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**OAKLEAF : THE STORY OF
A RADICAL BOOKSHOP**

A CASE STUDY

**The Co-operatives Research Unit,
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May 1988

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1. INTRODUCTION

Oakleaf Books was Milton Keynes' radical and community bookshop, owned co-operatively and run collectively. It aimed to combine the function of a community bookshop for the local area of Wolverton with a radical shop serving all Milton Keynes and a considerable area beyond. It opened in March 1979 and succeeded in its own terms for nearly seven years before closing down due to lack of financial viability at the end of 1985. This study looks at how Oakleaf was set-up, how it was structured and developed, the working experience of those involved and the reasons for its final closure.

I worked at Oakleaf from October 1979 to January 1986, and at the time of writing I am still involved in the winding-up process. The sources of information I have used - apart from my own memory! - are Oakleaf newsletters, accounts, minutes of meetings and shop diaries. I was also able to refer to the entire remains of the Oakleaf filing system, currently occupying my spare room.. All of Oakleaf's ex-workers have seen a draft of this study and have made comments which, where possible, have been incorporated into the text. Oakleaf learned a lot from other co-ops, and I hope that this account in turn will be useful to other co-ops and radical enterprises of all kinds.

Before beginning the story it would be useful to set out the aims of Oakleaf, which were:

1. To make available, and promote as widely as possible and on a non-sectarian basis: literature supporting radical social change; and cultural and political publications which commercial considerations normally prevent bookshops from holding in stock.
2. To practice and encourage anti-sexist, anti-racist collective working methods.

3. To provide employment which brings both satisfaction and a reasonable living wage.
4. To play an active part in the wider radical bookshop movement.
5. To provide an information centre and contact point for local cultural and political activities.

The shop was set up essentially for a political purpose, to make available radical publications. This is difficult to achieve in the market, consequently Oakleaf Books was never really a commercially viable business. It survived so long only because of the commitment, both from its workers and from the wider network of supporters, to that political purpose, part of which was to run co-operatively. We didn't see Oakleaf as a failure because it closed down. On the contrary, as the final Oakleaf Newsletter said, "We feel a sense of achievement that we have sustained for so long a specialist bookshop in the back street of a small town".

2. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The development of Oakleaf must be seen in the context of the growth of the radical book trade in general. The widespread development in the 1970's of grassroots political action, the expansion of socialist and feminist publishing and the growth of 'radical academia' all helped to create a market for specialist radical bookshops. Some developed as general 'radical' bookshops, some were linked to political parties or particular political movements, and some aimed to be 'community' bookshops providing a service in a working-class area traditionally poorly provided with bookshops and cultural activities. Over time as the market grew, major bookshops moved into the radical sector, selling the more popular, more profitable lines, thereby marginalising radical booksellers.

It is also important to understand the local background. Milton Keynes is a new city built mainly in the 1970's and covering a wide area, including several established towns such as the railway town of Wolverton in the north. The new city was obviously lacking in traditional networks and political organisations, and it was an exciting time as the community developed - there was a feeling that things could perhaps be done in a different and more progressive way. A conference in 1975 on 'Alternative Enterprises' gave rise to Alternative Co-Operative Enterprises Ltd (ACE), a members' co-op created as an umbrella group to develop various projects. ACE's largest project was the establishment of a wholefood shop, Acorn, in 1976. Run by volunteers, Acorn began to stock a small selection of books and magazines, which gradually expanded in number and range. The publications sub-group of ACE began thinking about opening a bookshop, and by 1978 ACE had agreed to open Oakleaf Books. After searching several areas of the city for a suitable and reasonably cheap building, a shop near Acorn in Wolverton was bought with the aid of loans from ACE members, a setting-up grant was negotiated with East Midlands Arts, and Oakleaf opened its doors for the first time in

March 1979. There was no market research done before starting, which was partly due to lack of business experience but also because the motivation for starting the shop was political rather than commercial. In general, business skills and knowledge of the book trade were picked up gradually from experience and from contacts with other radical bookshops.

The main driving forces behind the establishment of Oakleaf were Jane and Andrew, who put in a tremendous amount of time and effort in the early days of the shop and became its first paid workers in July 1979. (Note that the wages paid were very low - and remained so. See the 'Development of the Business' section for a discussion of this issue). There was also substantial involvement from other ACE members (including myself) in the working parties to convert the building and as volunteer shop-workers. This set a pattern which was a vital feature throughout Oakleaf's existence - that we could call on an extensive network of supporters for help with tasks such as maintenance and publicity. Supporters were encouraged to become involved with the shop, especially by 'shop-sitting', and a regular supporters' newsletter was produced. The supporters' network was essential because it helped to keep costs down, and because, together with the running of endless bookstalls, it helped to establish and maintain strong links between the shop and the local radical political and cultural scene. It also became a social network - there were even a couple of 'Oakleaf Outings'. Although the workers were always a bit ambivalent about the use of volunteer labour (which could be considered to be exploitation), I think most of the volunteers enjoyed their work for Oakleaf and felt they also gained something from it.

