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ROBERT OWEN

(1771–1858)

Peter Gordon

Robert Owen's contribution to the advancement of educational thought and practice is widely acknowledged in textbooks on the history of education. But this, though perhaps one of his main achievements, by no means exhausts them. With his eager, questioning mind and superabundant energy, he explored other aspects of society which he considered required attention and investigation. These included his schemes to establish an enlightened pattern of industrial life to ameliorate many of the problems caused by the Industrial Revolution; experiments with community organization as a basis for international regeneration; and plans to establish a British labour movement with a Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. Many of his notions were taken up and transformed by followers who were termed Owenites and who believed that the economic and social structure could be changed in accordance with the laws of social science.

Effects of the Industrial Revolution

Robert Owen was born in 1771 at Newtown, Montgomeryshire, in Wales. His education was very modest, though by the age of 7 he was already a pupil-teacher and he left school for good two years later. With his business acumen and intelligence, Owen quickly rose to prominence in the industrial world. After a few years apprenticeship as a draper in London, he migrated to Manchester in the late 1780s and at the age of 18 set up his own business.

Owen arrived in a town that had, like many other British northern urban centres, been greatly changed by the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-eighteenth century. The invention of Watt's steam engine and those machines connected with the cotton industry, particularly Richard Arkwright's water frame, changed such work from the domestic to the factory scale. The population of Manchester increased by a 1,000 per cent from 25,000 at the time of Owen's birth to nearly a quarter of a million fifty years later. The demand by the cotton mills for labour was insatiable. The North of England, with its scattered population, could not supply a sufficient work force. The Overseers of the Poor, especially in London and the south, in order to be relieved of the growing burden of supporting the poor from local taxes, offered batches of children from the workhouses to factories in the north. These apprentice children were consigned to their employers from the age of 7, living next door to the mill in 'prentice-houses'. Besides the often-miserable living conditions they had to endure, they laboured from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. with half-hour breaks for breakfast and dinner (Hammond & Hammond, 1949).

In 1802 the Health and Moral of Apprentices Act became law in an attempt to protect the young. It provided, amongst other things, that children's work should be limited to twelve hours a day and that they should receive some form of elementary education. Sir Robert Peel, himself a factory owner and the promoter of the Act, subsequently admitted in the House of Commons that employers and magistrates were rendering the Act inoperative: children were working thirteen or fourteen hours a day at the age of 7 years, and in some cases even younger.

Intellectual influences

Whilst at Manchester, Owen took part in discussions at the Manchester Literacy and Philosophical Society and took the chair for Joseph Lancaster's meetings on the 'Lancasterian' system of elementary education, making at one stage a contribution of £1,000 to the latter. He joined with John Dalton, founder of the atomic theory, and others to form the Manchester College in the early 1790s; at one of the discussions, he clashed with the young Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

It is not easy to trace the sources of Owen's intellectual philosophy. He had lost his belief in Christianity in early youth and concluded, after studying the history of the human race, that man was 'the necessary result of his organization and the conditions by which nature and society surrounded him'. He became an active member of the Manchester Board of Health, set up by his friend Dr. Thomas Percival in 1796 and which was concerned with improving the health and sanitation of people living in the industrialized city (Cole, M., 1971). Through Percival's influence, Owen became aware of the French philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet and Rousseau. His meeting with William Godwin later reinforced his views. Of even more significance was his move to Scotland. In his autobiography, Owen mentions that he was on friendly terms with many of the professors of the Scottish universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, one of whom, George Jardine, a friend of Helvétius and d'Alembert, attempted to relate the study of philosophy 'to the business of active life' and encouraged his students to participate in the organization of their own courses (Stewart & McCann, 1967). On a more general level, the Scottish university tradition was then the benefactor of an intellectual renaissance in moral philosophy during the second half of the eighteenth century with the writings of David Hume, Adam Smith and Patrick Colquhoun. The blending of the views of the French and Scottish Enlightenment, as well as his own experiences in Manchester, were to form the basis for Owen's own theories of education.

A new view of society

After eight years in Manchester, where Owen had accumulated much wealth and experience, he acquired in 1799 the management of the 'very wretched society' of New Lanark on the River Clyde, which had the largest spinning mills in Scotland. David Dale, a strong Presbyterian and a Tory owned the mills. With his business partners, Owen, at the age of 27, not only acquired the mills but also married one of Dale's daughters. He was determined to introduce a more humane regime that would bring about a change in the character and dignity of individual members of the work force. Treated at first with natural suspicion both as an employer and a non-Scot, Owen soon overcame these difficulties. As he later claimed from his Manchester experience:

My treatment of all with whom I came into communication was so natural that it generally gained their confidence, and drew forth only their good qualities to me; and I was often much surprised to discover how much more easily I accomplished my objects than others whose educated acquirements were much superior to mine [...] In consequence of this to me unconscious power over others, I had produced such effects over the workpeople in the factory in the first six months of my management that I had the most complete influence over them, and their order and discipline exceeded that of any other in or near Manchester; and for regularity and sobriety they were an example which none could then imitate. [R. Owen, 1858]

