new order of capitalists." And when some one fatuously asked whether it would not mean better workers "if you carried out your principle fully and completely," Mitchell turned on his questioner with something like indignation. "If you will allow me to put it in this way," he said, "it means this: that a man will not give his best energies for an honest wage, but he wants some other inspiring motive in order to lead him to put forth his best efforts—for which he is engaged—to serve his fellow-workmen in different parts of the country."

A pertinent question put was whether in the co-operative store movement employees could be elected to management committees; and, speaking in 1892, Mitchell replied, "Not for the direction of the institutions where they are servants."

"But if co-operation were universal?" asked his questioner.

"You would create a new state of things in that case," was the reply. "Interest would then be common, and when the interest is common there can be no special interest."

"I have found this," he continued, "that where interest changes the methods of action change. There must be commonality of interest and purpose where you want uniformity of action."

Ironically a commissioner commented on Mitchell wanting to make of every man "a member of a society for universal distribution," and the witness quickly took up the point. "Yes," he said, "and I want to see that all co-operative societies shall be so conducted that it will be an impetus and a part of the inspiration of every man to become a member of a co-operative society."

But this did not interest the commissioners. From all sides they continued their questioning for the man at work, the Duke intervening at one piquant point to explain Mitchell to the perplexed trade unionist in Mr. Abraham—"Mabon." "I want to see the workman most generously rewarded," asserted Mitchell. "He deserves it. No one deserves it more." But again he asserted the dependence of the worker on the consumers, and then pointed out how co-operation was training consumers not to buy shoddy boots, but "to appreciate an article by giving a better price for it." Attacked again on the charge that consumers' co-operation would give most benefit to the rich, Mitchell replied by a direct negative. "Personal consumption is comparatively a small matter with anyone." The greater benefit would be to the largest families and the poor; while the system would also "alter the flow of wealth," and would mean "a control of trade as regards production more in the interests of the poor."

Asked whether his universal co-operation would not beggar poor traders, the witness replied that it would be "better to subscribe and keep them than maintain a bad system." And he added that small traders already suffered more from their large rivals than from co-operation.

Mitchell had said that he was not in favour "of a distribution of wealth by law," preferring "the ordinary forces of commerce, industry, and perseverance"; and Mr. Tom Mann took up the questioning on this side. Every legal supersession of private ownership, he said, presupposed "a just and righteous manner." Would the witness be opposed to that? And Mitchell replied "not at all." Tom Mann then

pointed out that democratic control of railways might come in this way, at which Mitchell remarked that co-operators had "already begun to buy up railways." At present he preferred the co-operative method; but if another method were before him he would consider it, and "endorse all for the good of the people." In the same way he was in favour of municipal socialism. The municipalities could supply gas and water better than co-operative societies; they were the proper bodies to do that and undertake "any other work they can do equally satisfactorily." But he was "not sure" that he would be willing to transfer the C.W.S. Leicester boot works to the Leicester Corporation. Hesitation was on practical grounds, the business being more national than local. A federation of municipal corporations would be another matter; for its operations would be national and "like our own." Declaring himself "not bound down to C.W.S. methods," the C.W.S. chairman added, "anything that comes nearest to that which we have I accept."

In 1893, at the instance of the King of Greece, Mitchell was made a member of the Order of the Golden Cross. The ceremony was performed at Balloon Street by the Greek Consul. The recognition, it must be confessed, was not personal. The chairman received the Order simply because the C.W.S. was a great and an appreciated customer for Greek fruit. Indeed, as that year's purchases did not turn out too well (owing to events in France causing currants to be thrown on the market), the honour (shared with another) was even derided as "the Knighthood of the Innocents." Happily the chairman's personal modesty saved him. He accepted the Order as in duty bound,

with some friendly words showing appreciation of ancient Greece; and then like Ivan in Tolstoy's parable, put away the decoration and evidently thought no more about it.