During 1979 a big prestige glass-and-marble covered shopping precinct, the 'City Centre', was being built in the middle of Milton Keynes. Oakleaf was worried (with hindsight, quite correctly) that this would draw shoppers away from the traditional centres such as Wolverton, and so began discussing

the possibility of taking a market stall there. Oakleaf couldn't consider a bid to be the main bookshop there, since the shop's politics were anathema to the private management of the centre and anyway the financial scale was well beyond Oakleaf's means. Eventually the lease of a tiny shop unit in the rather out-of-the-way 'Specialist Arcade' was negotiated, a grant from East Midlands Arts was obtained for shop-fitting and the new shop finally opened in November 1979, just in time for Christmas. In order to cope with two shops, a third worker, myself, was appointed in September. Looking back, it seems incredible that we could run two shops with only three workers - mainly due to help from volunteers. The three workers even had a fortnight's holiday together the following summer, leaving the shops in the care of a rota of volunteers!

At this time we suffered considerable fascist harassment. The city centre shop was picketed, our locks were glued up and young fascists tried to intimidate the workers and customers. We had much welcome support from local anti-fascists and eventually the trouble stopped. Throughout Oakleaf's life we occasionally had fascist trouble - at the Wolverton shop too - threatening phone calls, visits, stickers and leaflets and our windows broken on a number of occasions. We were thankful that we were never physically attacked or firebombed, as happened to other political bookshops, particularly black bookshops, and we tried to give support to others in these situations.

By the end of 1980 we realised that the city centre shop was making a continuing loss, so we decided to close it down and consolidate our activities at the Wolverton shop. We applied for another grant from the Arts Council, to pay for increased stock and equipment, which we got on the understanding that it would be our final grant. I think it is important to say that we felt that the various grants Oakleaf obtained facilitated our essential aims rather than compromising us in any significant way.

During the first few years we also took on a number of extra activities. We ran a distribution service, 'Root and Branch Distribution', for locally produced books and pamphlets, taking them round to other bookshops, newsagents, etc in the area. The books were mainly from the local 'People's Press', which also had an office in Oakleaf's building in the early days where Writers Workshops were held. In 1981 we also published our first (and only!) book, "D for Doris, V for Victory", an autobiographical account of Doris White's war-time Wolverton experiences. Neither of these activities made much money, but they were examples of our continual desire to encourage and promote the writing of 'ordinary' people. Later in the shop's life we also helped to establish a Women's Writing Group and a group called 'Speakeasy', which organized poetry readings by both local people and nationally known poets.

We also began to supply books to institutional customers, and inspired by the success of Grassroots Bookshop in Manchester, we started producing 'Community Information' booklists for libraries. We persuaded the Manpower Services Commission to fund a one-year 'Community Information Project' to develop this work as one of their Community Enterprise Project schemes, and Aude was employed for this in October 1981. In fact, she became an equal member of the collective, and the community information work was shared out (as were her wages, since the MSC paid more than Oakleaf did!).

Oakleaf's commitment to the wider radical bookshop movement was expressed in our active membership of the Federation of Radical Bookshops (FRB). We received much advice from other shops in our early days, and always found the regular FRB conferences a useful source of information, ideas and solidarity. We were involved in the production of a handbook, "Starting a Bookshop", the organisation of a 'Women in Booktrades' conference, the start of a new trade magazine 'The Radical Bookseller' and many more FRB activities. From January 1982 to March 1983 Oakleaf became

the Co-ordinating Shop for the Federation, a job which was paid at one person-day a week and which involved producing newsletters, organizing conferences, answering queries and initiating projects.

During 1982 the Oakleaf collective decided to end the link with ACE (see 'Development of the Co-operative' section) and set up a new company, Milton Keynes Community Bookshop Ltd, with a two-tier structure combining day-to-day control by the workers with ultimate ownership by a wider membership of the shop's supporters. We also raised loans from supporters to buy the building from ACE, to reflect the reality that Oakleaf was doing all the work of ownership - dealing with tenants, organizing maintenance etc. Two particularly memorable problems we had with the building were the time a friend set it on fire when burning paint off an upstairs windowframe (we had to call the fire brigade - the only casualties were a lot of wet books!), and the time we discovered dry rot in the floor (the shop had to be closed for a week to deal with it).

In August 1982 Jane became the first worker to leave and we decided not to replace her since we couldn't afford to pay four workers from turnover once the MSC Project money finished. Andrew later decided to follow her and left in February 1983. There was then a difficult period with only two workers, until Jenny joined us in May 1983. We felt particularly short-staffed at this period, especially as Aude was also ill for some time (which gave us a chance to discover the mysteries of Statutory Sick Pay!). We did find time, however, to produce a 1984 calendar featuring photographs of local political events. Considerable work during 1983 went into supplying institutional orders, and the resulting income meant we almost broke even that year without any grant funding, a trend we hoped would continue.

