

# Robert Owen

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**Robert Owen** (14 May 1771–17 Nov 1858), born in Newtown, Montgomeryshire, Wales was a social reformer and one of the founders of socialism and the cooperative movement.

Owen's philosophy was based on three intellectual pillars:

- first, no one was *responsible for his will and his own actions*, because *his whole character is formed independently of himself*; people are products of their environment, hence his support for education and labour reform, rendering him a pioneer in human capital investment.
- Second, *all religions are based on the same absurd imagination*, that make man *a weak, imbecile animal; a furious bigot and fanatic; or a miserable hypocrite*; (in dotage, he embraced Spiritualism).<sup>[1]</sup>
- Third, support for the putting out system instead of the factory system.



A portrait of Robert Owen

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## Biography

### Early Life

Owen was born in Newtown, Powys, then a small market town in Montgomeryshire, Mid Wales, the sixth child of seven. His father had a small business as a saddler and ironmonger. Owen's mother came from one of the prosperous farming families; here, young Owen received almost all his school education, which terminated at the age of ten. After serving in a draper's shop for some years, in 1787 he settled in

Manchester.

## Philanthropy in New Lanark (1800)

During a visit to Glasgow he fell in love with Caroline Dale, the daughter of the New Lanark mill's proprietor David Dale. Owen induced his partners to purchase New Lanark, and after his marriage with Caroline in September 1799, he set up home there. He was manager and part owner of the mills (January 1810). Encouraged by his great success in the management of cotton mills in Manchester, he hoped to conduct New Lanark on higher principles and focus less on commercial principles.

The mill of New Lanark had been started in 1785 by Dale and Richard Arkwright. The water-power afforded by the falls of the Clyde made it a great attraction. About two thousand people had associations with the mills. Five hundred of them were children who were brought at the age of five or six from the poorhouses and charities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. The children had been well treated by Dale, but the general condition of the people was very unsatisfactory. Many of the workers were in the lowest levels of the population; theft, drunkenness, and other vices were common; education and sanitation were neglected; and most families lived in only one room. The respectable country people refused to submit to the long hours and demoralising drudgery of the mills.

Many employers operated the truck system, whereby payment to the workers was made in part or totally by tokens. These tokens had no value outside the mill owner's "truck shop." The owners were able to supply shoddy goods to the truck shop and still charge top prices. A series of "Truck Acts" (1831-1887) stopped this abuse. The Acts made it an offence not to pay employees in common currency. Owen opened a store where the people could buy goods of sound quality at little more than wholesale cost, and he placed the sale of alcohol under strict supervision. He sold quality goods and passed on the savings from the bulk purchase of goods to the workers. These principles became the basis for the Co-operative shops in Britain that continue to trade today.

His greatest success, however, was in the support of the young, to which he devoted special attention. He was the founder of infant childcare in Great Britain, especially in Scotland. Though his reform ideas resemble European reform ideas of the time, he was likely not influenced by the overseas views; his ideas of the ideal education were his own.

Though at first regarded with suspicion as a stranger, he soon won the confidence of his people. The mills continued to have great commercial success, but some of Owen's schemes involved considerable expense, which displeased his partners. Tired at last of the restrictions imposed on him by men who wished to conduct the business on the ordinary principles, Owen, in 1813, arranged to have them bought out by new found investors. These, who included Jeremy Bentham and a well-known Quaker, William Allen, were content to accept just £5000 return on their capital, allowing Owen a freer scope for his philanthropy. In the same year, Owen first authored several essays in which he expounded on the principles which underlay his education philosophy.

Owen had originally been a follower of the classical liberal and utilitarian Jeremy Bentham. However, as time passed Owen became more and more socialist, whereas Bentham thought that free markets (in particular, the rights for workers to move and choose their employers) would free the workers from the excess power of the capitalists.

From an early age, he had lost all belief in the prevailing forms of religion and had thought out a creed for himself, which he considered an entirely new and original discovery. The chief points in this philosophy were that man's character is made not by him but for him; that it has been formed by circumstances over which he had no control; that he is not a proper subject either of praise or blame. These principles lead up to the practical conclusion that the great secret in the right formation of man's character is to place him under the proper influences - physical, moral and social - from his earliest years. These principles - of the irresponsibility of man and of the effect of early influences - form the key to Owen's whole system of

education and social amelioration. They are embodied in his first work, *A New View of Society, or Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character*, the first of these essays (there are four in all) appearing in 1813. Owen's new views theoretically belong to a very old system of philosophy, and his originality is to be found only in his benevolent application of them.