Owen aimed at making New Lanark a well-governed community based on his ideals. Dale had laid the foundations earlier for his future son-in-law in paying attention to the physical conditions of the pauper children in his factories and in providing some modest form of infant education. Owen hoped to carry out an experiment in social living. No child under 10 was employed in the factories;

he abolished pauper apprentice labour and greatly improved the factory conditions of his work force. Commercial success resulted. Although his own venture had proven satisfactory, Owen realized that by being a benevolent autocrat, the underlying problem of social malaise could only be ameliorated rather than solved. He wrote:

As employer and master manufacturer in Lancashire and Lanarkshire, I had done all I could to lighten the evils of those whom I employed; yet with all I could do under our most irrational system for creating wealth, forming character, and conducting all human affairs, I could only to a limited extent alleviate the wretchedness of their conditions, while I knew that society, even at this period, possessed the most ample means to educate, employ, place, and govern, the whole population of the British Empire, so as to make all into fully-formed, highly intelligent, united, and permanently prosperous and happy men and women, superior in all physical and mental qualities (R. Owen, 1858).

How to achieve this end occupied Owen during the first decade at New Lanark. He outlined his proposals for reform in a book *A new view of society, or essays on the principle of the formation of the human character, and the application of the principle to practice* in 1813 and 1814. The first two *Essays* dealt with the need to consider rationally forming the character ‘of that immense mass of population which is now allowed to be so formed as to fill the world with crimes’. The third *Essay* was an account of the progress made at New Lanark for the further improvement of its inhabitants. It is here that Owen expounds his view of the importance of education.

Much good or evil is acquired or taught to children at an early age. Many ‘durable impressions’ are made even in the first year of a child’s life. Therefore children uninstructed or badly instructed suffer injury in their character during their childhood and youth. It was in order to prevent this that the workers’ young children were to receive Owen’s closest attention. In the playground which was built for them at New Lanark each child would be told on his entrance in language he could understand that ‘he is never to injure his play-fellows: but that, on the contrary, he is to contribute all in his power to make him happy’. If this simple precept was followed—and the employment of superintendents was to ensure that there would be no deviation from it—then this behaviour would in time be transmitted to the population as a whole.

Owen had earlier, as has been seen, been an admirer of the Lancasterian monitorial system of education, and the first two *Essays*, written in 1812 and 1813, reflect these principles of obedience, order, regularity, industry and constant attention rather than the need to read, write and calculate. Now in the third and fourth *Essays*, written in 1814, his views had changed considerably:

Either give the poor a rational and useful learning or mock not their ignorance, their poverty, and their misery, by merely instructing them to become conscious of the extent of their degradation under which they exist. And therefore, in pity to suffering humanity, either keep the poor, if you now can, in the state of the most abject ignorance, as near as possible to animal life, or at once determine to form them into rational beings, into useful and effective members of the state.

To this end, Owen prescribed that the curriculum should be the best possible, eschewing traditional attitudes towards the education of the poor. Recognizing that each child had different aptitudes and qualities, he later pointed out that the intention of his system was not to attempt to make all human beings alike. Education was to make everybody ‘good, wise and happy’. Owen did not simply equate education with schooling. The role of parents in the process was stressed: the mother from the birth of a child onwards and certainly in the early years, was a key figure and both parents were urged to display great kindness in manners and feeling.

However, it was not enough to leave to employers and parents the task of raising children in the ways set out by Owen in his fourth *Essay*. It was the most important duty of the well-governed State that it should establish a national system of education for the poor, uniform over the United Kingdom. Whilst praising both Bell and Lancaster’s pioneering efforts in this field, Owen

criticized their pedagogical approaches. Reading and writing are merely instruments by which knowledge may be imparted: they are of little value unless children are taught to make proper use of them. 'The *manner* of giving instruction is one thing, the *instruction itself* another; and no two objects can more distinct.' It is therefore, important to adopt the best manner of instruction whereby a child can understand the objects and characters around him.

Owen's dissatisfaction with the existing provision of education was voiced in unambiguous terms:

[...] enter any one of the schools denominated national, and request the master to show the acquirements of the children. These are called out, and he asks them theological questions to which men of the most profound erudition cannot make a rational reply; the children, however, readily answer as they had been previously instructed; for memory, in this mockery of learning, is all that is required. Thus the child whose natural faculty of comparing ideas, or whose rational powers, shall be the soonest destroyed, if at the same time, he possess a memory to retain incongruities without connection, will become what is termed the first scholar in the class; and three-fourths of the time which ought to be devoted to the acquirement of useful instruction will be really occupied in destroying the mental power of the children (R. Owen, 1814).