Aude left in March 1984 and Carol was almost immediately appointed to replace her: the collective then remained constant

until the shop closed. Because of the rather rapid staff turnover at this stage, more time and effort had to go into learning and doing the basic work of the shop, so there was not much time for new projects. Jenny's artistic skills were put to good use in producing new posters, publicity material, Christmas cards and wonderful window paintings for our window displays. Carol concentrated on school and library supply. We also continued our tradition of organizing author visits and bookrelated events, including two very successful feminist book days.

During 1984/5 it became increasingly clear that we were running at a considerable loss. Shop sales were constant (though not keeping pace with inflation) but institutional sales had decreased alarmingly despite our efforts - largely because of cuts in the education and library services. We decided as a temporary way out of our cash-flow problems to take out more loans from supporters against the increased value of the building. But by the summer of 1985, with no increase in turnover and no new sources of subsidy, we were beginning to realise the shop would have to close sooner or later. A financial assessment in September convinced us it would have to be sooner (see the 'Development of the Business' section for the options considered at this stage), and a special meeting in October agreed to closure after Christmas 1985. We felt it was important to close down before we became insolvent so that our supporters would not lose any of their savings that they had lent us. The building was put on the market and raised enough to pay off the loans, tax bills and the remaining debts to publishers, with a small surplus to be donated to local co-operative and community projects.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE BUSINESS

When Oakleaf was established we expected that for an initial period the business would need a subsidy in the form of grants, but that the turnover would gradually increase until we became self-supporting. This expectation was based on the experience of other radical bookshops and the planned expansion of Milton Keynes. The actual economic history of the business can be traced from the table below:

	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Turnover - shop sales	14061	23694	19153	19750	19523	19693	20191
Turnover - institutions	3013	8496	9702	10038	14119	7651	6298
Total turnover	17074	32190	28855	29788	33642	27344	26489
Gross Profit	5566	10102	9678	9226	10635	7124	2446
Total expenses inc. wages	4905	14682	13101	18179	12660	13602	14182
Net profit	661	-4580	-3423	-8953	-2025	-6478	-11736
Rent & misc. income	350	1150	787	1968	1737	1691	2575
Grants	3500	1923	5500	4771	0	304	134
Surplus	4511	-1507	2864	-2214	-288	-4483	-9027

The gross profit was always less than the total expenses, except in the first year when expenses were extremely low and wages were not paid to start with. Therefore there was always a trading loss. The income from renting out the rest of the building to tenants helped a little, but the main things that enabled the shop to keep going were the grants. We received:

- £3500 from the Arts Council via East Midlands Arts in 1979 to set up, - £1923 from East Midlands Arts in 1980 for the city centre shop, - £5500 from the Arts Council in 1981 as a final grant for stock & equipment, and - £4771 from the M.S.C. in 1982 for the Community Information Project.

The business was permanently undercapitalised, as many small co-ops are. It's worth pointing out that after the first few years, the stock value was over £13,000, and even that seemed a pretty minimum level for credibility as a 'proper' bookshop. The large stock values (associated with reasonable stock levels) seem to cause financial problems for the whole book trade.

Apart from the loans to buy the building, the working capital to finance the stock came partly from the initial grant, partly as small loans from supporters and partly as 'sweat capital' during the period when there were no paid workers. There was no risk capital available, eg for the city centre shop. The fact that the first year's turnover there was insufficient to pay the very high rent and rates of the shop unit meant that we were forced to cut our losses and move out. Many other shops in the city centre were also making losses but could afford to wait it out until the volume of trade increased enough for them to break even.

Wage Levels

Some radical bookshops are run entirely by part-time volunteers. But at Oakleaf there was a determination to pay wages in recognition that the efficient running of a bookshop

that the individuals' interest as workers were to some extent separated from their collective interest as a business. Partly for this reason, and partly out of a general desire for solidarity, Oakleaf workers also joined a trade union, ASTMS.

Wages went from £133.50 per month (similar to a student grant) in 1979 to £176.25 per month in 1985. Part of the problem was that we were caught in a 'poverty trap', whereby increasing wages by small amounts would have made little difference to the workers because we would have lost state benefits, but it would have cost the shop more. Essentially though the difficulty was that the business could not afford to pay decent wages, and we were all aware that we were exploiting ourselves in the interests of the shop's survival. Note though that wages in the book trade generally are very low. We always took care to keep our wages above the minimum for National Insurance, so that Oakleaf workers wouldn't be financially penalised later in life for their commitment to the shop. Business expenses other than wages were kept to an absolute minimum.

