

THE STORY OF THE
WOMEN'S INSTITUTE
M O V E M E N T

IN

ENGLAND & WALES
& SCOTLAND

BY

J. W. ROBERTSON SCOTT

Without detail sufficient to make its scenes dramatic, and give us a lively sympathy with the actors, a narrative history can have little value and still less charm . . . In history there is nothing isolated : *The Holy Roman Empire*

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TO
THE YOUNGEST MEMBERS
OF THE MOVEMENT
AND THE
MEMORY OF MRS. HOODLESS



THE LATE MRS. HOODLESS
an address by whom led to the
formation of the first Women's
Institute in the world. Photo-
graph specially taken for this
book from the portrait in Ontario
Agricultural College by the court-
esy of President Reynolds

BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND HIS READERS

WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

WHAT is this Women's Institute movement, which has the 'warm sympathy' of Her Majesty the Queen, herself an active member of it, which the State has subsidized to the tune of £50,000, which 'it is the hope of the Government will spread throughout the whole country,' which the highest authority on our rural history considers to be 'the most important body formed during the century,' which the head of the Scottish Board of Agriculture calls 'the most important movement in social and agricultural history for a hundred years'?

Four thousand Institutes in England and Wales and Scotland prove that this ten-year-old movement - it is in its twenties in Canada - has met a need. A quarter of a million country-women, by reason of geography and tradition the most difficult of all our people to organize, are in membership. The rural parishes of Great Britain are many of them very small, but in a fifth of the parishes in England and Wales, and in every other parish in Scotland a Women's Institute flourishes.

WHAT IS A WOMEN'S INSTITUTE?

A WOMEN'S Institute is the village unit of a very human, democratic, non-party, non-sectarian organization, which prides itself, among other things, on the fact that every member, from the cottage to the Throne, pays a fee of two shillings a year, no more and no less.

In England and Wales, the movement functions not only in the monthly meeting in the village, but in an imposing array of Groups, Centres, County Federations, Consultative Councils, a National Federation, and a legislative two days' Annual Meeting in London. In Scotland they do things more simply, but the object of the Scottish movement, though differently defined, is the same.

THE OBJECT

IN the South the object of Women's Institutes is officially described as 'to improve the conditions of rural life and to provide opportunities for mutual help and intercourse.'

BETWEEN THE AUTHOR

The Scottish movement, after the Scottish manner, puts education in the forefront. Women's Rural Institutes – that is the name by which they are known in Scotland – are 'companies of women who join together for education, recreation and social intercourse.'

Their aim, it goes on to specify, with the Northern liking for definition, is –

- '1. To develop initiative and latent talent,
- '2. To bring experts to lecture and demonstrate (with the intention of making some of the educational advantages of the town available for countrywomen),
- '3. To promote social intercourse and recreation among women of all classes in country communities, and to circulate information.'

The interesting way in which these objects and aims are attained is explained as you go from page to page of this book.

WHY THE STORY IS OF GENERAL INTEREST

FOR two reasons a truthful narrative of the experiences of this remarkable women's movement is of social and political value.

1. It shows how countrywomen are now, like townswomen, working out their own salvation technically, socially, and, in the best sense of the word, politically.

2. It makes plain some of the more hopeful methods of rural advance, for men as well as women, if we are going to have any worthy agricultural life at all.

Incidentally, because the Women's Institute movement was brought into contact with them all, this book lights up now and then the careers of the deceased Agricultural Organization Society and Village Clubs Association – which had, between them, £221,000 of public money – and tells something of those noteworthy experiments in women's work – the story of which ought to have been chronicled long ago – the Landswomen and the Women's Branch of the Board of Agriculture.

THE BOOK THAT WAS NOT WRITTEN

THIS *first history of the Women's Institute movement* is of value to the membership because to know the story of the

AND HIS READERS

movement is to know whether it is made of stuff that will endure. I lay stress on this because I have had to find out for myself the importance of the movement's history. In the first plan for my book I proposed to keep the history part quite short. I would tell, within a Chapter, or two Chapters at most, how a movement which, started under the ægis of Agricultural Co-operation, passed under Governmental control and out again, and, in its last stage, has been an officially subsidized organization, due at an early date to begin an independent career.

To this history I planned to add, at some length, the results of personal investigation of the Work of the Movement in different parts of England and Wales and Scotland, and also the pith and marrow of a mass of information for which I am indebted to the kindnesses of workers all over the country.

Then there should be some account of the special developments of the movement in Handicrafts, in Education generally, in Folk-dancing, in Music and the Drama.

There should also be a certain chronicling of the Humours of an organization which is 'not too rare and good for human nature's daily food.'

This should all be followed by the most valuable thing of all, Thoughts on the Future, in which the best minds of the movement should be laid under contribution for their fears and questionings, as well as their reasoned hopes.

