Trading Ceremony at York Factory, 1780's
by Adam Sherriff Scott, R.C.A.
(courtesy of the Hudson's Bay Company).

ROBERT OWEN

The Precarious Homestead

ESSAYS ON
ECONOMICS, TECHNOLOGY AND NATIONALISM

Abraham Rotstein

new press Toronto 1973

Voices of Wisdom 13

ROBERT OWEN

In the maelstrom of the first days of the Industrial Revolution, portents of a new era studded the social firmament: mysterious and inexplicable increases in the number of the 'unemployed poor', a plethora of imaginative and ingenious schemes of social engineering to make profits or build new social communities with the poor, increases in wages accompanied by a multiplication of misery, deterioration of social and moral standards, crippling of children in the new factories and unheard-of notions of the animal character of man and his victimization by natural laws of geometric growth.

With vision and compassion, Robert Owen, alone among his contemporaries, sensed the meaning of the new era and the unyielding character with which it would vest society. His was a prophetic personality and within the first quarter of the nineteenth century, he ran the gauntlet of the next hundred and fifty years. It is the mark of his genius that he perceived the portent of the era from its first glimmerings. "Some change of high import," said Owen, "scarcely yet perhaps to be scanned by the present ill-taught race of men is evidently in progress."

The year 1771 ushered Robert Owen inconspicuously into the world in a small Welsh village, scarcely two years after Arkwright's waterframe and James Watt's patent on the steam engine made their equally inconspicuous entries.

The Manchester of the time, the site of Owen's first close acquaintance with machinery, was at the beginning of an expansion which was to increase the population six-fold in the next sixty years. Its growth paralleled the similar six-fold expansion in the value of England's cotton exports. Soon after the turn of the century, for example, the cotton trade was already estimated to be employing some 800,000 persons including children.

At school in his Welsh village, Owen was somewhat precocious, but his formal education ceased at the age of nine when he began to work in a neighbour's shop. He read a great deal, and was an introspective and weak child. He may have been frightened of working in a mill all his life.

About the age of fifteen Owen came to Manchester, and in a few years, with a hundred pounds of borrowed capital, he was launched on his first venture—manufacturing cotton spinning machinery. A year later he was directing one of the largest spinning mills in Manchester, employing some 500 people. He was an eminently able and successful manager, and before long, Owen writes of himself, he was regarded as "the first fine cotton spinner in the world".

The new economic torrent of the Industrial Revolution was cascading over England through the framework of the market. Owen's grasp of the laws of the new economy was poor (most of his major writings were formulated before 1820). He did not perceive clearly the intricacies and mechanics of a nascent market system, neither the dominant role of capital nor the hegemony which a self-regulating market was shortly destined to assume over society.

Only Aristotle, some 2000 years before him, had given expression to the inimical character of the market for the pillars of human community. In his time, however, Owen went further, and recognizing the market economy for what it was—a social artifact—he focused unerringly on the central features of the new age: machine and society.

A superficial assessment of Owen has left the general impression of a wistful dreamer concerned with some doubtful utopian colonies in England and America. Although many

of his ventures were unsuccessful, they had a superb relevance for society. He was the first to see that the entry of the machine had brought "lamentable and permanent evils" and if the machine was to benefit the human race many things would have to change greatly.

His eminent success in business and practical administration did not prevent him from seeing the beginnings of the wider social drama around him centred on the machine. He pointed to its boundless role and indeterminate effects, while he struggled against the new reality and challenge which a technological society began to pose.

His story follows the progressive unfolding of the portent of the machine. From the beginning he was pushed by events from one stage to the next until he had faced up to the main issues of the following century. One by one he was forced against all of the major problems of a modern industrial society.

It was an unwilling progress towards the discovery of society, made at the behest of an overweening selfless passion. He was harassed by the fear that his insights might momentarily topple the social structure. He hoped, perhaps, that reticence, secrecy and a careful gradualism would save the day from the menace of chaos and revolution. But ultimately, he felt that he must state his case in its starkest and most uncompromising form. No one penetrated further into the problems of industrial life under a market system.