CHAPTER VIII

MITCHELL SPEAKS OUT

TO the Co-operative Congress at Lincoln, in 1891, Mitchell declared it "absolutely necessary for co-operators as such to be represented in Parliament," the representatives to be sent "apart from politics and religion." And at the same gathering he urged that "co-operators should strive to get the government of the towns they represented more under their own control."

In 1891 the time for co-operative candidates had not come, nor is it likely that Mitchell would have accepted nomination had there been a Co-operative Party. But after many previous requests he did allow himself, in 1893, to be put forward at a by-election for the council of his native town, where he had just become a J.P. He had been a member of a pre-franchise Non-electors' Association, and then of a Radical Reform Association, and now he came out as a Liberal. But, as he had "admitted" at Ipswich that "in the past Conservatives had done more good than Liberals," it is clear that he was not an orthodox party man.

At Rochdale, in the Castleton West Ward, he entered on his campaign confessing this to be his first candidature, but asserting that "good government was one of the most valuable concerns of human life." He stood for the direct employment of labour by the cor-

poration. "When the corporation wanted work doing they should employ their own workmen to carry the work out themselves. That would be best for the corporation and best for the workmen they employed." There should be "a living wage for all." Economy should be exercised "to get the best results for expenditure" and not merely to secure the lowest price. He did not see how politics could be left out of municipal affairs, and then declared that the aldermanic bench, like the House of Lords, should be abolished. Every man should come before the electors periodically.

It has been said that Mitchell did not make a good candidate; and an unverified story had it that because of Sunday School work he could not even spare an evening to meet the canvassers. It is evident that he was shy of having his virtues proclaimed either at the hustings or from door to door. None the less, the fight was extraordinarily keen, the "interloper" being beaten on a record poll by only 16 votes. The figures gave 656 to Mitchell and 672 to his Conservative opponent. At the Conservative Club there was great rejoicing. "Baron Wholesale" had been defeated, and a teetotaller kept out of a council on which there were "too many teetotallers" already. The Conservative gathering, indeed, resolved itself into an anti-teetotal meeting. In Mitchell's camp, with a note less fortissimo there was more enthusiasm. Fighting against a strong opponent, and a lavish expenditure, his party had come very near to winning. Unanimously the candidate was asked to stand again. Agreeing to do so, Mitchell remarked on a statement that he could not attend the council meetings if elected. If he could not, said Mitchell, "it would not be because he was on a bowling green or anything of

that kind." He revealed that in two different constituencies he had been asked to stand for Parliament. He "hoped the time was not far distant when members of Parliament would be paid"—under that head his programme was to pay members £500 and insist upon them attending to business.

The next contest came at the November elections of 1894. At that election a cry was "Vote for Mitchell and the standard rate of wages." But the candidate in this case was not worldly wise. Just before the election, on October 27th—a Saturday—he spoke at the annual tea party of the Littleborough Co-operative Society. There he read from a trade paper an account of one quality of tea being sold by private shopkeepers at three different prices. Then he touched on the existence of private fortunes which under co-operation "would have gone for the good of mankind." And, he asked, "Why did they want to have an advantage greater than their neighbour's?"—adding his own answer, that "none were entitled to that advantage. Those who had talents should use them for the good of the community, and not simply for themselves."

This was Mitchell himself and his very faith; but it was too much for the tradesmen who abounded in the Castleton West Ward. Mitchell was attacked on the ground of having made "specious promises of a policy of plunder." Possibly there was some faint-heartedness amongst Mitchell's supporters; for the Liberal newspaper was accused of suppressing the report until the election was over. At anyrate, the scale was turned against the co-operator. When the result appeared it was found that the Conservative vote had increased to 709 while Mitchell's had fallen to 628.