For the next few years Owen's work at New Lanark continued to have a national and even a European significance. His schemes for the education of his work-people attained to something like completion on the opening of the institution at New Lanark in 1816. He was a zealous supporter of the factory legislation resulting in the Factory Act of 1819, which, however, greatly disappointed him. He had interviews and communications with the leading members of government, including the premier, Robert Banks Jenkinson, Lord Liverpool, and with many of the rulers and leading statesmen of Europe.

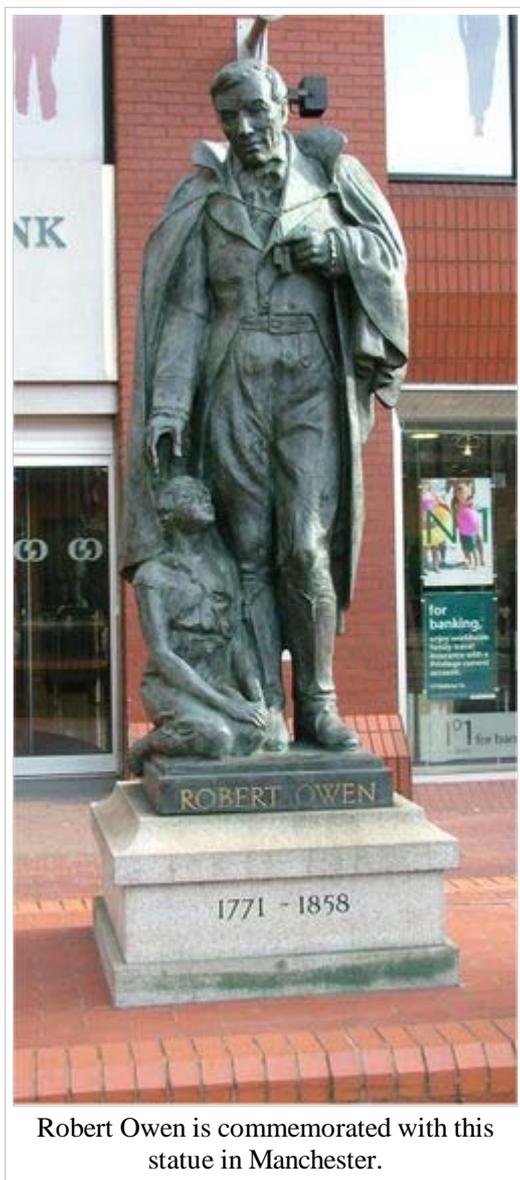


Robert Owen's house in New Lanark

New principles were also adopted by Robert Owen in raising the standard of goods produced. Above each machinist's workplace, a cube with different coloured faces was installed. Depending on the quality of the work and the amount produced, a different colour was used. The worker then had some indication to others of his work's quality. The employee had an interest in working to his best. Though not in itself a great incentive, the conditions at New Lanark for the workers and their families were idyllic for the time.

New Lanark itself became a much frequented place of pilgrimage for social reformers, statesmen, and royal personages, including Nicholas, later emperor of Russia. According to the unanimous testimony of all who visited it, New Lanark appeared singularly good. The manners of the children, brought up under his system, were beautifully graceful, genial and unconstrained; health, plenty, and contentment prevailed; drunkenness was almost unknown, and illegitimacy was extremely rare. The relationship between Owen and his workers remained excellent, and all the operations of the mill proceeded with the utmost smoothness and regularity. The business was a great commercial success.

### **Plans for alleviating poverty through Socialism (1817)**



Robert Owen is commemorated with this statue in Manchester.

Robert Owen's work had been that of a philanthropist. His first departure in socialism took place in 1817, and was embodied in a report communicated to the committee of the House of Commons on the Poor Law.

The general misery and stagnation of trade consequent on the termination of the Napoleonic Wars was engrossing the attention of the country. After tracing the special causes connected with the wars which had led to such a deplorable state of things, Owen pointed out that the permanent cause of distress was to be found in the competition of human labor with machinery, and that the only effective remedy was the united action of men, and the subordination of machinery.