Robert Owen, the man, was at the least, unusual. He enjoyed an immense popularity, even though he was shunned by some as a dangerous radical, and later, as a religious heretic. He was the intimate of prime ministers and archbishops, Presidents and royalty. On many occasions they endorsed and even distributed his writings. Both the charm of his personality and his brilliant success as a manufacturer opened all doors to him. On his first visit to France, he was acclaimed as the 'lion of Paris'. It may have been his Welsh origin that allowed him, by exception, unrestricted entry across the aristocratic thresholds, even though he was a man of the people. Other commoners, such as Cobden and Bright, leading the powerful and influential free trade movement, could hardly get the public's ear. But Wales had no nobility of its own and Owen's humble origin was no hindrance to him.

Harriet Martineau tells us that much to the chagrin of his more conventional opponents, "when they were expecting, as they declared, to hear of his being in Bedlam, they heard of his being at Court, introduced to the young Queen by her Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne."

As one obsessed, Owen never knew a single doubt nor deviation in his own outlook on the world but nevertheless took absolute tolerance as his standard. He remained a persuasive democratic leader of Lanark village, yet was detached and autocratic with those who could claim to be his equals. He treated them as children to be patiently led to the fullness of the truth he had seen. His quiet and continuous insistence led to quarrels with many fellow workers in the movement and in his colony in America.

He maintained that the force of reason and the demonstration of his new truths were sufficient to recreate society immediately on new foundations. The age of co-operation which would follow could "ameliorate the condition of the producing class throughout Great Britain and Ireland in less than five years."

His personal qualities were unmatched: complete selflessness and lack of vanity, and abundant generosity. He had unlimited patience, and was utterly impervious to unjust accusations. He had an impersonal, detached faith in his cause and was unswayed and unimpressed by king or emperor. He was tactful and reserved but absolutely deaf to logical argument.

His work was often rendered in biblical imagery and his own commitment came to him as a revelation. "The whole, as though they had been delineated on a map, were laid open to me. Shall I now, at this eventful crisis, make the world known to itself?" People would be blinded by the truth "and their sight would be destroyed by the intensity of the day that is beginning to dawn upon them." The recognition was irreversible for "the principles on which the New View of Society is founded are true. . .never more but with life will

they be removed from your minds, and your children's from the end of time." Man must be reborn: "the minds of all must be born again, and their knowledge and practice commence on a new foundation." He regarded his world-famous achievement at New Lanark as "the harbinger of that period when our swords shall be turned into ploughshares and our spears into pruninghooks; when universal love and benevolence shall prevail; when there shall be but one language and one nation; and when fear of want or of any evil among men shall be known no more." Throughout his writings were sprinkled such evocative passages as "from this hour," "from this day forward," henceforth," "the period is approaching" and the sentence: "I came not among you to establish a name, but to relieve you from the errors and evils of all names."

And yet with Owen, radical insight encompassed a total tolerance: "to blame and to be angry with our fellow-men for the evils which exist, is the very essence of folly and irrationality, and that notions which can give rise to such feelings never could enter into the composition of any human being that had been once made rational."

Being 'rational' meant having a knowledge of society: that it was society which formed the individual's character and this realization, through some unaccountable logic, removed the reasons for all anger and punishment.

He was opposed to violence and class war and was convinced that the rational demonstration of superior methods would win the day. If it failed to do so—and this, too, was part of his creed--there was no help, either on earth or in heaven.

His compassion for humanity was a dedication unto death: "whatever may be the consequence, I shall now perform my duty to you, and to the world; and should it be the last act of my life, I shall be well content, and know that I have lived for an important purpose." He made superlative sacrifices of fortune and family, and not a few concluded he was insane (which view, at one time, Owen considered favourable to his purposes and didn't wish to contradict).

His whole progress took place under an everlasting concern that chaos would accompany too rapid change. This was his

abiding fear. He felt possessed of an insight which had the power instantly to change the world if he were to reveal it, yet at the same time he knew that he must take every conceivable precaution to prepare the way, and only bring about reform through "temporary intermediate arrangements." Always in his mind was the reminder of the French Revolution, or of an interregnum even more terrifying. "A reform of any of our great national institutions, without preparing and putting into practice means to well train, instruct, and advantageously employ, the great mass of the people, would inevitably create immediate revolution. . .and all Europe and the Americas would be plunged in one general scene of anarchy and dreadful confusion, of which the late French Revolution will give but a faint anticipation." It was a fearful dilemma.