Mitchell's speech after the poll was reported as "extraordinary." He felt the defeat; he felt, too, that he had been a victim of unfair tactics. At Littleborough he had been "talking to his own friends in his own way." He had never obtruded co-operative opinions on any other platform, but in his municipal candidature his co-operative views had been used against him. He should have been opposed solely "on his policy as a candidate." As it was, there were now "those in this ward who would not vote for me on any account." "Have a better candidate," he said, "and you will succeed." And with characteristic openness, and generosity in forgetting his own complaint of unfairness, he concluded, "with a tremor in his voice," "I have been defeated twice, and you will find you cannot win with me at all, because the opportunity has been given fairly and fully, and the electors are not in my favour. . . . My labour will still continue for the good of the town, but perhaps in a humbler sphere."

Whatever we may think of the persons who, having heard Mitchell within a co-operative meeting, went off to quote his words with prejudice in another place, or of politicians who purposely misused those words, we cannot altogether escape the difficulties of the position. However sincerely a man may be simply a co-operator in one sphere, a Liberal and nothing more in another, and purely a Congregationalist in a third, he is still one man in mind and faith. Of this latter fact Mitchell himself was a living proof. Any person entirely hostile to any one of his fundamental beliefs ultimately would have found himself in disagreement over the others. No doubt there is wisdom in stopping short of ultimates and keeping particular issues separate in actual affairs,

so as to secure all sorts of immediate practical unions and agreements. But the unity of life remains ; and unless store, town, country, and church affairs in each case are very carefully delimited and fenced about, that unity will inconveniently assert itself. People in movements can move cautiously inside thin walls, or express themselves completely ; but there is no other alternative.

Political and temperance associates deserted Mitchell when he uttered his full self ; but in the co-operative world he could speak his mind and open his heart, and then he was happiest. One of the most congenial of his co-operative tasks had been that of opening the C.W.S. Dunston-on-Tyne flour mill in 1891. This development had roots going back to the early eighties, while as the first of the great C.W.S. flour mills it had pioneer importance for the coming century. To Mitchell the tall building by the Tyne, with its quay for ships, and its floor upon floor of new machinery, was an embodiment of his pride. This was the outcome of a mass of consumers' purchases at the stores—this great instrument, employed for no individuals or sections but for the "entire body politic." Those who grew rich, he said, always would snap their fingers at those who were poor. Then let them make none rich.

This was in the speech made at Tynemouth following the opening. The C.W.S., he said in this speech, employed 2,000 persons in production and the "total profits" on production had reached £70,000. It was better to distribute these to 70,000 persons than to 2,000.

At this E. V. Neale, still faithful against what at Carlisle he had called "the system of taking the

earnings of those who do the work to give them to those who do not do it," interposed a brave "No."

Mitchell replied, "I say 'yes,' and it is more to the interest of mankind."

And then the C.W.S. chairman took his stand on the unshakeable ground which the originally domestic operation of flour milling now afforded for the collectivist. In one C.W.S. industry, the chairman said, using figures still valuable for comparison, a capital of £50 was sufficient to employ one man. In another it was £87, in another £312. But in flour milling it was £1,500. In two flour mills employing 200 workers a profit of £40,000 had been made. Were the 200 to take the £40,000? If so, that was not co-operation. It was diametrically opposed to the spirit and genius of co-operation. "They might produce," he said, "but if they did not consume what would be the good of this production?" Let the people see to it that the profit on their consumption came back to themselves.

Mitchell's battle for regarding all profits on cost as belonging to the whole community of consumers concerned, and not to any group of capitalists or workers, was won. He had lived to see himself victorious there; as Neale—not less a happy warrior—had met defeat. But Mitchell still had other battles to fight. One was over printing. This industry is the opposite of flour milling in lending itself to small productive effort. "I do not object to independent productive societies if they are the better method," Mitchell told the Labour Commission. "I like our own method better than theirs; that is all." Yet, under Mitchell's own chairmanship, the Manchester meeting voted against allowing the C.W.S. to commence its own

printing; and that it did become a great printer was due to a major vote from the rest of the constituencies. Again, too, Mitchell was overcome on the question voted upon in 1895 of direct purchases from the C.W.S. by individual employees.

