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INTRODUCTION

Robert Owen lived not so much a long life as a sequence of historical episodes. To follow him through the panorama of his activities is to follow at a fundamental level and at crucial points the complex history of the establishment of predominantly industrial, urban Britain. It is to touch some of the tenderest points of the suffering and bewilderment which accompanied it. It is to witness immense efforts to establish humane controls over the free-running processes of change, to build new hopes and objectives, to organise for their accomplishment. Cotton, factory legislation, education, trade unionism, cooperation, rationalism—each may have its heroes of a stature at least that of Owen, but in all of these, and more, Owen was there; never passively, always deeply involved in the attempt to cope sharply and seriously with the disconcerting implications of great changes. Owen was not a titan, but the episodes he fashioned add up to a contribution to British social development that was titanic.

He began, and in many respects remained, a child of the eighteenth century. He was born in 1771, at Newtown in Wales. He had a brief but probably effective small-town schooling, and educated himself beyond it. From the age of ten, first in Stamford, where he spent three years, then for a short time in London, and finally in Manchester, he worked as a draper's assistant. At the heart of the cotton revolution, in Manchester, he became involved in a partnership to produce cotton machinery and then, in 1792, he became manager of a large, modern cotton-spinning mill belonging to Peter

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Drinkwater.[1] The following is Owen's summary of his Manchester career from this point:

I undertook to manage the spinning establishments of the Late Mr. Drinkwater of Manchester, at the latter place and at Northwich in Cheshire, in which occupation I remained three or four years. I then formed a partnership to carry on a cotton-spinning business with Messrs. Moulson and Scarth of Manchester; built the Chorlton Mills, and commenced a new firm, under the designation of the Chorlton Twist Company, along with Messrs. Borrodale and Atkinson, of London, and Messrs. H. and J. Barton and Co. of Manchester.[2]

In the 1790s, in Manchester, he learned and improved upon the techniques of fine spinning. He was also schooled in industrial administration, and—among the intellectual circles of the town—in the language of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. This was the first episode.

The second began when in 1800, as a partner in the Chorlton Twist Co., he took over management of the New Lanark Cotton Mills, which he had persuaded his partners to buy. Through several changes of partners, resistance from the population of the village and elsewhere, he pursued for a quarter of a century his schemes to establish a new pattern of industrial life, a new approach to the social problems of early nineteenth-century Britain. He improved housing and food supplies, the appearance and health of the village. He reorganised the

[1] Accounts of Owen's early life rely on *The Life of Robert Owen by himself* (1857). An important corrective is W. H. Chaloner, *Robert Owen, Peter Drinkwater and the Early Factory System in Manchester* (1954).

[2] Written in 1817, reprinted in *The Life of Robert Owen*, IA (supplementary appendix, 1858), 82.

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mills and won the confidence of the workers. He proclaimed a public gospel of tolerance and kindness and worked to accomplish them. He dispensed with the employment of pauper apprentices, raised the age at which children were admitted to employment, and created the first system of infant education in Britain. Against a background of the reluctant or tentative provision of education in England, and the declining standard of parish education in Scotland, he built a model for children up to the age of ten which no one in the nineteenth century was able to surpass.

His reputation was by the mid 1810s internationally established. *A New View of Society*, which he wrote in 1812–13, and first sold publicly in 1816, is one of the crucial texts of British social history and his contemporaries discussed it as such. He had a message of social reorganisation which he began to preach more and more emphatically, and he accepted the challenge in 1824 to create a model community in the United States.

At the beginning of this, the third episode, Owen had long been an associate of the great and the powerful. To list those with whom he corresponded, mixed, discussed and argued would be to list most of the names of importance in Britain in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. When he bought from the Rappite Community their land at Harmony, Indiana, he hoped to demonstrate by an experiment in community organisation what could be the basis for a whole international regeneration. His major attention, though not the whole of his time, between 1824 and 1829, was concentrated on the American New Harmony project, but slowly and relentlessly it failed. By the end of the twenties Owen had lost a great deal of his fortune, and most of his

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influential friends. Owen the successful cotton employer and social theorist had, in the difficult years at the end of the Napoleonic wars, been of interest to them. Owen the social experimentalist and propagandist, when the great and the powerful had regained their composure and confidence, was not.

