Co-operation with an unhappy ending

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HERE'S A shaggy dog story with a happy ending. Recently a group of dog breeders in Northern Ireland contacted the offices of Co-operation North. Before the Troubles started it had been quite common for them to come south, both to show their dogs and to mate them. Over the years, though, they had stopped doing so and instead they had turned to breeders in Britain to meet their needs — and those of the dogs. Now there was feeling of concern that the pups which resulted from these cross-channel couplings lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi* and that, as a consequence, the breed was in danger of losing, well, a certain quality of Irishness. And you thought it was only poor wayward men and women, nationalist and unionist, who had suffered a crisis of cultural identity over the past 20 years?

Co-operation North was, of course, happy to oblige the hounds of Ulster, just as, over the 10 years since it was formed, it has organised contacts and exchanges between groups of apple growers, academics, amateur dramatic societies, and others too numerous to mention. The variety of these contacts was to be seen last Monday night at a reception in the old House of Lords in College Green. Here, or so it said on the invitation, prizes would be given for the best projects entered in the organisation's Network programme during the course of 1989.



report themselves on what they believe they achieved. These are then evaluated by independent judges who decide on what awards should be made. This year's prize-winners included the Irish Deaf Society, the Dublin Travellers' Education and Development Group, the Workers' Educational Association in Belfast and community groups from small towns in both parts of Ireland. The prize-winners in two of the categories were gay groups. It was these awards, apparently, which prompted Co-operation North to hold the prize-giving ceremony at a hurriedly arranged lunch. Inevitably the impression given was that the organisation wanted the ceremony disposed of in a hole-in-the-corner fashion, with minimum media attention.

Kathleen Watkins had come along to make the awards. There was music from the Shankill Music Collective, whose members had travelled down from Belfast for the occasion. For some of them it was their first visit to Dublin, though hopefully they will come again later this year as part of an exchange project with the Tallaght Rock School.

How sad then that, although Ms Watkins and the musicians turned up to play their parts, there was no prize-giving. Instead, we were told, the award ceremony had taken place at a private lunch earlier in the day.

The reason for this, which emerged during the evening, is that there was intense embarrassment within Co-operation North that the prize-winners in two of the categories — Community Care and Women's Links — were gay groups actively involved in helping fellow homosexuals. Actually, that is not quite true. The work of the Aids Helpline in Dublin stretches far beyond the gay community, but the group with which it had twinned in the North was Cara Friend, a gay switchboard in Derry. They won first prize in their category because, as a result of their exchange, the Dublin group had helped the people in Derry to set up a counselling service for Aids victims, something of which Co-operation North might, perhaps, think it had cause to be proud.

Here, one should briefly explain the basis on which these awards are made. Under its Network programme Co-operation North arranges and funds exchanges between adult community-based groups living north and south of the Border. Because the organisation is keen that tangible benefits should result from these exchanges, the groups have to observe quite stringent rules in order to qualify for a relatively modest grant. In particular, they are asked to make a full

Janet Rooney, of the Dublin Aids Helpline, says that one reason given to her for the last-minute change of plan was the recent statement by the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Desmond Connell, that homosexuality is a "disorder".

If that's true, the decision was a shocking error of judgment. At the very least it was insulting and hurtful to those to whom the awards were made. Geraldine McCarthy, who runs the Cork Lesbian Line, told me "To be honest, what we valued was not the money. It was the fact that this was the first public recognition we'd ever received in Ireland that what we're doing is socially useful." It came, she said, after years of facing prejudice in Cork, having their advertisements refused by local newspapers, and so on.

Second, there is the damage which has been done not just to the reputation of Co-operation North, but to the confidence of those who have participated in its scheme or supports what it is trying to do. Any organisation like this, trying to encourage contact and change attitudes at grass-roots level, has to work against intricate layers of prejudice, personal and political. The first reaction is scepticism, that do-gooders of this kind probably mean well but are irrelevant to the real conflict in Northern Ireland. That was my own view until I was dragooned, extremely reluctantly, to take a peripheral part in the project of exchanges between schools, North and South. My impression, that this was useful and constructive, was confirmed by the much more moving experience of taking part in a conference of women's groups, exchanging their experiences and what they had learned from them.

In a week which has seen a pretty depressing Sinn Fein Ard-fheis and the latest meeting between Peter Brooke and Gerry Collins, it may seem strange to some readers that this column should focus on the work of a charitable organisation working with small groups at grass-roots level. But such real hope as exists in Northern Ireland at the moment derives from just such small groups of individuals who, drawing strength from each other, have come to realise that they do not have to conform to the demands of tribe or church or political party. They have learnt not only how to change their minds but to take decisions for themselves. Co-operation North has helped many people along that path. It is extremely depressing to see it bowing to exactly the kind of pressure which it had helped others to reject.