His vision of a system of education for the poor and labouring classes was based on the doctrine that 'the state that possesses the best national system of education will be the best governed'. To achieve this end, Owen set out the contents of an Act that Parliament should agree to. It consisted of several far-sighted and comprehensive proposals. These included the establishment of a Ministry for Education staffed by able people; teacher training colleges—'at present there are not any individuals in the kingdom who have been trained to instruct the rising generation'; an overall plan for the manner of instruction, based on a comparison of the various practices of the time; and the appointment to schools by the State of suitable masters. Owen believed that it was also necessary to give accurate information about the actual number of workers in each district, their occupations and the extent of unemployment.

Although some of Owen's ideas on education are at times idiosyncratic and exaggerated, they are basically sound and far-sighted. For example in his second *Essay*, he explained that 'children are, without exception, passive and wonderfully contrived compounds, which by due preparation and accurate attention, founded on a correct knowledge of the subject, may be formed collectively into any human character'.

This passage clearly shows that Owen was not simply a believer in environment as the main determinant of character, but that training, in the form of education, was equally important. On the other hand, as character is formed in infancy, before the child's second year, no general reformation of character is possible unless the foundations of a system of moral education had already been laid. For the development of a well-balanced child, schooling should not begin too early, and when it did begin there should be a large element of recreation and amusement. It was for this reason that children at New Lanark did not start school below the age of 5.

As we shall later see, Owen's views on community coloured his social and economic philosophy and activity. In *A new view of society*, he advanced the view that each individual is not simply a product of his training and environment, but that societies collectively are the product of the forms of training and of social environment in which their members are brought up to adulthood. Society as a whole can inspire in its members a common basis for moral belief (G.D.H. Cole, 1965).

Another aspect of Owen's novel approach to education was that it should be a common right of all children, though his advocacy was in favour of the poorest people in the community. It was for this reason that he refused to employ children in his mills under the age of 10 and reduced the hours of older children in order that they could benefit from the evening classes that he also provided.

Owen did not take a wholly detached view of the benefits, which could accrue, from his

enlightened approach. One result of his beneficence at New Lanark, he wrote in this third *Essay*, was that ‘the time and money so spent, even while such improvements are in progress only, and but half their beneficial results attained, are now producing a return exceeding 50 per cent, and will shortly create profits equal to 100 per cent on the original capital expended in these mental improvements.’ He overstated the case when he declared that ‘man’s character is made for, and not by him’ and perhaps understated the importance of nurture in the educational process.

Nevertheless, *A new view of society* represents a manifesto for a reappraisal of the function and consequences of child education. The emphasis on the moral basis of education is one that is widely accepted by current educational thought. His explanation of the formation of character is of interest and the need for healthy recreation and happiness for young children, with the provision of playgrounds for this purpose, has long been accepted during the early years of primary education.

New Lanark and its schools

A new view of society quickly went through five editions and was also translated into French and German. Now a figure of national significance, Owen determined to put some of his own theories into practice.

He had a good basis on which to build his own vision of education. David Dale, the previous owner of New Lanark and Owen’s father-in-law, had in 1785 established the mills on enlightened lines. Dale believed in the necessity of protecting the health and morals of the 500 young children who worked in his factory, aged between 6 and 16; they were housed in six dormitories (albeit sleeping three to a bed), and were well clothed and fed. They worked from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. and after supper attended classes. There were sixteen teachers, including a writing master, a music master and a sewing mistress, though standards were not high. Owen criticized Dale’s efforts on two grounds: that pupils working daily in the mills for eleven-and-a-half hours were not able to take full advantage of the provision, and that the starting age was too early. Dale also provided two schools, similar to infant and nursery care, for those too young to work: they were the first of their kind in the British Isles (Stewart & McCann, 1967).

Owen spent the first twelve years at New Lanark remodelling the factory and improving the life of the villagers. However, by 1809, his partners in the enterprise had revolted against Owen’s apparent extravagance and had resigned. His new partners from the end of 1813 were William Allen and other Quakers and Jeremy Bentham. One of the provisions among the articles of partnership was for establishing schools ‘on the best models of the British system, or other approved system to which the partners may agree’. He was now ready to realize his ambition. A school of two stories was built, the upper divided into two rooms for the 6 to 14 years olds; the first was fitted with forms and desks, as with the Lancasterian system, the other with natural objects, pictures and maps, and could also be used for singing and dancing. The ground floor was devoted to infant teaching, there being three rooms. Maximum use was made of the building: children used it during the day and by adults during the evening. Some 300 children were educated at the school, with boys and girls in the same classes.