In large matters Mitchell was all for equality; but though he sought to cast down mountains and exalt valleys, he had no taste for steam-rolling small, loose stones. While the employees had been described as forming in this respect "a privileged aristocracy," Mitchell made fun of "this very awful state of things," "a matter of £10,000 in £10,000,000—a few coppers a week all round." But although the common law eventually stepped in to prove Mitchell's sagacity, on the immediate issue he and his committee had to suffer defeat. It was his last quarterly meeting, and the largest over which he had ever presided; and perhaps it was fitting that he, of whom Holyoake said "energy was his element," should battle to the last.

Yet these defeats did not mean that the chairman was losing his personal hold. On the contrary, at this same C.W.S. meeting of March, 1895, the delegates were intent upon doing him honour. About £100,000 of co-operative money had been invested in the Manchester Ship Canal, and it had been assumed that Mitchell would accept a unanimous invitation of the directors to join the Canal Board. The "Co-operative News" described this prospect as giving "unbounded satisfaction." But it meant transferring to Mitchell's name a qualifying holding of £2,000; moreover, Mitchell, the unwearied, the man who never took a holiday, was now beginning to doubt his own physical powers. Reluctant all along, finally he told the

delegates he could "only fill one place at a time"; that he could not stand the extra strain.

Still determined to honour the chairman, a delegate called attention to the approaching completion of his twenty-first year of office. "That is not on the programme," Mitchell ruled, and he rang his bell to end discussion, amidst laughter and cries to the delegate of "Go on!" Already, however, the event had been anticipated by the committee, auditors, and employees, and a portrait of Mitchell painted for due presentation. The picture had been finished; but it was never presented. For the big, hale man, with the deep chest, strong voice, and ruddy face, who had attended punctually at meetings of every co-operative kind during the period of a whole generation, was soon to pass out of sight, leaving in his place only a memory, a thing to fade and perish.

CHAPTER IX

JOURNEY'S END

THE winter of 1895 was bitter almost beyond precedent. A relentless frost hammered the country throughout two long months ; on quiet parts of the coast the sea itself was frozen. In Rochdale the 13th of January brought "a fearful Sunday morning," with doorways "completely blocked by snow." Mitchell, nevertheless, was at his place in the Milton School, prompt as ever. The weather was little better on the next Sunday ; yet, again, Mitchell was present. But it was noticed that he was tired, that he walked slowly and painfully. Three years earlier he had slipped and fallen on the Rochdale railway station steps. He hurt his ankle, and any considerable amount of walking after that became difficult. And during this winter a more serious handicap imposed itself more heavily. The damp, cloudy, smoky atmosphere of East Lancashire is unkind to bronchial tubes, and Mitchell was a sufferer.

One of his engagements during this winter was to speak at the opening of a branch store in the Derbyshire coalfield. "As nearly as I can remember," writes Mr. Duncan McInnes, who was then secretary to the Midland Section of the Co-operative Union, "this was the last great meeting Mr. Mitchell attended in the Midlands. The audience was so large that two halls were occupied. . . . Both halls were crowded. I remember Mitchell pointing out to me the condensa-

tion running down the walls of each of the crowded rooms, and his remark that the conditions were very trying for him, as he had a long-standing bronchial trouble. We went down to the railway station in a closed conveyance together ; he repeated what he had said, asked me how far I had to go before I got home ; bade me good-night, and I never saw him again.

“ He was a martyr to duty,” adds Mr. McInnes, confirming the testimony of many, “ and never spared himself.”