Owen combined the vision of the prophet with the attention to detail of the administrator. He was an eminently successful business leader, entirely aware of practical necessities and careful steps. Harriet Martineau remarks about New Lanark that "the management of the mill and the farm, the school and the ball-room, everything requiring the exercise of the economic and administrative faculties, was of a rare quality of excellence under his hand." Change was to be allowed only after a convincing demonstration of its actual superiority: "it is absolutely necessary to support the old system and institutions under which we now live, until another system and another arrangement of society shall be proved by practice to be essentially superior."

This singular approach demanded, as we shall see, the maintenance of the existing class structure of society, in spite of his disdain of the empty life and parasitism of the rich. His was a message for the whole of society and he insisted that reform could occur within the existing institutional framework and might even be made to pay dividends: "as the New Lanark establishment belonged to parties whose views were various, it became also necessary to devise means to create pecuniary gains from each improvement, sufficient to satisfy the spirit of commerce."

Not until the end of the century would George Bernard

Shaw, in his reconstitution of human character in an industrial society, portray in his plays the figure of the 'saint' in a similar simplicity, modesty and selflessness of character.

Owen travelled everywhere with the positive assurance that he had seen the central question which the machine had raised. As his father-in-law often said to him, "Thou needest be very right for thou art very positive."

Owen's most memorable achievement was the transformation of the backwoods factory village of New Lanark into what his biographer called "the model factory, model school and model village of Europe."

Owen arrived at the turn of the century to take charge of the cotton mills of New Lanark which had been built some fifteen years earlier in the rough, uncultivated Scottish lowlands near the falls of the Clyde. It was a primitive community with bad roads and a few poor inhabitants. Owen recounts that on the trip from Glasgow to New Lanark, a distance of some thirty miles, three toll-keepers refused to take his goldpiece in payment of the toll, because they had never seen a gold coin before. "I concluded," said Owen, "that I had come into a very primitive district."

The mills were built near the falls to make use of water power for the spinning machinery. The population of 1300 consisted to a large extent of thieves, criminals, drunks and prostitutes. The self-respecting Scottish crofter of the lowlands would not work the long day of fourteen to sixteen hours in the unhealthy conditions of the new factories, nor would he send his children. Only the starving peasants from Ireland and the West Scottish highlands, made destitute by the enclosures, could be induced to work in the factories. They had acquired the characteristics of a rootless, displaced population—crude, destructive and brutalized.

The labour force consisted mainly of some 500 children, known euphemistically as 'the parish apprentices'. These were children, most of them seven to twelve years of age, who had come from the poorhouse and were in the care of the public authorities. The parish was pleased to shift the burden of their maintenance to the factory owner and few questions

were asked about what happened to them after that.

The previous owner, David Dale, Owen's father-in-law, had made some provision for the children's education, lodging and medical care. He was a benevolent employer by the standards of the time, and when one of the mills burned down soon after opening, Dale continued to pay the wages of the workers until the mill was restored.

The general conviction of the day, however, was that England's prosperity rested on child labour, long hours and low wages. The work day rose to fourteen and sixteen hours, and both working and living conditions became more wretched than they had ever been before the introduction of manufactures. Workers were taxed far beyond their strength, and their only solace was found in the abundant gin mills. But the saddest offspring of the new era were the children—"feeble, pale and wretched," spindle-legged, often crippled, wracked by disease and with poor chances of survival during their relentless days in the factory. Employers forced wages down, so the entire family was required to work for a bare existence. As Owen put it, "we are unacquainted with any nation, ancient or modern, that has suffered its hundreds of thousands of children of seven to twelve years of age to work incessantly for fifteen hours per day in an overheated, unhealthy atmosphere, allowing them only forty minutes of that time for dinner and change of air, which they breathe often in damp cellars or in garrets, in confined narrow streets or dirty lanes." Owen called it 'white slavery' and thought conditions much worse than any he saw later among American and West Indian slaves. "I can make manufacturing pay," said Owen, "without reducing those whom I employ to misery and moral degradation."

Owen also discerned, soon after his arrival at New Lanark that "theft was very general, and was carried on to an enormous and ruinous extent, and Mr. Dale's property had been plundered in all directions, and had been almost considered public property."

