

**SELF-HELP A
HUNDRED
YEARS AGO**

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Self-help a hundred years ago by George Jacob Holyoake

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GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE

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A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

BY
GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE,
AUTHOR OF "THE HISTORY OF CO-OPERATION IN ENGLAND."

Third



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INTRODUCTION.

THE Royal Family of England, from the end of the last century down to this day, have taken real interest in the self-helping welfare of the people. The remarkable devices (commenced in 1794), recited in this book, appeared under the direct encouragement of George III. The early volumes in which they were printed were preserved by him, and now exist in the "King's Library," in the British Museum. The Duke of Kent, the Father of the Queen (the wisest of all the sons of George III.), took the chair on several public occasions in the City of London, when organisation of industrial life was advocated. The Duke said to a friend that "should he come to the Throne—(which his death unfortunately prevented)—he would give effect to Mr. Owen's plans of Industrial Villages—of the advantages of which he felt assured." Since that day, industrial efforts of the more thinking portion of the working people have, in various Co-operative ways, attained unforeseen dimensions. In 1883 this was recognised in memorable words addressed to the Committee of the great Wholesale Society of Manchester, who had sent their Annual Volume to Her Majesty. The words were these:—

"The Queen is glad to learn the success of a movement which not only encourages thrift, but which also teaches the habits of business and promotes education among so large and important a body of her people."

Lately, the Prince of Wales in acknowledging the receipt of two volumes of the "History of Co-operation in England," caused assurances to be given in his name, that "the lively interest which the Prince took in 1883 in this all-important question remains unabated, and it affords him the highest satisfaction to learn that the movement continues to make such encouraging and satisfactory progress."

What the Prince of Wales said at the period to which he refers was so thoughtful, comprehensive and discriminating, that it is a matter of public interest to quote it here. The words were:—

"The Prince has read with the greatest interest the details of the working of the society with which you have supplied him, and he is anxious to express the extreme gratification which he experiences in finding that so large a body of the working men of this country are united in a determination to benefit themselves, both morally and physically, by endeavouring to carry out a scheme which his Royal Highness conceives is admirably adapted to raise the standard of their knowledge and intelligence, and to increase their welfare and happiness; and, in stating this opinion, he feels very strongly that such praiseworthy efforts are deserving of the highest commendation and encouragement. He wishes your society, therefore, every success, and he sincerely trusts it will continue to increase in prosperity in the same proportion as heretofore."

This consecutive record of hereditary opinion, by personages so eminent, will be new to many readers. The self-helping devices presented in these pages exceed in wisdom of principle, in variety and definiteness of conception, those in the minds of any persons living now. Their promulgation was owing to the personal encouragement of George III. The Mongewell Shop, 1795, devised by the Bishop of Durham, may be regarded as the mustard-seed whence has sprung that vast network of Distributive Stores which now overspread Great Britain, constituting a self-helping movement which has grown into prominence during Her Majesty's reign, the like of which has arisen in no other nation on the earth.

Three organised forces contend in this country for the rights of labour and competent incomes for working people :—Trade Unionists, Socialists, and Co-operators. Trade Unionists seek to raise wages by strikes; Socialists at the cost or outlay of State Funds; Co-operators help themselves by Commercial and Industrial Associations, neither making war on Capitalists, nor supplicating aid from the State. This last-named movement, the manlier and more English form of self-help, is but one of the singular and versatile suggestions put forward by prelates, peers, and gentlemen a century ago. The story of these notable conceptions may advantageously be made known now.

It is difficult now to conjecture from what motive such unusual interest in the condition of the poor was taken at the end of the last century. It might be that the American Declaration of Independence had awakened unrest in the "common people." The French Revolution, which occurred shortly before these reports began, might have taught the wealthier classes that it was not prudent to leave the

labouring people in a condition of hopelessness. The awful reign of revenge which came to pass in Paris had scarcely closed when these reports began. Byron at a later date wrote:—

France got drunk with blood . . .
And fatal have her saturnalia been
To freedom's cause in every age and clime,

France did put back freedom in England; but this interest in the social "comfort" of the poor was not interrupted, but continued many years. The leaders of this considerate movement died out and left no successors. Certainly, since 1816 no similar organised concern for the poor has been shown.

It was the Peace of 1815 which killed it. While the population was being thinned by war, it became of consequence to keep up the supply of men, or gentlemen who made the war in class interests must go out themselves to be shot. Substitutes grew scarcer and dearer year by year. "God's daughter, Carnage," as Wordsworth styled her, had "a good time" of it, in the early part of this century, and the slaughter of battle abroad was aided by fever at home, bred of squalor and starvation. Large families were encouraged, and mothers who had three children at a birth received a bounty; but the children being poorly fed, lacked the stamina and spirit required in recruits. It was therefore good policy to institute plans for feeding and cheering them. The human sympathy of the eminent persons, whose devices are herein recounted, were their primary incentives, but it was the discernment of the national need which stimulated so many promoters among the general public, and thus policy continued what humanity began.

When Peace came, the necessity for rearing soldiers ceased, and no public belief then existed that it was the permanent interest of a great nation that the industrial portion of the people should be free from disease, poverty, or precariousness. Without this exemption being secured, patriotism is but spuriousness or imposture—since there can be no honest patriotic pride in a nation in which the condition of the people is a scandal.

G. J. H.