During his last illness the “ Rochdale Observer ” commented upon his position as a bachelor with “ no one to restrain him,” and said the co-operators ought not to work a willing horse too hard. “ But kindness,” added the journal, “ seldom takes the form of withdrawing invitations.” On the other hand, in the Maxwell memoir it is said that “ his friends . . . beseeched him to take some rest ; but no, his rest was not here.” He laboured through the hard weather, and saw the end of the frost and the hope of spring. On the 9th of March he kept his place at the head of a record attendance of over 700 delegates at his last quarterly meeting at Balloon Street, and none suspected more than a rest would cure. But he was exhausted. On March 11th and 12th the important annual joint meeting of the English and Scottish committees was due in London. This over, the way to a holiday would be clear. After the big meetings it was his intention (as a colleague told the *Co-operative News* readers) to lay up for a while. His old friends the Howards had begged him to stay with them at Liverpool, and the invitation in all likelihood would have been accepted ; but first of all he was due in the chair at the London meeting.

“ I thought of going with him to Manchester,” said his landlord, friend, and attendant, Butterworth, on Sunday the 10th; “ he’s not a bit well.” In London, on the Monday morning after his journey, he was unable to rise; and the evening still found him very ill. But the next morning he insisted on getting up. Though obviously ill and enfeebled, he so controlled himself as to appear at the meeting in his old kindly character, commenting pleasantly on the flower in a colleague’s button-hole. He gave his mind to the business, too. The salaries of the higher employees formed a question on the agenda, and Mitchell, it is said, stood out for a certain course, protesting to those who differed from him, “ Gentlemen, you are not considering the employees.” But to quote the Maxwell memoir, “ death was written largely on every line of that genial face.” His comrades “ beheld the rare sight of a man dying at his post. The vote of thanks that day to the chairman was full of pathos. . . . We felt a void . . . that could not be filled in our time. His last co-operative meeting was over.”

After the meeting Mitchell managed to take a little food; at Euston, however, on the way home, he had to be wheeled across the platform in a bath chair. The vice-chairman and his eventual successor, John Shillito, accompanied him. At Stockport there was a change of trains, and Mitchell reached Rochdale completely exhausted. “ I feel,” he said, “ that my work is done.”

His doctor summoned a specialist, and orders soon had to be given for the patient to see no one. That was in accord with his own feelings. “ I don’t want bothering, Kate,” he said to Butterworth’s house-keeper, who was his nurse, and people knocking at

No. 15, John Street, were left to go on to No. 27. "Look after Thomas," he bade her also; for, as if to fulfil the prophecy, the faithful Butterworth too had fallen ill, and had to be nursed in an adjoining room; indeed the landlord survived his tenant and close friend by less than three days.

A trained nurse was suggested; but Mitchell did not like the idea. "Who can look after us better than those we're used to," he said. So while additional help was engaged no one unfamiliar helped in the sickroom.

As the chairman lay dying his thoughts were on the Wholesale Society and the school, but perhaps the school most of all. Had he done his full duty to the school, to the children, and to the church? "They're few and far between who'd have done as you have done," was one reply. But in these hours of quietude, with the deathly cough becoming easier as the body grew weaker, the meditations of one who had never obtruded personal thoughts on the world were his own. Bye-and-bye the failing life lapsed into unconsciousness. The 16th of March was a Saturday, a very mild day at last, a day of Spring. The weather had been fine and sunny, though misty later on. Yet at five of the afternoon it was still early for the shadows of night. It was still early . . . but, anticipating the sunset and the dark, the co-operative leader slipped away. Breathing, which had been so difficult, became gentler, and less and less perceptible, and then ceased.

To the scholars he had sent a message. "Tell them to give their young hearts to God"; but there was human grief amongst the children next day for the lost father of the school. The feeling throughout Rochdale and England expressed itself at the funeral, on the

Wednesday following. Edward Vansittart Neale, his one equal in unselfishness, had preceded him ; hardly more than a year earlier Mitchell, in St. Paul's Cathedral, had unveiled the memorial tablet to that heroically generous man, and had spoken with a warm affection for Neale that no differences of mind could diminish. But other leaders of the Co-operative Union were there, with co-operative society representatives from Edinburgh to London, with C.W.S. workers of all degrees, with Women's Guild and Employees' Union representatives, with Ship Canal directors, with all who loved him for his many deeds.