The infant school, part of the Institution for the Formation of Character, was opened on 2 January 1816, claiming to be the first of its kind in Great Britain. Owen appointed as a teacher James Buchanan, a former weaver, and an assistant, Molly Young, then aged 17, both of them from New Lanark. The qualities that Owen looked for were a love of children and willingness to follow his own instructions. No corporal punishment was to be administered, no harsh words were to be uttered by the teachers and the children were not to be ‘annoyed with books’. The young were encouraged to ask questions when their curiosity was aroused and, above all, they were to be happy. There were no prizes or punishments. Robert Dale Owen, Owen’s son, has left an account of life in the infant school:

They were trained to habits of order and cleanliness; they were taught to abstain from quarrels, to be kind to each other. They were amused with children's games, and with stories suited to their capacity. Two large, airy rooms were set apart, one for those under four years, and one for those from four to six. This last room was furnished with paintings, chiefly of animals, and a few maps. It was also supplied with natural objects from the gardens, fields and woods. These suggested themes for conversation, and brief familiar lectures; but there was nothing formal, no tasks to be learned, no readings from books (R.D. Owen, 1874).

Buchanan, a gifted teacher, worked out his own programme for amusing his charges. He played the flute and the children would march behind him down to the bank of the River Clyde, where they were allowed to play and then marched back to school. Singing, dancing and an appreciation of natural objects was encouraged (Smith, 1931). There was also gymnastics, which involved clapping hands and counting numbers. Buchanan, unlike Owen, believed that young children should have some religious knowledge. Owen's business partners and the children's parents demanded that religious instruction should be given. Hymn books and Bibles were subsequently purchased for the school (Browning, 1972). After two years, Owen himself was a frequent visitor and took great pride in the proceedings. One visitor to New Lanark, who witnessed such an occasion, wrote: 'The little creatures run in groups to seize their benefactor by the hand, or to pull him by the coat, with the most artless simplicity.'

A modern curriculum consisted of the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), sewing, history, both ancient and modern, geography, botany and geology. Natural history was emphasized and the pupils collected botanical and geological specimens from the surrounding countryside and displayed them in their classrooms. Owen employed a London teacher to paint large canvases of subjects from natural history and the history of nations that were hung on rollers. Music also played an important part, together with singing and dancing; songs and dances of different countries were taught and choirs of some 150 children gave performances. Although textbooks were not plentiful, Maria Edgeworth's books were acceptable because of their high moral content.

Marching and drilling in the playground provided exercise. Not only would this contribute to the health and spirit of the boys: Owen stipulated that, under the supervision of an appropriate instructor, firearms 'of proportionate weight and size to the age and strength of the boys, shall be provided for them, when also they might be taught to practice and understand the more complicated military movements.'

Several interesting pedagogical techniques were used. Small blocks of wood were employed to help the child in understanding addition and subtraction. Word-and-picture cards assisted in the teaching of reading, and brass letters were available for learning the alphabet. With the older children, parts of speech and grammatical principles were visually depicted as members of the Army, such as General Noun, Colonel Verb, Corporal Adverb and so on. Arithmetic was taught by means of the Pestalozzian table of units and the theory of fractions from the table of squares, where each square was divided up into a number of equal parts. Most subjects in the arts and sciences in the upper school were taught by means of lectures to large groups. In contrast, the pupils were taken out on visits that could sometimes only marginally be labelled as educational.

Perhaps one of the best-known examples of the school's enlightened teaching techniques was with geography, which occupied a prominent place in the curriculum. It had two main objectives: to show the relationship between environment and character (the basis of the early twentieth century approach to the subject) and to give children a sense of geographical location. Pupils stood in a circle round a large map of the world that contained circles with the names of cities and towns omitted. The children used a pointer to challenge each other and all would have a turn. Owen later stated that 'one of our Admirals, who had sailed round the world, said he could not answer many of the questions which some of these children not six years old readily replied to.' Lessons lasted no more than forty-five minutes each, the children attending for five-and-a-half

hours per day. As for clothing, Owen stipulated that it was important that the children should be able to move freely. To this end, they were to wear either Roman-like white togas or Highland dress, including kilts.

A continuation of this education for those who left school at the age of 10 was available in evening classes, with an average of 400 attending. The curriculum was similar to that in the day school. Adults too were able to attend these classes. There were also weekly lectures on chemistry and mechanism and, for recreation, music and dancing (Silver, 1965).

The institution attracted a range of visitors of distinction in many different walks of life. Between 1815 and 1825, there were 20,000 names inscribed in the Visitors' Book. Owen, at the height of his popularity, could boast that he had shown the New Lanark schools to, amongst other, Prince Esterhazy, the Czar of Russia, the Grand Duke Nicholas, Brougham, Canning, Cobbett, Malthus, James Mill, Francis Place and Ricardo (Jeffreys, 1952).