In the face of disaster or defeat of any kind Owen never faltered. When, after 1829, he began to pick up the threads, he found to his surprise that a new audience and new allies had emerged in Britain. The fourth episode lasted until 1834, and in it Owen became one of the most important pioneers of the British labour movement. Owen's pioneering had, indeed, begun long before, but only as a by-product of his proclamation of a creed of community and humanity. Paternalist then and always, he had seen no further in *A New View of Society*, for example, than a vision of a humane, paternalistic reformation of society. Now he found working men who accepted his vision, but wished to take part in implementing it. Working-class radicals, after difficult years of repression, alert in the twenties to new means of organisation and receptive to ideals which offered any prospect of challenging, changing or by-passing the relentless march of an inhumane society, saw a message of hope in the doctrines of Owen. Onto other traditions, other ideals, they grafted Owen's vision of community, of education, of a society founded on principles of cooperation.

For five years or so, hesitantly at first, Owen became absorbed in the activities of a politically and organisationally reawakening labour movement; he had discovered a force which derived at least some of its vigour from his ideas; he sought to harness it (and it was not unwilling to be harnessed) to attain a tangible vision.

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Working-class and radical cooperators had been trying to establish Owenite communities since the very beginning of the 1820s. The first such attempt was the London Co-operative and Economical Society, established in 1821; its progress was recorded in *The Economist*, begun in the same year to explain, it announced, 'the new system of Society projected by Robert Owen'. Orbiston, the first major Owenite experiment in community organisation, began in 1825. By the time of Owen's return from the New World, the number of Owenite cooperative societies ran into hundreds.

This was part of the ground out of which Owen's fourth episode arose. It witnessed, under the driving impetus of Owen himself and the growing register of Owenite thinkers and organisers, the brief period of Owen's mass working-class basis and influence. From 1831 dates the national efflorescence of the movement under Owen's leadership, aimed at cooperative effort towards the establishment of communities. From 1832 date Owen's attempts to establish the Labour Exchange as a means of interchanging cooperatively produced goods through the medium of 'labour notes' which reflected the value of the producer's labour. From 1832 date Owen's first newspaper, *The Crisis*, and his first organisation aimed at popular propaganda—the Association of the Intelligent and Well Disposed of the Industrious Classes for removing the Causes of Ignorance and Poverty by Education and Employment. From 1832 also date the beginnings of the commitment of wide sections of the trade union movement to the Owenite cause, culminating in his Grand National Consolidated Trades Union with its dramatic but short-lived existence in 1834.

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By 1835 Owen, now well into his sixties, was plunging into his fifth period. He had lost his mass organisational support. If he had been over-eager, and too much caught up in the passions of class warfare, his socialism (as it now was) and his free-thought crusade were matters for rational, reasonable persuasion. From the mid thirties Owen's organisation frequently changed its name and the title of its newspaper (though for most of the time *The New Moral World* was the principal part), but its central purpose was, by careful organisation, reasoned debate and constant propaganda, to win over the minds of men.

Owen died on 17 November 1858. For the quarter of a century since Owenite trade unionism and cooperation had reached their zenith and declined, he and his organised followers had patiently reiterated their message of human community. But the dynamic of social movements, having absorbed Owenite energies, had by then come to lie elsewhere.

This brief narrative, of course, does less than justice even to the outline of Owen's life, which is, in most respects, a familiar story. To some aspects of the narrative we shall return; others, Owen's writings in the selection here made, including from his *Life*, will illuminate. There are, however, three precise questions to which we need to devote attention. First, if a preoccupation with education was a constant through all Owen's episodes, how did he arrive at it? Secondly, what, particularly in the eyes of his contemporaries, were the salient points of attraction in his educational ideas? And, thirdly, what happened to them?

'It must have been desperately hard', H. L. Beales has reflected, 'to know what was going on in the earlier

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phase of industrialization.'[1] It was hard because the growth of industry, its new disciplines and demands brought confusion. Its impact on the patterns of lives in new urban concentrations brought confusion. Its effect on traditional skills, its disturbance of traditional family and social routines and expectations, brought confusion. Although industrialisation did not effect a total cataclysm, the final decades of the eighteenth century and the early ones of the nineteenth did experience great discontinuities of social change. In the first half century or so of major industrialisation, however, the new productive developments wrestled with resilient traditions. Much that we have associated with nineteenth-century developments was, in fact, as Peter Laslett has suggested in *The World we have lost* (1965), a feature of pre-industrial society. Much of pre-industrial England, conversely, persisted longer than we have sometimes allowed for. Survivals, as G. Kitson Clark puts it,

> are in fact to be found round every Victorian corner. Habits, patterns of behaviour, attitudes of mind, conditions of living which had come down from the eighteenth century persisted not only in the life and practices of the aristocracy but also in the ways of life and thought, and where there was not much conscious thought in the instincts and customs, of people much lower down the social scale.[2]

The industrial revolution clearly did not create the poverty, or the disease, malnutrition and low expectation of life that were outstanding aspects of the new towns: it intensified them.