Turnover

Referring to the table on p. 6 shows that the turnover from shop sales after the first couple of years remained constant at just under £20,000. We believed that the reasons why turnover hadn't increased as anticipated were twofold. Firstly, a general lack of money to spend on books - due to the recession, to relatively high unemployment and low wages in the area, and because it seems that people regard books as a luxury which is one of the first things to go when money is tight. Secondly, we suffered from competition from the City Centre - largely because people became increasingly inclined to do all their shopping there and not make special trips to Wolverton. Even our supporters often bought 'ordinary' books elsewhere, perhaps not realising how much we needed these sales to subsidise our 'radical' stock. It was also significant that staff at

the main bookshop in the City Centre, Fagins, were active in the burgeoning Peace Campaign, and Fagins became an unofficial organisational centre for the peace movement. Peace activists would tend to support their friends there (despite the profits going to their right-wing owner). Also Fagins began to stock more of the 'trendier' radical subjects (eg peace, feminism, vegetarian cookery and later black writing) and took away a lot of our custom in these areas, which of course were the higher turnover ones.

We tried many ways to increase our turnover through the shop, with little success. We worked hard on publicity, to attract new customers and encourage old ones. We couldn't afford much paid advertising, so we relied mainly on free advertising, eg posters, book reviews in newsletters, and the back-breaking work of endless bookstalls. We organized many author visits, bookfairs, poetry evenings etc, and produced a regular Oakleaf Newsletter. We also tried new areas of stock - greetings cards and second-hand books did best, but they didn't significantly affect takings.

The main area of expansion was in sales to institutions (again, see table on p. 6). We were always keen to supply books on credit to local institutions (eg Milton Keynes Development Corporation, the Open University, union branches, school bookclubs), and we tried to develop any contacts we made. Our concentration on sales to libraries, especially in the community information area, got results, particularly in 1983, when we received a number of large initial orders. Later however cuts in library funding, coupled with their loss of interest in this area, meant that our library sales dropped dramatically. We didn't realise this at first since we were still servicing numerous orders, but increasingly the orders were for small numbers of cheap pamphlets. We also worked hard at supplying local schools, a difficult field to break into and a less lucrative one, since they demanded discounts of 10% or 15% when we frequently only got 25% or less ourselves. Just as we were

starting to make some headway in this area, schools were also badly hit by cuts. In the end, our institutional turnover in 1984 was only half what it had been in 1983, and 1985 was no better, so this really spelled the beginning of the end for Oakleaf.

Survival tactics

In 1982 Oakleaf had raised loans from supporters (plus a bank loan) to buy the building. The price we had paid ACE was low, since they were prepared not to make a profit, and over the years the building had increased in value.

Hence, in 1984/5, when we had no other sources of subsidy, we made a considered decision to take out more loans against the building to finance the trading loss. We were aware, obviously, that we couldn't keep doing this, but we hoped that this would see us through a difficult time. The loans were raised once again from supporters (and note that the interest rate paid, as decided by MKCB meetings, was much lower than a bank loan would have been). We always found it weighed heavily on us to be responsible for our friends' savings.

We also set up a group from the wider membership of Milton Keynes Community Bookshop to look into longer-term fundraising, or other means of keeping the shop going. This group came up with a range of suggestions, all of which would have involved much more work for the already severely stretched workers, who felt none of the suggestions were really practical. The shop managed to raise about £1000 during 1985 from special second-hand book sales and a sponsored bike ride, but this was really a drop in the ocean.

The decision to close

In the summer of 1985 the workers faced the fact that takings for 1985 so far were no improvement on 1984, in fact marginally worse. We were unhappy about taking out yet more

loans, so we had a valuation done on the building and did a stocktake of the business, valuing all our assets and liabilities realistically. Our initial sums led us to believe we could continue for another year, but when we realised we would be liable for Capital Gains Tax on the building the picture became much bleaker. We took three options to a special meeting of Milton Keynes Community Bookshop:

1. Find an immediate large chunk of capital and continuing subsidy;
2. Stop paying any wages - change to a volunteer-run shop; or
3. Close down after a pre-Christmas sale.

Option 1 was not possible - no fairy godmothers materialised! Option 2 was rejected mainly because the workers were unwilling to work for nothing, nobody else wanted to either, and anyway it was felt that a shop with lots of volunteers coming and going would become inefficient and gradually 'dribble away'. So we decided to close, hopefully leaving a good reputation and good memories, and while we were sure to be able to pay back our supporters loans.

4. DEVELOPMENT OF THE CO-OPERATIVE

Structure

The structure of Oakleaf has been somewhat complex, mainly because of its origin as part of ACE (see 'Background and History' section). When Oakleaf was being set up, ACE had to consider what kind of legal structure to choose for this new enterprise. The ACE membership wanted to separate the capital assets (the buildings) from trading, so that a disaster in one of the shops didn't affect the rest of ACE. We also wanted the shop workers to have control over their day-to-day operation with ACE retaining ultimate control. The option of setting up Oakleaf as a workers co-operative in its own right was rejected partly for practical reasons - ACE as an established body could apply for grants and get credit. Also, a one or two person worker co-op with no safeguards could become like a traditional business. We were also unhappy that, because at that time there was a seven member minimum to register as a co-op, the majority of non-worker members of the co-op would have a lot of say and the rest of ACE none. So we finally decided on a separate 'off-the-shelf' company, with the shares used not as a means of raising equity capital but to establish the ownership of the shop. The shop workers were the company directors and had one share each, ACE had 51 shares and the rest were unissued. Oakleaf Books (Milton Keynes) Ltd was registered in February 1979.