In the complete absence of relatives all duties toward the dead chairman were discharged by the Wholesale Society, in union with the Milton Church. The coffin at the church was almost hidden by the masses of flowers from co-operators, school children, and church members. Every seat was occupied except one, draped in black, Mitchell's own seat in the gallery, over the clock. "No man could have had a more inauspicious start," said the Rev. Hirst Hollowell in his address ; and as the preacher proceeded his words became a thanksgiving for a man of transparent character, childlike, generous, cordial, charming, a life given to upbuilding, "the most successful of all embodiments of the socialistic spirit." "Plain living, hard work, love for children, purity of motive, love to God, and kindness to his fellowmen," said the minister, "marked and ennobled his whole life." And then was sung one of the simple and hearty hymns Mitchell most loved, "Joyfully, joyfully, onward we move."

An enormous concourse went to the grave or lined the streets to watch the long procession. Not since the death of John Bright had Rochdale borne such

witness. "The suddenness of his death," said the "Rochdale Observer," "the pathetic loneliness of his life . . . together with the fine simplicity and integrity of his character, had profoundly impressed the popular mind. Honoured in life, when he died he was buried like a king."

The event was long remembered by Rochdale people. "Eh! that *was* a funeral," were words on the lips of matrons for a score of years. Co-operators in their days of effort may fail to arouse any deep and wide public attention; but at least one did so in his death. Yet a last signal proof of Mitchell's devotion remained to be given.

During his lifetime it was freely said by the cynical that, after all, Mitchell was doing pretty well out of his good work. Once he had given a subscription of two guineas. The next man approached gave £10. Seeing the previous entry in the book, the donor said, "That's a poor subscription for John Mitchell."

"I think it's a good one," replied Mr. John Fountain, who was collecting the money.

"He's worth £30,000," retorted the first speaker.

"He's not worth 30,000 pence," was the warm reply. "John Mitchell's the wrong chap to accumulate money."

"What, with his splendid opportunities for back-handed work!" exclaimed the other.

"He wouldn't do anything of that sort," answered the collector. "And I'll make this assertion, that if we're alive then I'll come to you when his will is proved and you'll find me right."

The body was not buried before similar rumours of wealth went round Rochdale. In Manchester a railway official remarked, "Well, he's gone, and he's left

£50,000. How could he have got that honestly ? ” But the will was published, and the total estate returned at £350. 17s. 8d. Even that sum, Sir William Maxwell has said, was the residue of money saved when he was in business for himself. The Conservative “ Times ” equally with the Liberal “ Observer ” had proved its respect, and, commenting on “ the surprise to everyone ” to hear that Mitchell had died “ a comparatively poor man,” the “ Times ” said : “ This alone proves he must have been singularly disinterested and unselfish.” And in the “ Annals of Rochdale,” amongst the notable wills of past Rochdale citizens this figure of Mitchell’s stands to-day, set in quiet contrast with the five-figure and six-figure sums around it.

All the property was willed to Thomas Butterworth, who, as if to follow his friend and let money go, had died on the day before the great funeral. And so it happened that while the money went to Thomas Butterworth’s heirs, all the keys and trophies given to Mitchell during his lifetime came into the keeping of the C.W.S.

The Rochdale cemetery lies westward of the town, on a slope commanding all that is best in the view around Rochdale. Here the C.W.S. erected a granite monument, on which is engraved the best-known passage from Mitchell’s Rochdale Congress address : “ The three great forces for the improvement of mankind are religion, temperance, and co-operation ; and as a commercial force, supported and sustained by the other two, co-operation is the grandest, noblest, and most likely to be successful in the redemption of the industrial classes.”