Owen's views on education were derived from a number of different sources. His idea of 'natural' rewards and punishments was clearly derived from Rousseau. Bentham had earlier postulated the notion of infant schools and he may have known of the de Fellenberg's work from an account published in William Allen's periodical *The philanthropist* in 1813. Godwin's views on the idea of progress, derived from Helvétius, was another source with its belief that man's character is the result of his intellectual and moral environment and that it could be improved by training. David Williams, a political radical who was influenced by Rousseau and established a school in Chelsea in 1774, was another obvious influence. Two years after opening the Institution for the Formation of Character at New Lanark, Owen visited the Continent of Europe, meeting several leading educationists. Owen, no modest man, wrote: 'My public proceedings at this period [1817] were considered to be several hundreds, some said thousands of years, in advance of that period.'

After visiting notable people in France, Owen travelled to Switzerland, where he spent some time observing three well-known schools for the poor. Oberlin, who had set up a catholic school at Fribourg, lacked an infant department. At Yverdon, he visited Pestalozzi—'another good and benevolent man'. Owen believed that 'his theory was good, but his means and experiences were very limited, and his principles were those of the old system', though he admitted that the school was more advanced than others. As was previously mentioned, however, Owen subsequently adopted the Pestalozzian method of arithmetic for his own schools. The last visit, of three days' duration, was to meet de Fellenberg at Hofwyl. Owen was greatly impressed by him, calling him 'a man of no ordinary mould' who ran his establishment on democratic lines. In exchange, de Fellenberg stated his admiration for the New Lanark system, though there were no boys under 10 in his school. Owen was so impressed with de Fellenberg that he sent his two eldest sons, Robert Dale and William, respectively 16 and 14 years of age, to finish their education with him.

Probably the answer to the origins of Owen's educational thought is that given by G.D.H. Cole in his *The life of Robert Owen*, that he owed very little to others, arriving at largely similar conclusions with other pioneers by a different road based on his own experience and peculiar philosophy of character (G.D.H. Cole, 1965).

After the initial success of the schools, difficulties arose. In 1819 two of his Quaker partners, William Allen and Joseph Foster, visited New Lanark to investigate the claim that dancing and music were taking precedence over religion. One of the methods used to discredit Owen was instituted by a committee of factory owners set up when Owen was fighting to improve a Factory Bill which was then before Parliament. The New Lanark clergyman, Mr. Menzies, was ordered to keep a watch over Owen and reported to the factory owners in London: subsequently rumours about his irreligiousness began to be circulated.

Although Owen brushed these charges aside, he was eventually, in January 1824, forced to sign an agreement which ended his connection with the school. Weekly readings of the scriptures were instituted and dancing became a paying subject only. The wearing of kilts for boys over 6 was

banned, as was singing. Many of the teachers were dismissed and one of the new appointments was a master trained in the Lancasterian system. One redeeming feature was that Allen introduced lectures in chemistry, mechanics and other scientific subjects into the curriculum. Owen now resigned from the management of the institution and thus this valuable experiment came to an end.

Despite these setbacks, Owen had provided inspiration for others who followed. Lord Brougham, impressed with Owen's endeavours, in December 1818 discussed with the latter the possibility of setting up an infant school in Westminster. A committee, consisting of Brougham, James Mill and Zachary Macaulay, the historian's father, was formed and £1,000 collected. Accordingly, a school was opened in Westminster with James Buchanan, Owen's former New Lanark teacher, in charge. Buchanan carried on from where he had left off at New Lanark. He remained there until 1822, when he moved to new premises.

During his time in Westminster, Buchanan was introduced to Samuel Wilderspin, who was offered the superintendence of a second infant school, in Spitalfields in the East End of London. This school, opened in 1820, was conducted on similar lines to that of Owen's, with the young child at the centre of the educational process. Wilderspin, who created a national network of infant schools, acknowledged Owen's contribution to the development of the system as well as giving him personal help, but as a covert Swedenborgian, Wilderspin disagreed with Owen's philosophy. There was, however, a large measure of agreement as to how an infant school should be organized (McCann & Young, 1982). In Scotland, David Stow, a young Glaswegian merchant, was inspired by Owen to open a school in that city in 1816 for poor children, employing the 'picturing out' method in his lessons to capture the interest and imagination of his pupils (Smith, 1931). He also pointed out, for the first time, the difference between instruction and training. Ten years later, Stow founded the Glasgow Infant Society and began to train infant schoolteachers.

Whilst it is true that Owen's influence at New Lanark, and that of his disciples Buchanan, Stow and Wilderspin, generated a climate suitable for the encouragement of infant education, there was no great enthusiasm to introduce it at the national level. The real impetus for this came from a different source, the acceptance of Continental reformers, particularly Pestalozzi and Fröbel, through the advocacy of Dr. Charles Mayo from the 1820s onwards.