Over the next few years, while Oakleaf became established, ACE as an organisation declined, with few new projects and much of the membership moving away or becoming involved in other things, until its role became merely that of landlord. Simultaneously, Oakleaf's own supporters network blossomed (see 'Background and History' section). The workers became increasingly unhappy with this situation, whereby control was in the hands of what was basically a paper organisation, and the shop's supporters had no formal voice. So we devised a new

structure which would retain the workers' self-management, make explicit the non-profit aims of the shop, and give ultimate control to the wider community the shop aimed to serve. A new company, Milton Keynes Community Bookshop Ltd (MKCB) was incorporated in July 1982 as a company limited by guarantee, with rules adapted by the workers from the ICOM model rules for a company limited by guarantee. There were two classes of membership: employee members, who formed the Workers Collective (Board of Directors), and general members - sympathetic individuals or organisations admitted to membership by the Workers Collective. The membership eventually reached 66.

We decided not to wind up Oakleaf Books Ltd and transfer its assets to MKCB as this would have been complex and expensive. Instead, MKCB bought all Oakleaf's shares, thus becoming a holding company. In retrospect this was a mistake because it caused a lot of confusion about the structure - among tax people, supporters and even the workers! (We also had to do two lots of accounts and other paperwork). Although the structure reflected our desire to be in control of our work but at the same time accountable to a wider community and to have the support of that community, the two-company arrangement obscured the basic principle and perhaps meant that the general membership felt more remote than had been intended. There was never a problem with the workers feeling 'pushed around' by the general membership - in fact I think the workers felt that the wider membership perhaps didn't take on as much of the responsibility as they would have liked. During the final financial crisis the wider membership was unable to produce miracles as the workers half-consciously hoped that they would, but I doubt if any other structure would have helped at this stage!

Decision-making

MKCB

The main power of the MKCB General Meeting was to fire directors. In actual practice, the Workers Collective would take to the General Meeting major questions such as opening and closing shops, whether to raise more loans, and the interest rate to pay on loans, as well as the formal AGM business. General Meetings would also advise on stocking policy, publicity etc and give the workers support and encouragement. Meetings were held once or twice a year, and apart from the formal business, it would generally have a report from the workers and a long general discussion, often generating useful ideas for the workers to follow up.

Workers Collective

In the early days, decisions were taken informally whenever a question arose, but regular collective meetings were soon necessary. Anything someone wanted to discuss, eg new ideas, problems, letters needing response, changes in work organisation would be written down and put in a special 'meetings tray'. The meeting - usually one morning a week - would then work through the tray, with the occasional tea-break! The aim was always to make decisions by consensus, though MKCB rules allowed a vote after no consensus in two meetings, and disputes could be referred to the MKCB General Meeting. In practice, in such a small group we could run our meetings informally and genuinely decide things together.

If we disagreed on something important, we would postpone the decision and discuss the issue again until we reached a solution. It was interesting that, given the chance to think about things between meetings, fairly polarised attitudes could swing completely from one meeting to the next. People's opinions were often influenced by the particular work role they had at the time (see under 'Work Organisation' below). For example, the Christmas Bonus Discussion became a standing joke, because the 'accounts' person would always say we couldn't afford one, and everyone else would always demand one anyway. The

people in these roles would be different each year, but the result was always the same - we awarded ourselves the bonus!

The workers took it in turns to 'service' meetings, which involved drawing up the agenda, being in charge of the "meetings tray", taking minutes and informally chairing. Meetings were seen as an important part of work, and so were held in work time (with a volunteer to shop-sit if necessary) and everyone attended. There were no formal guidelines on what individuals could decide on their own and what had to go to a meeting - it was a question of judgement and practice. Many minor decisions were made by quickly checking with everyone else at the time. Drafts of documents, eg. important letters, grant application, would be shown around and re-written taking into account everyone's comments until everyone was happy. New workers would gradually become more confident and take less of the smaller questions to the meetings.

The collective also held occasional evening meetings to discuss big issues and long-term policy, because otherwise these subjects would tend to get lost amongst the day-to-day business. We tried to make these evening meetings pleasant social occasions too, by having a meal together and a few drinks too!