CHAPTER X

EPILOGUE

Nearly thirty years after 1895 a student, making an enquiry from a stranger in a Rochdale street, mentioned the name of Mitchell. "Mitchell," exclaimed the Rochdalian. "Ah! he was an honest man."

Few of us, perhaps, are so conspicuously honest that we can hope to be remembered for it a generation after we have left the world; yet we can recognise and practise plain honesty as the first essential in all co-operative effort. Where men are corrupt social institutions cannot be erected; and where honest men have built corruption will bring to the ground. But Mitchell's was more than the average which is necessary and serviceable; it was a dominating honesty; and this was one of the qualities that made him a master builder. Another was energy. "Energy," said Holyoake, "was his element, and he gave it." In a consumers' business, where supply follows demand, there is a tendency to sit down and wait for demand instead of leading it, and only a moral self-driving force like Mitchell's will overcome this inertia. Yet energy by itself is not enough, and may be very harmful. Has not the devil always enjoyed a reputation for activity? In the earlier years of Mitchell's presidency of the C.W.S., after the follies of the "boom," he had to hold back as well as advance. He could do both, in

fidelity to principle, because of a third quality of absolute unselfishness of aim. In the fine words uttered in homage to his memory by his old opponent, George Jacob Holyoake, "he sought nothing for himself."

Material benefits to the consumer came naturally and properly within his principles. Because of this he was misunderstood until after his death, as he would again be misapprehended to-day. He was reckoned a "divi-hunter" and selfish. Even the famous author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* took the self-taught C.W.S. chairman for another variation of the type of Lancashire self-making man. Had Mitchell talked in terms of the prevailing ideal it might have been different; as it was he paid a price for adhering to his unfashionable conception of the co-operative aim, and, like his doctrine, he was judged "unspiritual." Well, it has been admitted that he was not what is called an intellectual. He made no claim to the spirituality of fine, subtle imaginative minds. He was the plain, blunt man. He may never have understood that criticism of collectivism which is implicit in the nobly-expressed co-operative teaching of Neale and Hughes—the criticism which champions individuality against the mass and personality against the machine, and is valid enough as criticism. But was it necessary for him to understand? He had to concentrate upon truths more elementary. Romantic, fantastic attempts at castles in the air, all idea and no substance, every actual reformer has to witness. Mitchell did not ask for less theorising but for conceptions more plainly based on common human needs.

Less imaginative but more realistic than his critics, or their successors in the world of labour to-day, he

perceived a primal truth. If we are to avoid mere towers of Babel there must be agreement upon a unifying principle. And for all who would reconstruct society, in or out of the co-operative movement, Mitchell's challenge still stands. This principle is only to be found in the corner-stone used by the Rochdale Pioneers almost accidentally—the principle that industry and commerce must be organised primarily for the welfare of consumers, with freedom and generous conditions for producers as they serve human needs which consumers represent. In other words, service may be free, self-directed service, as millennial as may be; but proved service must come first, all the apparent exceptions arising from foolish or wrong demands of particular consumers not destroying the general principle.

The English C.W.S., which is senior to the other co-operative wholesale societies throughout the world, was, as Mitchell left it, his monument. Yet this large practical work was done almost by the way. It was Mitchell's lot to labour so much in the basements of the new social order that people did not realise what he was after. His high aim was not primarily a C.W.S. turning over so many million pounds; it was to express and demonstrate his social beliefs. "Public service, the welfare of the 'body politic' . . . as the condition of individual progress," said the *Daily Chronicle* in 1895, "was Mr. Mitchell's civic gospel and co-operative faith." Instead of writing books about it, he helped to build co-operative stores and factories, local and national. But all the while, as the *Rochdale Observer* of the same period said, co-operation was to him more than trading, more than material gain; it was "voluntary socialism."