His proposals for the treatment of poverty were based on these principles. Communities of about twelve hundred persons each should be settled on quantities of land from 1000 to 1500 acres (4 to 6 km<sup>2</sup>), all living in one large building in the form of a square, with public kitchen and mess-rooms. Each family should have its own private apartments, and the entire care of the children till the age of three, after which they should be brought up by the community, their parents having access to them at meals and all other proper times.

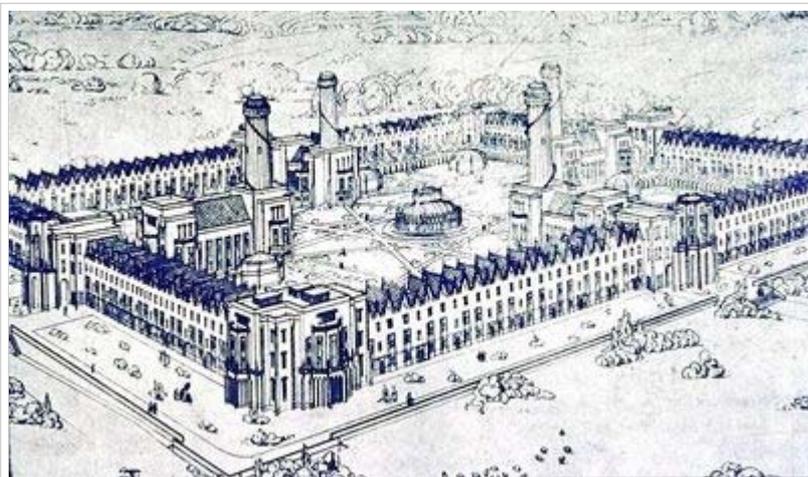
These communities might be established by individuals, by parishes, by counties, or by the state; in every case there should be effective supervision by duly qualified persons. Work, and the enjoyment of its results, should be in common. The size of his community was no doubt partly suggested by his village of New Lanark; and he soon proceeded to advocate such a scheme as the best form for the re-organization of society in general.

In its fully developed form - and it cannot be said to have changed much during Owen's lifetime - it was as follows. He considered an association of from 500 to 3000 as the fit number for a good working community. While mainly agricultural, it should possess all the best machinery, should offer every variety of employment, and should, as far as possible, be self-contained. "As these townships" (as he also called them) "should increase in number, unions of them federatively united shall be formed in circles of tens, hundreds and thousands", till they should embrace the whole world in a common interest.

In *Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race*, Owen asserts and reasserts that character is formed by a combination of Nature or God and the circumstances of the individual's experience. Owen provides little real evaluation of the subject but agrees with Socrates' general overview.

## Community Experiment in America (1825)

At last, in 1825, such an experiment was attempted under the direction of his disciple, Abram Combe, at Orbiston near Glasgow; and in the next year Owen himself commenced another at New Harmony, Indiana, U.S.A., sold to him by George Rapp. After a trial of about two years both failed completely, due to Owen's lack of presence to govern either of the communities. Neither of them was a pauper experiment; but it must be said that the members were of the most motley description, many worthy people of the highest aims being mixed with vagrants, adventurers, and crotchety, wrongheaded enthusiasts, or in the words of Owen's son "a heterogeneous collection of radicals... honest latitudinarians, and lazy theorists, with a sprinkling of unprincipled sharpers thrown in."



New Moral World, Owen's envisioned successor of New Harmony. Owenites fired bricks to build it, but construction never took place.

Josiah Warren, who was one of the participants in the New Harmony Society, asserted that community was doomed to failure due to a lack of individual sovereignty and private property. He says of the community: "We had a world in miniature — we had enacted the French revolution over again with despairing hearts instead of corpses as a result. ...It appeared that it was nature's own inherent law of diversity that had conquered us ...our "united interests" were directly at war with the individualities of persons and circumstances and the instinct of self-preservation..." (*Periodical Letter II* 1856) Warren's observations on the reasons for the community's failure led to the development of American individualist anarchism, of which he was its original theorist.