Work Organisation

Initially, work was done by each person taking on things as they came up. However, as the work became more complex and record-keeping systems were improved, we agreed it would be more efficient to share the tasks out more systematically. The plan was to divide the main work into three job roles, and rotate these on an approximately annual basis, so that eventually everyone would know each area of work thoroughly. The three basic roles were ordering, accounts, and dealing with institutions, with smaller jobs like wages or book token returns added in depending on people's workloads. Irregular tasks like advertising, the newsletter, dealing with maintenance and

tenants were discussed at a meeting and taken on by whoever had the time and inclination. 'Housework', opening mail and parcels and getting the lunch were organized on a weekly rota, and everyone took their turn at the two most important things - sitting at the shop desk and making the tea and coffee!

In the early days, the job rotation worked well, but it was hard to incorporate new workers because it took time for them to feel confident about taking major responsibilities, and pressure of work meant it was difficult to give the necessary attention to training. Just after changing roles, people would be feeling a little unsure about the new tasks and perhaps reluctant to give up something they felt they'd got good at, so there would be a period when the 'old' person would be giving the 'new' person a lot of advice and help. Anyone feeling overloaded could always ask for help, and we would re-divide the tasks occasionally as some would expand and others contract.

Later, after a 2/3 staff turnover, the roles stayed almost static because of lack of time for training and because our financial situation meant we couldn't afford to make any mistakes. This was unfortunate, because the 'accounts' role at this time was particularly unpleasant, and Jenny had to suffer it for nearly two years! It also meant that Carol never got a chance to cover the 'accounts' or the 'ordering' roles, and so had a less thorough knowledge of the business. This probably meant that I, as the only one who had experience of all the roles, had more power in the collective, though it didn't feel that way to me. At this stage, skill-sharing was seen as something to be postponed temporarily whilst we were fighting for survival, and then once we had decided to close there didn't seem to be any point in changing roles

5. WORKING IN THE CO-OPERATIVE

This section is based on my own experience of working at Oakleaf - the costs and benefits for me and the conflicts that I saw.

Before coming to Oakleaf I had been an unhappy struggling research student, and I was glad to make the decision to 'give up' an academic career in favour of the politically useful work I saw Oakleaf as being. The first benefit for me was the restoration of my self-confidence in my abilities. We took it for granted that we could each learn to do anything we needed, and I valued the opportunity to learn all the skills of running a business. Just being around books was pretty good too! I enjoyed the feeling of collective creativity, both during the initial development of the shop and in the many 'extra' activities we took on during the shop's life. It was important to me that we worked collectively - we each had equal say, we took decisions together and we shared the responsibility (though this had the disadvantage that we all worried about everything also!). I wanted control over my work, and I valued the support, trust and strong friendships that grew from our working relationships. Usually, I was happy that my work life, political activities and social life were interlinked. And I was glad to be working in an environment where I didn't have to 'dress up' or hide my sexuality or my politics.

The main cost of working at Oakleaf was the extremely low wages, which left us feeling permanently poor. Low wages also mean low status in the eyes of the rest of the world, and despite rejecting that value judgement on a conscious level, unconsciously I found it a problem. I felt that others on the left could sometimes, from relatively high-waged 'careers', undervalue the work we did and even regard us as capitalistically inclined because we had to be efficient in our dealings with money in order to survive. We worked under considerable pressure, which was quite a strain at times, and the

financial difficulties meant we were forever economising (so much that we were often cold in the winter). Some of the work was tedious, but it could sometimes be a relief to settle down to some relatively mindless stock-control! Overall though I found the benefits of working at Oakleaf far outweighed the costs and I found it a very satisfying job.

I think that other workers saw similar costs and benefits, with perhaps a few differences. For example, the way work life extended into home life (eg running evening bookstalls and working frequent Saturdays) was more of a problem for people with family responsibilities. Conversely though, family life extended into work too - children could visit or telephone their parent at work, and we could be quite flexible when children were ill. Workers' children often also ended up helping at bookstalls and other shop events!

As far as the workers' backgrounds are concerned, I think it is important to say we were all pretty well educated (graduates etc), which meant we had a range of skills and confidence not available to everyone. Some of us had many years of varied work experience, some hardly any, and some had been unemployed or working in the home. But I think that educational qualifications give you a certain amount of security to fall back on, which can be important if you take the decision to work in a low-paid 'alternative' job.

There were of course many disagreements and conflicts at Oakleaf over the seven years, but before discussing particular examples I think I should stress that in general the collective process worked well. Focusing on problems can give a false impression of endless difficulties. I should also say that I am writing from my personal memories and I cannot speak for the other Oakleaf workers.

The first area where some problems arose is that of relationships between the workers. We had a close-knit

working situation, where the 'personal' relationships between individuals were bound to affect how they worked with each other and with the rest of the collective. For example, Jane and Andrew were 'a couple', and although I felt they tried very hard not to have 'personal' discussions at work, any emotional tension in their relationship would still be there at work and would affect the rest of us too. The extension of our work friendships to social and emotional relationships outside work could be both good for the co-op, since it helped to forge a stronger group identity and personal commitment, and also bad for the co-op, because work relationships could become vulnerable to 'outside' emotional problems. At times there were also personality clashes between individual workers, where people simply didn't get on, which of course can happen anywhere.