This work was fundamental but not final. It was the sincere, hearty effort of a man always ready to welcome the contributions of others, because of his intrinsic modesty, tolerance and "freedom from personal vanity." In the midst of his controversies, before a hard-headed audience ready to follow a lead in scorning ideas, he showed no sign of being tempted. On the contrary, he took occasion to rejoice in theories, for "theories are the basis of universal practice"; and to hope for "a permanent and beneficial association between the thinker and the actor as long as the co-operative movement shall stand." At Plymouth, in 1886, he suggested a place even for competition if deprived of its selfish aim, and made serviceable to what on this occasion he called the greatest good of the greatest number. Mitchell was a pioneer, improving on the work of 1844 by elaborating into a basis for conscious action the principle which the earlier pioneers (intent on helping their fellows as producers) had used only casually and empirically; but doing that as pioneer work. We may be sure that he wanted others to follow, and build into his structure everything consistent with its base. It is quite likely that the friar of John Street did not "figure out" the full breadth of scope necessary if the consumers' movement is to be equal to the richness of life, and is not to shut out from employment initiative and personality. But we may be certain that he desired it. Given a right basis, the larger and richer the final structure the better. We may believe that the genius of Balloon Street, commercially inclined as he might seem, wanted (in this respect) not a warehouse, but a cathedral.

In all Mitchell's building the ultimate foundation,

too, was moral-spiritual. Though he used phrases ready to hand, like that of the utilitarians, his impulse ran more deeply. He was moved by a steady, quiet passion for universal good. Common benefit, not sectional benefit, was his constant demand; and he expanded his conception of the constituency to benefit until all aims became sectional that were not open to be shared by all mankind. It is this characteristic which gives present-day point to his idea and invests it with its full meaning. We live amidst a welter of sectional interests, in which that of labour is merely less sectional than any capitalist interest it opposes. Already it is plain that in a world run for what interests and nations of interests are going to get out of it, common humanity is going to get less and less out of it. We shall not get peace for all abroad, nor, let us say, houses for all at home. Another, and a greater, aim is necessary, an aim of common human benefit, an aim which can be so established in our minds that by constantly looking on affairs from this point of view, in obedience to custom and public opinion, either spontaneously or as in duty bound, we shall work it out.

Bringing men within one economic organisation in itself may not do very much for us. The old Adam can so soon make himself at home in new quarters. But to imbue mankind at large with an ideal of common human good, and to direct men to a new and practical means of expression in terms of consumers' benefit,—that is another matter. That way opens to a wide vista. In the past, and not only in the distant past, ordinary humanity, when moved by a mass impulse, has revealed almost too great a capacity for personal self-sacrifice. Given a true social aim, knit up at last with the everyday ideas of the mass, it will not fail for want of mass energy and courage.

To-day Mitchell's chief significance arises from the contribution he sought to make to such a common ideal. Beyond board rooms, offices, and workshops, he saw a world of consumers, men, women, and children, ill-fed, ill-clothed, ignorant, disunited, manipulated for profit where they should be served; and he wanted to unite all in striving for a new world in which all gain would be for all. Experience of human selfishness, as he told the Royal Commission, modified his hopes. But not by any means did it destroy them. He continued to work as steadily as if sure of his millennium dawning in his own day. For that ever-upwelling impulse of his did not derive from success. It was the motive that in itself is success, that in itself is the beginning and the end; in a word, the motive of love. The love of God and man that has kindled prophets, saints, and heroes, moved him, too. The most normal, yet most profound of spiritual forces, uplifted him, as it will uplift any other plain man as constantly living and working in the same faith. While well aware of the world, and not led by illusion, the Rochdale man of business came to share in his plain way the mystic's faculty of anticipating the happiness of triumph. He lived for his faith, and took the wages of living; but it is not merely dust that is left of John Mitchell.

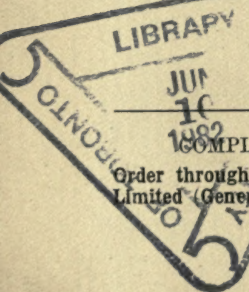


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