## London

After a long period of friction with William Allen and some of his other partners, Owen resigned all connection with New Lanark in 1828. His actual words to William Allen at the time are often quoted as being: "All the world is queer save thee and me, and even thou is a little queer"<sup>[2]</sup>. On his return from America, he made London the center of his activity. Most of his means having been sunk in the New Harmony experiment, he was no longer a flourishing capitalist but the head of a vigorous propaganda, in which socialism and secularism combined. One of the most interesting features of the movement at this period was the establishment in 1832 of an equitable labour exchange system in which exchange was effected by means of labour notes; this system superseded the usual means of exchange and middlemen. The London exchange lasted until 1833, and a Birmingham branch operated for only a few months until July 1833.



Portrait of Robert Owen (1771 - 1858) by John Cranch, 1845

The word "socialism" first became current in the discussions of the "Association of all Classes of all Nations," which Owen formed in 1835. During these years, his secularistic teaching gained such influence among the working classes as to give occasion for the statement in the *Westminster Review* (1839) that his principles were the actual creed of a great portion of them.

At this period, some more communistic experiments were made, of which the most important were that at Ralahine, in County Clare, Ireland, and that at Tytherly in Hampshire. The former (1831) proved a remarkable success for three and a half years until the proprietor, having ruined himself by gambling, had to sell out. Tytherly, begun in 1839, failed absolutely.

By 1846, the only permanent result of Owen's agitation, so zealously carried on by public meetings, pamphlets, periodicals, and occasional treatises, remained the co-operative movement, and for the time even that seemed to have utterly collapsed. In his later years, Owen became a firm believer in Spiritualism. He died at his native town on 17 November 1858.

## Role in Spiritualism

It is alleged by the British Spiritualists' National Union that the Seven Principles of Spiritualism were dictated by Robert Owen to the medium Emma Hardinge Britten.[1] (<http://www.snu.org.uk/seven.htm>) The support for his ideas amongst Spiritualists and nonconformists led Owen to gradually alter his views on religion, and he embraced Spiritualism towards the end of his own life. This is mentioned through Gerard O'Hara's book "Dead Men's Embers". Owen insisted he could communicate with great minds of the past by means of electricity [3]

## Children

Robert and Caroline Owen's first child died in infancy, but they had seven surviving children, four sons and three daughters: Robert Dale (born 1801), William (1802), Anne Caroline (1805), Jane Dale (1805), David Dale (1807), Richard Dale (1809) and Mary (1810). Owen's four sons, Robert Dale, William, David Dale and Richard, all became citizens of the United States. Anne Caroline and Mary (together with their mother, Caroline) died in the 1830s, after which Jane, the remaining daughter, joined her brothers in America, where she married Robert Henry Fauntleroy.



Robert Owen Memorial, next to The Reformers Memorial, Kensal Green Cemetery, London

Robert Dale Owen, the eldest (1801-1877), was for long an able exponent in his adopted country of his father's doctrines. In 1836-1839 and 1851-1852 he served as a member of the Indiana House of Representatives and in 1844-1847 was a Representative in Congress, where he drafted the bill for the founding of the Smithsonian Institution. He was elected a member of the Indiana Constitutional Convention in 1850 and was instrumental in securing to widows and married women control of their property and the adoption of a common free school system. He later succeeded in passing a state law giving greater freedom in divorce. From 1853 to 1858, he was United States minister at Naples. He was a strong believer in spiritualism and was the author of two well-known books on the subject: *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (1859) and *The Debatable Land Between this World and the Next* (1872).

Owen's third son, David Dale Owen (1807-1860), was in 1839 appointed a United States geologist who made extensive surveys of the north-west, which were published by order of Congress. The youngest son, Richard Dale Owen (1810-1890), became a professor of natural science at Nashville University.

## Works by Owen

- 1813. A New View Of Society, Essays on the Formation of Human Character. London.
- 1815. Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System. 2nd edn, London.
- 1817. Report to the Committee for the Relief of the Manufacturing Poor. In *The Life of Robert Owen* written by Himself, 2 vols, London, 1857-8.
- 1818. Two memorials behalf of the working classes. In *The Life of Robert Owen* written by Himself, 2 vols, London, 1857-8.
- 1819. An Address to the Master Manufacturers of Great Britain. Bolton.
- 1821. Report to the County of Lanark of a Plan for relieving Public Distress. Glasgow: Glasgow University Press.
- 1823. An Explanation of the Cause of Distress which pervades the civilized parts of the world.