Although Oakleaf had a strong commitment to anti-sexist working, there were difficulties we had to face on this issue. Sexism was most obvious in our external relations, when outside people (eg bank managers, grant bodies) often expected there to be a man 'in charge' and so expected to deal with a man. I found this easier to deal with when we were an all-woman collective, because then we simply (simply??) had to overcome our own internalised sexism. When we were a mixed group, I felt we tended to collude with other people's sexist assumptions by having a man do the 'wheeler-dealing'. We discussed this and the women tried to take on more of these roles. Sexism within the collective also became an issue around the question of who did the cleaning, watered the plants etc. We more or less solved this problem by putting the 'housework' on a rota, so everyone took their turn (though different people had different standards...) The women workers had to deal with constant sexist assumptions and remarks from customers and some publishers reps. 'Female shop assistants' are expected to be pleasant and smiling however the customer behaves - we usually were, in the interests of the shop's reputation, but it could be quite trying.

It seems to me that one of the areas we had trouble with was the appointment of new workers. We looked for an ability to learn and do the job, a political commitment to the aims of the shop, including collective working, and for someone we would all get on with. All this is hard to evaluate from application forms and interviews, and you can only really tell if the person is right after working with them for a while. Some co-ops have a trial period, but Oakleaf rejected this as unfair on the individual - if someone was prepared to accept our lousy wages and change their life round to commit themselves to the shop we felt it would be unfair to then reject them several months later. We thought that if some feel the wrong choice has been made, it is then up to the whole co-op to deal with the problem. Many potential workers were put off the idea of working at Oakleaf because of the low wages. Another problem occurred when volunteers had put considerable time and effort into the shop and then applied for a job, but we felt we wouldn't be happy working with them on a permanent basis. In that case we tried to explain in a non-hurtful way that we valued their contribution but felt they were not the most suitable candidate.

Once a new worker has been appointed, with a small group working closely together it can be difficult for a new member to take on a full role and feel an equal part of the collective. In my case, when I joined Oakleaf, Jane and Andrew had to make a positive effort to stop discussing work at all hours of the day and night as they had before, otherwise I would have always felt an outsider. This situation was helped by the development of a

workers and the later ones in their attitude to the shop. In the early days people were more immersed in the shop and the motivation was more intense perhaps because getting something started is more exciting than keeping it going. I felt this caused some strains after the initial period, when the 'older' workers perhaps had over-high expectations of the newer ones' commitment, but this was not a particularly crucial problem.

It seems reasonable to expect that, for personal reasons and because of different past experience of work, different workers will give their work a different priority at different times in their lives. These differences sometimes led to some people perceiving others as either over-working or under-working. The issue of over-working came up at Oakleaf when my response to the pressure of work was to work longer hours, because I felt I would rather spend longer at work and get everything done than feel constantly pressurised by the amount waiting to be done. Because I then did more than my share of the work, I seemed to take more over, and the others felt guilt-tripped and pressurised (i.e. if I was working harder so should they be). As I recall, we were reluctant to discuss this at all, but once we did we agreed to be more explicit about what we expected of ourselves. We set a 40 hour week (later reduced, instead of a wage rise, to 36), with our own version of flexitime.

At other times, different people were felt by others not to be pulling their weight or not to be taking a full share of the responsibilities, and resentment built up. Because of our joint responsibility for the whole undertaking, I think we felt a justifiable interest in how well other people were working, but were loath to say anything if we felt something was wrong for fear of damaging important work relationships or seeming to act in an authoritarian manner. I felt we were extremely bad at dealing with these problems; they tended to flare up in occasional arguments but were rarely discussed and dealt with. Part of the problem came from the difficulty of defining what 'counted' as work, and what priorities were in the best interests

of the shop. For example, someone chatting to friends in the shop could be seen by one person as a waste of time but by another as dealing with customers or developing useful contacts. Co-ops generally seem to have difficulty in dealing constructively with these sorts of problems - when they become severe usually someone leaves or is pushed out, in this respect co-ops can sometimes be worse employers than conventional businesses.