The New Harmony experiment

The economic and social distress, which immediately followed the Napoleonic Wars, was a spur to action for Owen. At the end of his Continental visits to schools, he attended the conference of Great Powers at Aix-la-Chapelle and presented to it his *Two memorials on behalf of the working classes*. In them he pleaded for international action to restore the purchasing power of the workers and to establish schemes of education for the development of character. Two years later, in his *Address to the working classes* (1819), he reiterated his plan to set up an agricultural village, which he himself would superintend, and which would be self-supporting and based on communitarian principles. This plan was further elaborated two years' later in his *Report to the County of Lanark*. One of the principal features was the education of the children who 'shall be trained as though they were literally all of one family'. There would be two schools, one for 2 to 6 year olds and one for those aged 6 to 12. The children were to be trained to acquire useful knowledge which would 'supersede the present defective and tiresome system of book learning'. Training and education, Owen insisted, must be viewed as intimately connected with the employment available in the village.

G.D.H. Cole has called the *Report to the County of Lanark* the real beginning of Owenism as a social, or socialist, system (Cole, G.D.H., 1965). 'The natural standard of value', Owen stated, 'is in principle human labour, on the combined manual and mental power of men called into action'. Under Owen's system, there would be a new standard of value based on productive power in which the producer should have a fair proportion of the wealth he creates. Owen's Villages of Co-

operation, as he called them, would be based on the principle of united labour, expenditure and property, and equal privileges. Agriculture would take priority over manufacture—it was to be essentially a ‘spade culture’—and the evils of the division of labour eliminated.

Owen had attempted to gain a wider platform for his views by standing for Parliament when a vacancy occurred for Lanark Burghs in 1819 and at the General Election in 1820, but on both occasions he was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, an opportunity later presented itself for Owen to carry out his community experiment. In the summer of 1824, Richard Flower, an Englishman, visited Owen from America. Flower had been instructed by the Harmony Society, a community consisting of emigrant German peasants founded by George Rapp, to sell their property, consisting of 20,000 acres of uncultivated land in Indiana, on the banks of the Wabash River. Owen had known of the Rappites, who followed the principles of combined labour and expenditure, as early as 1815. Seeing the possibilities, Owen bought the village and land in April 1825.

Owen delivered an address in Washington, where his fame had already preceded him: in one of the audiences was the President of the United States, John Quincy Adams, as well as several members of Congress. People flocked to Harmony, now called New Harmony, from all parts of the country. Some 800 arrived in the first few weeks, not all for altruistic reasons. Owen personally directed the community. In January 1826, on his return from a visit to England, Owen, who was pleased with progress made in the experiment, drew up the articles of union entitled ‘The New Harmony Community of Equality’. All members of the community were to be considered as one family, receiving similar food, clothing and education and were to be accommodated in similar houses.

One of the men whom Owen had brought back with him was William Maclure, a Scotsman with a passionate enthusiasm for popular education. A man of great wealth, Maclure agreed to advance some of the capital required to set up an agricultural school for the children of the poor, similar to that of the de Fellenberg’s. Owen had already established a school at New Harmony for some 130 children who were boarded, clothed and educated at public expense. Maclure now took charge. The schools henceforth were run as a separate undertaking under the name of the Education Society. Maclure, to combat idleness amongst the pupils and to help in paying for their subsistence, purchased from Owen 900 acres of land on which the children laboured. Soon there were more than 400 pupils from the age of 2 upwards. Owen’s two sons were employed as teachers.

The schools—boys and girls were separated—were boarding institutions. A disused church was a workshop for boys who were intending to become joiners and shoemakers. They slept on the floor above the church in cribs, three to a row, so their places of instruction and sleeping accommodation were very close together. A former pupil of the girls’ school wrote an account of her time at New Harmony:

In summer the girls wore dresses of coarse linen with a coarse plaid costume for Sunday or for special occasions. In winter they wore heavy woollen dresses. At rising a detail of the girls was sent out to do the milking, and this milk, with mush cooked in large kettles, constituted the essential part of the morning meal, which the children were expected to finish in fifteen minutes. We had bread but once a week, on Saturday. I thought if I ever got out I would kill myself eating sugar and cake. We marched in military order, after breakfast, to Community House No. 2. I remember that there were blackboards covering one side of the schoolroom, and that we had wires, with balls on them, by which we learnt to count. We also had singing exercises by which we familiarized ourselves with lessons in various branches. At dinner we generally had soup, at supper mush and milk again. We went to bed at sundown in little bunks suspended in rows by cords from the ceiling. [...] At regular intervals we used to be marched to the Community apothecary’s shop, where a dose that tasted like sulphur was impartially dealt out to each pupil. Children regularly in the boarding school were not allowed to see their parents, except at rare intervals. I saw my father and mother twice in two years.

Under the articles of The New Harmony Community of Equality, the community was to be divided

into six departments—agriculture; manufacturers; literature; science and education; domestic economy; general economy and commerce. Each department was sub-divided into occupations. Each occupation chose an ‘intendent’, who in turn chose four ‘superintendents’. These members, together with a secretary, formed the executive council with the real estate vested in the community as a whole. As Frank Podmore, Owen’s biographer, wrote: ‘Thus the Society at one step emerged from the chrysalis stage of modified individualism into the winged glory of pure communism’ (Podmore, 1906).