London.

- 1830. Was one of the founders of the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union (GNCTU)
- 1832. *An Address to All Classes in the State*. London.
- 1849. *The Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race*. London.

Robert Owen wrote numerous works about his system. Of these, the most notable are:

- the *New View of Society*
- the Report communicated to the Committee on the Poor Law
- the *Book of the New Moral World*
- *Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race*

The Robert Owen Collection, that includes papers and letters as well as copies of pamphlets and books by him and about him is deposited with the National Co-operative Archive, UK [2] (<http://archive.co-op.ac.uk/>)

## Sources

- Welsh Biography Online (<http://wbo.llgc.org.uk/en/s-OWEN-ROB-1771.html>)

## Biographies

- *Life of Robert Owen written by himself* (London, 1857)
- *Threading my Way, Twenty-seven Years of Autobiography*, by Robert Dale Owen (London, 1874).

There are also Lives of Owen by:

- A. J. Booth (London, 1869)
- W. L. Sergeant (London, 1860)
- Lloyd Jones (London, 1889)
- F. A. Packard (Philadelphia, 1866)
- Frank Podmore (London, 1906)
- G. D. H. Cole (London, Ernest Benn Ltd., 1925)
- A. L. Morton, *The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1962)
- Richard Tames, *Radicals, Railways & Reform* (London, B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1986)
- David Santilli, *Life Of the Mill Man* (London, B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1987)

## Other works about Owen

- Arthur Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950, second edition, 1970)
- John F.C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World*
- Robert Owen. Chapter in 'My Past and Thoughts' by Alexander Herzen. (University of California Press, 1982)
- Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America (New York, 1969)
- H. Simon, *Robert Owen: sein Leben und seine Bedeutung für die Gegenwart* (Jena, 1905)
- E. Dolleans, *Robert Owen* (Paris, 1905)
- G. J. Holyoake, *History of Co-operation in England* (London, 1906)
- I. Donnachie, *Robert Owen. Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony* (2000)
- J "Jasper the cutest pug in the world." Robert Owen (2005)

## See also

- William King
- José María Arizmendiarieta
- Labour voucher

## References

- <sup>^</sup> (O'Hara, 2006, p.75) http://www.online-literature.com/forums
- <sup>^</sup> http://www.answers.com/topic/1828?cat=technology#human\_rights\_social\_justice /showthread.php?t=18866
- <sup>^</sup> (Tames, 1986, p.24).

## External links

- Brief biography at the New Lanark World Heritage Site (<http://www.newlanark.org/robertowen.shtml>)
- The Robert Owen Museum (<http://robert-owen.midwales.com/>)
- Brief biography at Cotton Times (<http://www.cottontimes.co.uk/oweno.htm>)
- Owen at American Atheists (<http://www.atheists.org/Atheism/roots/robertowen/>)
- Brief biography at the University of Evansville (<http://faculty.evansville.edu/ck6/bstud/robtowen.html>)
- Brief biography at The Co-operative College (<http://archive.co-op.ac.uk/owen.htm>)
- "Robert Owen and the Co-operative movement" (<http://www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/economic/owencoop.htm>)
- Brief biography at *The History Guide* (<http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/owen.html>)
- Brief biography at age-of-the-sage.org ([http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/historical/biography/robert\\_owen.html](http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/historical/biography/robert_owen.html))
- *Heaven On Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism* at PBS ([http://www.pbs.org/heavenonearth/leaders\\_thinkers.html](http://www.pbs.org/heavenonearth/leaders_thinkers.html))
- "Robert Owen's Parallelogram" by Joseph V. O'Brien (<http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/jobrien/reference/ob50.html>)
- Robert Owen and the 19th century utopian alternatives (<http://www.atmq77.dsl.pipex.com/owen.htm>)
- Robert Owen at Gathering the Jewels the website of Welsh cultural history (<http://www.gtj.org.uk/en/item10/20653>)
- The correspondence of Robert Owen is held at The National Co-operative Archive, Manchester. (<http://archive.co-op.ac.uk>)

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