

# MUST READS ON COOPERATIVES, WOMEN'S RIGHTS & GENDER EQUALITY

## THE MATRIARCHS OF ENGLAND'S COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT

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Current thinking considers the Women's Cooperative Guild within the English Cooperative Movement to have been an independent and democratically run organization whose leaders built sisterhood across class lines and achieved many benefits for married working-class women. This study of the dynamics of gender within the movement between 1883 and 1921 arrives at different conclusions. Blaszak examines what freedoms of speech and activity women were permitted within the movement, as well as what resources they were given to accomplish their tasks. Ultimately, the parameters set by the men would determine the type of female leadership that emerged and whether it was able to realize its feminist and utopian agendas.

Setting the organization's activities within the context of gender relations in the Cooperative Movement, Blaszak finds that the Guild was much more dependent and much less democratically directed than has usually been supposed. Restrictions established by male cooperators and enhanced

by the realities of working-class life turned the Guild into a clique dominated by a few. Even the Guild's most revered leader, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, found it impossible to escape the gendered socio-economic circumstances in which she labored at her ministry to improve the lives of working-class women. Consequently, her leadership inadvertently assisted male cooperators in their attempts to limit possibilities for women.

As Blaszak recounts the story of the Women's Cooperative Guild, she does so more broadly in the context of the gendered politics of the cooperative movement as a whole. She argues convincingly that men established the boundaries in which women operated, that they feared the feminization of cooperation, and that, consequently, much of the previous work on the Guild has tended to overestimate the achievements of female cooperation. The book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the gendered politics of cooperation in modern society.