The new constitution gave rise to dissension. A Captain Macdonald objected to the system of representative government. Indeed, the existence of intendents and superintendents in a ‘community of equality’ was in itself an outstanding inequality. In addition, the community was too large and there were too many differences of religion and national characteristics to achieve homogeneity.

As a result, two groups of settlers formed their own groups on the outer parts of the estate. In both cases, they were to invest their executive powers in a council of fathers, consisting of people aged at least 65 in one case and 55 in another. By March 1827, the parent community was dissolved. It was reorganized into four communities based on occupations, one of which was the Education Society, still under the direction of William Maclure. Owen warned members that, unless they joined one of the daughter communities, they must either support themselves or leave New Harmony. Many took the latter course.

The ten communities that Owen left in July 1827 did not flourish. Owen admitted on his return to the United States in April 1828 that the experiment was a failure. Addressing the New Harmony inhabitants, he said:

I tried here a new course for which I was induced to hope that fifty years of political liberty had prepared the American population—that is, to govern themselves advantageously. I supplied land, houses and the use of much capital [...] but experience proved that the attempt was premature to unite a number of strangers not previously educated for the purpose, who should carry on extensive operations for their common interest, and live together as a common family.

Owen left the community for the last time in June 1828. He had lost a large amount of money through unscrupulous speculators, and the daughter communities within a few years had ceased to exist. His four sons remained in New Harmony and became American citizens, as did William Maclure until his health gave way. Maclure left money to establish a Working Men’s Institute and a Public Library there.

Although as an example of practical socialism the experiment was a failure, for more than a generation New Harmony was the centre of intense social and educational interest; other communities were started based on similar lines. Owen himself had not lost faith in his venture; immediately on his return to England he proposed a similar venture in the Mexican Republic. Owen arrived in Mexico in the middle of a revolution where he obtained from the government a promise of a large extent of land for his experiment. Owen imposed the condition that an Act should first be passed granting freedom of worship, but the Mexican Congress threw this out and the proposal came to nothing.

Socialism and the final phase

Owen’s vision of co-operative communities, as set out in his *A new view of society*, and which could be established by proprietors, parishes or associations of mechanics or tradesmen, flourished in the United Kingdom. A meeting of London printers on 22 January 1821 had proposed that a ‘Co-operative and Economical Society’ based on Owenite principles, should be set up. It was, however, not to be ‘a spade paradise’ but located in Spa Fields within the City of London itself and

the community lived under a strict code of moral precepts (Garnett, 1972).

A successor to the Spa Fields experiment was the London Co-operative Society which, in 1826, drew up 'Articles of Agreement for the Formation of a Community within Fifty Miles of London on Principles of Mutual Co-operation'. There would be a system of mutual instruction and self-government, women would be freed from domestic chores, and all members of the community would undertake some tasks in agriculture and in industry.

Owen was in America from 1824 to 1829 and was not directly involved with such initiatives, though his advocacy of community and the importance of education were the bases of many co-operative ventures. One northern correspondent wrote to Owen in 1832:

I have to request your opinion on an undertaking that is of importance to the co-operative system—it is the wish of the Co-operative Societies of the north of England [...] to establish a school for 500 children from 4 years old to 14 years [...] and I know your experience will enable you to give us some valuable information on this subject (quoted in Silver, 1965).

There were also attempts to found socialist schools outside those of the co-operative societies. In London, at least three were founded by the mid-1830s. Owenite schools were also to be found in the industrial centres, for example Lancashire, Cheshire, Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire (Simon, 1960).

Although Owenism, or 'Co-operation', gained ground rapidly in the 1820s, the majority of the workers were unaware of these movements until the next decade. Whilst Owen was in America, Owenite socialists such as William Thompson and William King advanced Owenism beyond the argument that co-operative communities would in themselves lead to a just society. The notion of 'co-operators' looked to a new social order based on production for use instead of profit and closely linked with trade unions. Owenism was the basis for this movement, though Owen himself was at first lukewarm. But, as unionism began to spread throughout the country in response to economic grievances, co-operators and unionists embraced Owen's millennial ideas. By 1833, Owen was seen as the recognized leader of the trade union movement: in the same year, he was involved in the founding of the National Equitable Labour Exchange.

At a congress in London in October of that year, all such associations intended for the improvement of the working classes were urged to form themselves into lodges and to make their own laws and regulations in order to emancipate themselves. In the spring of the following year, the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union was formed. The union adopted Owen's views on co-operation, the formation of character, the influence of environment, the emancipation of women and, above all, the importance of education for its members, particularly children. But, by the end of the year, the Consolidated Union was no longer in existence. In March, the 'Tolpuddle Martyrs' were sentenced to seven years' transportation (banishment to Australia) for administering unlawful oaths in forming a lodge under the Consolidated Union; and the leaders of the movement were also divided on aspects of policy. The government, alarmed at the potential power of the union, imposed repression and lockouts. Although trade unionism was not eliminated, the working class movement turned from co-operation to Chartism, an overtly political movement, and Owen's brief leadership came to an end.