But when I had given a few weeks to my task I saw that it would be utterly impossible to produce, within a single volume, a book of so wide a range.

THE UNKNOWN A.B.C.

THE more I explored the history of the movement the more I saw that the movement was its history, that a knowledge of its history was vital to an understanding of it, that members who were not grounded in that history were taking the Senior Reader before they had learnt their A.B.C., and that the first thing I had to do, if I would serve the movement, was to tell its story as clearly and convincingly as I could.

BETWEEN THE AUTHOR

How little some of the history I have rescued from oblivion is known even to women who have become prominent in the movement, is illustrated by the fact that one member of the Executive of the National Federation asked me who Mrs. Hoodless was! When I told an even more conspicuous member of that august body that we were met on an auspicious day she learnt from me, with surprise, that it was the anniversary of the introduction of the movement into this country!

TWO MORE BOOKS!

HAPPILY I found that the history of the movement at which I was labouring was very interesting history indeed.

If I am sufficiently encouraged by the circulation of the present volume, I hope to follow it, as soon as possible, with an already quarter-written book of inquiries, of criticism and of constructive ideas. It will be, in sum, I believe, a book of encouragement and inspiration. It will be the sequel to the present History, that is to say it will be a record of or report on **THE MOVEMENT AT WORK AND PLAY**. It will bring to every separate Institute the stimulus of a picture of the movement as a whole, in all its varied activities, in all its strivings and hopings for the future. It will assemble from England and Wales and Scotland the wisdom of the best minds of the movement. It will present all the plannings for and speculations about that future, in which the movement is to be, we trust, a much greater thing than it is to-day.

Before long, I hope, this second volume may be followed by yet another book, from someone else's pen if not from mine, a practical publication on the large, engrossing and important subject of Handicrafts.

WAS THIS A BOOK FOR A MAN TO WRITE?

SHOULD a man have written this History of a women's movement? The way in which I have come to write it is this. When, after years of acquaintance with village life, in our own country and abroad, I returned home after the War, no advance which had taken place in my absence gave me more pleasure than the setting going of the Women's Institute

movement. The scrap-books of its headquarters show that in the daily Press and in periodicals I have written more about it than anyone else! I have also had the privilege, for four years, of helping a little, with technical experience, on one of the London committees.

More than once during the last few years I stressed the importance of some woman preparing an account of the movement. But no one came forward. Then I found, with pleasure, that a man, an old friend of mine and a delightful writer, Mr. Eric Parker, had such a book in contemplation. Eventually, however, he had to give up the enterprise, and urged me to undertake the task.

Before I finally decided to set to work myself I straitly questioned Lady Denman. Had not she or some other woman who had had a part in the making of the movement's history contemplated such a volume? I was assured that none of them had done so. So, as Pepys says, 'No one beginning, I did.'

PUDDING VERSUS *INGREDIENTS*

BUT I have been gradually led to the conclusion that Fate, in laying hold of me for this piece of spade work, knew quite well what it was about! Months with the material of this book have taught me something. I see now that there are advantages in the History of the Women's Institute movement being written by a sympathetic and dispassionate outsider – although by this time of day I find it very difficult to think of myself as an outsider! An outsider is able, as he watches the progress of events, to view, in a detached way, both the achievement and the dramatis personæ of the achievement.

I came to my materials with an open mind. I should see in them what I should see. Having spent months of labour, read through masses of correspondence, documents, and printed papers lent by scores of people inside and outside the movement, and by Government departments, having cross-examined many, many members of the movement, having been to many Institutes and several Annual Meetings, I have written my chronicle and my impressions, with no person or persons in

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my mind to laud above all others. I introduce no *deus* nor *dea ex machina*, working miracles. As I have played no part in the movement, as I have done nothing for it but admire it, I have not had to write about myself, although you will see from this Preface that writing about oneself comes easily. Having engaged in no frays I have no scars. Having had no ambitions, no plans, I have no memories of discomfiture. All my concern has been to get at the facts, to set them forth as clearly as a craftsman of writing, as a writing man acquainted with the bane and the blessing of the printed word, may do.

The persons of the drama, I trust, occur in my narrative, as in life, here and there and everywhere, naturally, many good currants and a few fine raisins in a pudding. It is neither the currants nor the raisins, it is not the cook's bit of flour and suet and salt that the diners care about; they care only about the pudding. The movement is more than its workers. Many snares beset the feet of the autobiographer. Luckily for me, this is biography, and a training in Fleet Street and authorship has given me some experience of psychology, human nature, and the value of evidence.