Although everyone who worked at Oakleaf shared the general political aims of the shop, we obviously still had political differences. For instance, I remember one heated argument in the shop over whether or not all men are potential rapists! These differences showed up mainly in questions of stocking policy, eg whether to stock books on paedophilia, or an anti-militarist cartoon book that was sexist. As I recall, usually if someone remained unhappy about selling a particular book or books we would end up not stocking it. Politics was also behind general discussions of our stock, both within the collective and between us and the supporters. How far should we devote space and resources to books because they might sell well and how far should we stick to the radical books which often didn't sell? Our stock was always a mixture, with half the space given over to the radical stock and half for 'general' books that any bookshop might stock, thus reflecting our desire to be both a radical bookshop and a bookshop for the local community. Our window displays perhaps exemplify this balance. We wanted to interest passers-by and draw them in, whilst simultaneously being open about the shop's politics and avoiding frightening off local people. So a 'safe' subject like gardening or cookery might be followed by a display on the miners' strike or peace campaigning. We always tried to avoid stocking books we saw as oppressive, eg racist or sexist, but found, particularly with children's books, that to be very strict about these criteria would leave you with no stock! So we would carry a range of stock that wasn't too bad, and try to recommend particularly books we thought both presented

positive images and were enjoyable. Of course we were always compromising between political purity and commercial considerations, but different people would want to compromise in different positions! I think this is an eternal and inevitable conflict in radical and community bookshops and just has to be continually discussed.

When Oakleaf's finances began to take a downward turn I certainly found work increasingly stressful. Once we started taking out loans against the building to finance the trading loss, we knew deep down that unless we could find new solutions this was the beginning of the end. We had to economise all the time, which was unpleasant (eg lack of heating), expensive to us personally (eg paying for phone calls) and generally time-consuming. Coupled with our very low wages, I felt there was no part of my life where I wasn't poverty-stricken. It was hard to feel positive and creative in this situation, and fighting against depression was draining I'm sure the others had similar feelings, and I think it added a lot of strain to our working relationships, especially over the last few months. I think we were reluctant to deal with tensions at this time because we knew the shop was closing.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In summary then, the main achievement of Oakleaf Books was to have existed at all, and to have substantially fulfilled its aims (see 'introduction') over a seven year period. Purely as a business venture Oakleaf was never a viable proposition, and we were enabled to survive by a combination of subsidy and determination, hard work and commitment from workers and supporters.

Oakleaf's role as an information centre and contact point was always a useful and successful service to the community. It became perhaps less vital as other networks developed in the growing Milton Keynes, but I think these other networks tend to be more specialised, so that the overall function of making links between many different concerns has been lost. The increasing tendency of 'straight' bookshops to carry radical stock will help to alleviate Oakleaf's loss to the political community, but nevertheless its closure has been quite a blow to the left and the women's movement in particular, and it will be sorely missed.

Other important achievements have been the skills acquired and developed by Oakleaf's workers. We learned an enormous amount about the book trade and all the necessary business skills, eg financial, promotional and administrative skills. We also learned to work collectively, to operate politically and to deal with authority. Through the many and varied activities the shop took on we were able to develop our organisational abilities. Working at Oakleaf helped to build our confidence in ourselves, and past Oakleaf workers have gone on, two to work in Co-operative Development Agencies one to do administrative work at the Open University, and one to work for a Rape Crisis Centre. Volunteers, particularly unemployed people and women working in the home, also gained more confidence and experience, which in a number of cases helped them to get paid work subsequently.

The development of a co-operative structure combining workers' selfmanagement with wider community control has been taken up elsewhere in the co-op movement and has helped to fill a need for more accountable structures. The community control aspect of Oakleaf was important, and I do think it meant that the people we aimed to serve felt much more involved with the shop than is usual for radical bookshops, whilst leaving the workers in basic control of their work. The main drawback was the amount of energy the workers had to put in to service the structure, but I think this was more than compensated for by the support we received.

Oakleaf's basic problem was our inability to increase turnover to a point where we could be independent of subsidy, and so when the various grants ran out closure became inevitable. This was largely due to the particular situation in Milton Keynes with the competition from the City Centre. We can speculate that had the City Centre been built earlier (or had the idea to start a bookshop come later), Oakleaf might never have decided to set up in Wolverton. Instead it could have grown from a market stall to a small shop in the City Centre, with perhaps more hope of long-term survival. Who knows? It is worth pointing out that radical bookshops in general are going through a difficult time (the only ones that are doing well are in large cities and/or have local government subsidy) so the problem is not unique to Milton Keynes.

A consequent problem was the shop's inability to pay decent wages. This meant that all the workers had to be prepared to accept a large degree of self-exploitation. Paradoxically, I think this led to a greater degree of solidarity amongst us, but this commitment could not be maintained for ever. The political commitment among the workers to the shop's aims enabled them to tolerate this for longer than would otherwise be possible.

I think we had our fair share of problems and tensions in the collective, and I think we were often bad at acknowledging their existence and dealing with conflict. I felt on balance though that we worked together well, and that learning to work collectively was an important part of our experience at Oakleaf.

I'd also like to think that some of the ideas and information that we helped to spread have, perhaps in a small way, begun to change people's lives and perspectives and helped to change the world for the better.

On a final note, if I was asked to distill Oakleaf's experience into one sentence I'd say it shows that miracles can be performed with enough commitment, but that anyone thinking of setting up a radical bookshop now needs to look long and hard at the financial planning side!

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