Though this was his high point of influence, Owen thereafter continued to develop his ideas but to a diminishing audience. By May 1835 he had addressed the inaugural meeting of the Association of All Classes of All Nations and followed this with *The book of the new moral world*, which appeared in parts between 1836 and 1844. Owen believed that a great moral revolution was at hand and that all classes should unite in order to make it successful. The book was a complete statement of his educational, moral and religious theories. Among the eighteen causes that Owen blamed for the evils of society, unequal educational opportunities was one of them. In the eight ages of man in the new Moral World, the first age, birth to 5, would give the child the type of

training and education, which the New Lanark Infant School had pioneered. From 5 to 10 the child would 'discard the useless toys of the Old World' and instead receive his/her education by actually handling objects, by conversation with older persons and by helping with domestic duties. In the third class, from 10 to 15, adolescents would learn and practice the more advanced of the useful arts and handicrafts, and in these five years advance rapidly in knowledge of all the sciences. By the age of the sixth class, 25 to 30, all the wealth required by the community would be being produced: as a result, work would occupy but two hours a day, the remainder of the time would be devoted to study and social intercourse.

Some of the ideas expressed in the book, such as the condemnation of marriage on the ground that it perverts and degrades a natural and lawful instinct, and equality between the sexes (Taylor, 1983) were coolly received. Even his Association of All Classes and All Nations had a patriarchal rather than a democratic structure. It was to consist of a president called the Father (Owen himself) and a series of councils based on age 'consisting of such friends as the Social Father may have been advised as the most harmonious in action and with the other' (Yeo, 1971). Owen further alienated the clerical establishment in his pamphlet *The catechism of the moral world*, first published in 1838, where he stated that, in the millennium, there would be no temples and no forms of ceremonies: the religion of the future was 'The Religion of Truth' (Podmore, 1906).

Between 1835 and 1845, no less than five Owenite communities were established in the United Kingdom. Owen's last attempt at community-making was at Queenswood, or Harmony Hall, a model village based mainly on agricultural production. Built on a grand scale with splendid buildings and equipment, it included a school for residents and for Owenites nation-wide. Every member of the community also attended classes in the morning and evening. There was a range of activities including mathematics, dancing, elocution, instrumental and vocal music, grammar, geography, agriculture and botany. Owen was Governor of Queenswood for three years but was turned out of office in 1844. The community closed in the following year but the school continued for several years, conducted on Owenite lines.

Now aged 74, and no longer listened to by many of his disciples, Owen continued to make speeches that emphasized his belief in the supreme importance of education from birth to old age. In September 1858, Owen, already a sick man, determined to attend the meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science at Liverpool to deliver in person his last message to mankind. 'This', he wrote to a friend, 'I believe will be my last effort for the public, and I intend it to be a crowning one.' During the course of his address Owen faltered and was taken to his bed where he became unconscious. Owen died on 17 November 1885 aged 84.

Owen's beliefs in education stemmed from his lifelong protest against poverty and unhappiness. His rejection of religion as a panacea was based on his belief that man, as a rational being, was self-perfectible. The role which character formation can play in forming the good society underlay his pioneering work in establishing the New Lanark schools. He began to lose his influence over the middle classes after 1816 and this was even more obvious by the end of the New Harmony experiments. His creed was often obscure and his arguments inconsistent. As E.P. Thompson has pointed out, Owen evaded the realities of political power, believing that co-operative socialism would simply displace capitalism by example and by education (Thompson, 1968).

Nevertheless, he exercised a powerful influence in appealing to the labouring masses and was for a brief time their leader. The co-operative society movement owed much to him. Apart from his work with Labour Exchanges and trade unionism, Owen, who propounded his views in no fewer than 130 works (Harrison, 1969), inspired a number of individuals who formulated a more scientific form of Owenite Socialism. Owen's communities, based on co-operation and human fellowship with the school at the centre, were copied in other parts of the world. The Chartists, who turned to a more overt political approach than Owen, followed the same tradition in their educational activities, especially with reference to adult education. His influence can also be seen in

some of the schools of the early progressivists in the present century.

Owen's message, that training and education must be viewed as intimately connected, is echoed in many education systems today. As Frank Podmore, in placing Owen in his historical setting, wrote:

He saw things which were hidden from their [i.e. his contemporaries'] eyes, which are perhaps not fully discovered to ours. And when a later generation shall pronounce impartial judgement upon the men and the forces which worked for righteousness in the nineteenth century, a place will be found for Robert Owen amongst those whose dreams have helped to reshape the world' (Podmore, 1906).

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