It was in the cotton industry, and in Lancashire above

[1] *The Industrial Revolution 1750–1850* (1958 ed.), p. 20.
[2] *The Making of Victorian England* (1962), p. 59.

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all, that the tensions of the new industrialism were at their most acute. A great deal of discussion has taken place about the complex factors which firmly projected Britain in the last two decades of the eighteenth century into a self-sustaining industrial revolution. The central fact, however, is clear: some time in the 1780s 'the shackles were taken off the productive power of human societies, which henceforth became capable of the constant, rapid and up to the present limitless multiplication of men, goods and services'.[1] Developments in agriculture, trade, technology, transport and the minds of men had combined, by the time Owen entered the cotton industry, to establish a new industrial order clustered around cotton. For the first time in history 'a great staple industry had been established on the basis of a natural resource that could not be domestically produced'.[2] Owen had, in coming to Manchester, come to the hub of these developments and of rapid, uncontrolled urban growth.

'Until the reign of George III', it has been suggested, 'a town was regarded as improving a landscape. A city was a glorious and beautiful thing, an object to be proud of.'[3] The industrial town, however, in its early stages was not *regarded* as anything; it was not intended as anything, it simply grew, and with it grew the human problems which are familiar landmarks of nineteenth-century social history, including the loss of an understood framework of social relationships and behaviour that had been characteristic of the lives of people before they crowded into towns.

It is important, however, to keep sight of the fact

[1] E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution* (1962), p. 28.
[2] Phyllis Deane, *The First Industrial Revolution* (1965), p. 64.
[3] William Ralph Inge, *The Victorian Age* (1922), p. 20.

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that many features of social life were continuous across the reaches of the industrial revolution. The beautiful town had also been a repository of disease; the haphazardly growing town offered a more concentrated picture of negligent and mortal social organisation. In describing the gamut of loss, adjustment and pain through which industrialisation caused many sections of the people to pass, Edward Thompson reminds us of both 'the continuing traditions and the context that has changed'. We must not, in emphasising the newness of the cotton mills, underestimate 'the continuity of political and cultural traditions in the making of working-class communities'.[1]

Even the difficult and important debate that has taken place about the effect of the industrial revolution on the standard of living in the half century or more from 1780 has been concerned with—overall—small shifts in averages: 'whichever way it went, the net change was relatively slight'.[2]

Manchester, however, and its population, were not averages. Nor, indeed, can the industrial revolution as a whole be thought of very profitably in terms of averages: 'The older "cataclysmic" view of the Industrial Revolution must still be accepted...The process of industrialisation is necessarily painful. It must involve the erosion of traditional patterns of life. But it was carried through with exceptional violence in Britain.'[3] Manchester has, of course, a long history. The cotton trade had become important in the late seventeenth century, and by 1729 the town had a population of about 15,000. It had even petitioned for the creation of a

[1] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), pp. 24 and 193.
[2] Deane, *The First Industrial Revolution*, p. 250.
[3] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 445.

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university in Manchester in 1640.[1] Its population was over 40,000 in the late 1780s, was over 70,000 by 1801, and reached 142,000 by 1831. Manchester and Salford together had 90,400 in 1800. Fifty years later they had 388,500.[2] In the short and the long run this growth and all that it involved were of the order of a cataclysm. By the thirties and forties Manchester had become the symbol of industrial civilisation. It had also become the symbol of urban disaster. It was a totally new kind of urban phenomenon, and to a Robert Owen, out of Newtown and Stamford, it must, in the 1790s even, have been of cataclysmic proportions. It is from this starting-point of his involvement in the process of industrialisation and urbanisation that Owen set out towards a New View of Society.

If it was hard, in this period, to know 'what was going on', it was the finding of bearings that was hardest. Owen found an intellectual position, a tradition and a momentum of conviction in the Enlightenment. It is necessary, if we are to arrive at a rounded answer to the first of the questions we are seeking to answer—how Owen arrived at his preoccupation with education—to understand what he made of his antecedents. In the history of English thought this is a relationship of no small importance.

The facts we have of *how* Owen arrived at his intellectual stance are brief and here only of passing interest. In Manchester in the nineties he was a member of the extremely important Literary and Philosophical Society and was close to its President, Dr Thomas

[1] Michael Sadler, 'The story of education in Manchester', in W. H. Brindley (ed.), *The Soul of Manchester* (1929).
[2] Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (1963), p. 85; Adna Ferrin Weber, *The Growth of Cities* (1963 ed.), p. 450.

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