THE 'TRIVIAL AND PERSONAL'

IN the pursuit of accuracy I have written *more than fifteen hundred letters!* As I have tried to follow the old counsel to 'enliven the truth with the smile,' the narrative will be found, I think, to be not only informed but readable. It might have been better informed and more readable if I could have got some good women to see a month or two earlier that a book must be more than a list of dates, a chunk of reports, and a string of statistics. I have toiled to get life and colour to make the chief actors and actions real to the reader. But there will always be people, I find, who think Alfred's burnt cakes, Henry's gorging of lampreys, Cromwell's wart, and Queen Anne's sixteen dead babies 'trivial and personal.'

THE SMOOTHING IRON

It is obvious that the remarkable movement whose story

I have attempted to tell could only have been the work of flesh and blood women (and men), personages of power and personality, with, sometimes, like the rest of us, the defects of their qualities. I have been writing the biography of a movement, and one of our most sagacious writers has well said that biographers are never more futile than in 'toning down, glossing over or altogether ignoring those weaknesses, defects and failures which are the very hall-mark of genius.' I may not have been dealing with many geniuses, but I have been writing about human beings, and as it is possible for human beings to make mistakes, there are mistakes as well as successes to record.

I suppose I had better say one thing explicitly, that a conspicuous worker entreats me 'very kindly' to state, that 'not even the most indiscreet of us is responsible for your comments, only for your facts?' By the same post an equally conspicuous worker begs that 'you will, as a free agent, criticize very much more.' A damsel of ten years is surely the better of criticism, or all the rules for the rearing of the young to a serviceable maturity are wrong.

THE YOUNGER GENERATION

THIS book records, happily, not only the growth of the Women's Institute movement, but the growth of women. It is because the best of them have got out of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that they can hand over to the younger generation, which has some command of its emotions, a movement worthy of its acceptance and development.

This book pays tribute to the pioneers. But it is a poor bit of writing if it is not conceived in a spirit which enables it to claim the attentive perusal of the young women in whose hands lies the movement's future.

AND THE ELDER

ON the personal question I have only one more word, a word of regret, that opportunity has not served in my narrative to speak of many women who have played an essential part in the

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movement. Further, as there must be some limitation to the size of a book like this, I have had reluctantly to cast out of this Introduction, at the last moment, a list of names of men and women who have been my kind helpers, a list which, even at two pages of print, was probably incomplete. Most of these names will be found in the text or the Appendix. It is a matter of concern to me that though, as the Index will show, the names of a large number of women and men are thus mentioned, many others are omitted who have probably rendered as good service to the movement. The names of not a few of these will necessarily appear in the book in which an account is given of **THE MOVEMENT AT WORK AND PLAY.**

THE READER'S PART

IN that book, also, there will appear, I hope, more of the excellent photographs with which I have been favoured. Many have been crowded out of the present volume by the demands of illustrations, which being, in the main, of an historical character, seemed more suitable.

In a book which covers as much ground as this one does, which has involved so much gathering of data from many sources, which has been so much of it copied, and re-copied, typed and re-typed, it is impossible that there should not be errors.

I shall value very much every correction with which I am favoured, every interesting amplification of my narrative, every contribution of new material, for publication or for my information, which readers are kind enough to write down for me.

I trust that members will also continue to send me *interesting photographs.*

A VILLAGE PUBLISHING OFFICE

THIS book has been written in the heart of the country, as it is meet it should be, and it comes to its readers from a little publishing office which I have set up in a hamlet for the benefit not only of this volume, but, it may be, of other rural publications, by myself and other writers, which it is desired should be 'truly rural.'

AND HIS READERS

THE QUESTION OF PRICE

BUT the most important reason why I publish this book myself is to keep down the cost. What is the use of trying to serve the Institute movement by writing its History if its members cannot afford to buy it?

The market value of this book, sold through the booksellers who have to cover the risks of their extremely risky trade, is quite 15s. I am trying to make its ends meet at 6s. 6d., post free, in a carton. Having regard to the number of words and illustrations and the quality of paper and binding, the book is probably *the cheapest volume published this year!*

Few authors are keen on having advertisements in their books. The enterprise of the reputable firms whose announcements appear in my back pages is one of the things which helps the reader to a copy of this book at so low a price.

THE NEW SPIRIT

AMONG all the letters I received from helpers none pleased me more than a note from a worker in the movement whom I have still to have the pleasure of meeting. The letter gives a delightful notion of the new atmosphere of friendliness, frankness, courage, self-respect and independence in which the younger generation, into whose hands the direction of the movement is passing, are determined to live. It does more. It leads one on to think of the outlook on life and the world which is being given to the younger generation's own daughters, who, in turn, are to shape for the movement such a development as we can but dimly foresee. On this letter I should like to close: 'Thank you very much for your letter. I am having a baby this week, but I shall be delighted to comply with your request when I am up and well again.'

J. W. R. S.

IDBURY MANOR,

KINGHAM, OXON.

November 20, 1925.

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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