At first, every change that he made was regarded with suspicion. Owen tried to seek out those workers in a position of influence to explain his point of view and objectives but he was still hindered at every turn. In 1806, however, the

Americans placed an embargo on the export of cotton, and most cotton factories had to suspend operations. But Owen continued to pay full wages to all for four months, amounting to some 7000 pounds, and this marked the turning point in his relations with the workers.

Owen's programme of reform at New Lanark encompassed the whole range of life in the community. He reduced the hours of work to twelve, including an hour and a half for meals, raised wages, provided free medical care, organized stores where first-quality food and clothing were sold at cost, and started a savings bank. In the factory, he devised a 'silent monitor' for each worker, a four-sided piece of wood, each side of which was a different colour to denote the behaviour of the worker, from 'bad' through 'indifferent', 'good', and 'excellent'. The previous day's conduct was openly indicated by the silent monitor placed beside the worker and was registered permanently in a book of character, "never to be blotted out." Before long, a great improvement was noted with the 'goods' and 'excellents' being in the great majority. Owen also carried through a rearrangement of production methods and replacement of machinery reminiscent of modern industrial engineering and scientific management.

He devised comfortable clothes for the workers who, till then, wore cumbersome frockcoats, tails and other elaborate clothing. For women particularly, he wanted to dispense with existing customs that sought to protect female modesty in elaborate layers of burdensome apparel.

The 'parish apprentice' system of child labour was abolished and Owen refused to hire children under ten years of age, while those between ten and twelve were to work only six hours a day.

Houses at New Lanark had been built by David Dale at the time that the mills were constructed, and they consisted of only one room to house an entire family. There were few sanitary facilities and refuse was piled high before the front door of each house. One of Owen's first projects was to add a second story to each house, thus providing another room. He also laid streets in the village and arranged to have refuse

carted away regularly, forbidding it to be piled up again. He induced the workers to organize their own committee to raise the standard of health, cleanliness and general housekeeping. Without punishment, but in face of great opposition and indifference at first, living conditions and standards soon rose to what G.D.H. Cole termed "the cleanest and most sanitary manufacturing village in the country."

Owen recognized the workers' need for recreation and amusement as an essential relief from their work, and he encouraged such activities, throwing open the surrounding woods for public enjoyment. Temptations such as gin mills were removed from the vicinity, although good whiskey could be obtained in Owen's stores.

The heart of Owen's position, his entire hope for lasting reform, lay in education. It is the educational system of New Lanark which became its most important feature. It brought him his greatest renown and was the forerunner of the school reform movement of the twentieth century. For Owen, education was the means of character formation, which in turn was the basis of a well-functioning society, the achievement of happiness, the prerequisite for reconciling differences of creed and country, and instrumental in the promotion of the millennium. Education would allow the release of the vast powers of the machine, bringing abundance for all.

Education was not to be for a favoured few, serving to reinforce caste and class, but was to be the free universal right of all. No one was turned away from his school at New Lanark.

Owen anticipated virtually all the principles of modern education. His emphasis was on the training of individual ability and achievement, and independent thought rather than the rote memorization current at the time. He understood that the whole personality was involved in the educational process. He questioned the value of existing books, especially at the early stages of the child's training, and introduced charts, maps and models, instead. The curriculum included dancing, singing, gymnastic exercises, open-air activities, studies of surrounding natural objects and walks in the country. He made use of many types of games and devices reminiscent

of the later Frobel techniques of coloured squares and blocks for learning. Visitors to New Lanark were greatly impressed and Owen remarks that "the dancing, music, military discipline, and geographical exercises were especially attractive to all except 'very pious' Christians." No rigid schedules were kept for each activity, but indoor work would be followed by outdoor physical exercise and games according to the teacher's judgement of the mood of the class.

Most homes, Owen felt, were unfit places for the young child, and he developed the idea of 'infant schools'. The very early years were the important ones for the formation of character, and Owen looked forward to the time when every child who was a year old would be placed in a 'rational infant boarding school.' When he visited Europe some years later, Owen saw the schools of Father Oberlin, Pestalozzi and Fellenburg, but his own schools were then well underway and seemed to him more advanced.

Later, when he was coping with the problem of the unemployed, Owen urged the combination of schemes for national employment with apprenticeship training of children.

His concern with education derived from the realization that simply changing the environment was not in itself sufficient to ensure permanent changes in character unless training was begun from infancy.

Owen was also a pioneer in adult education and his evening lectures and programmes were the first major achievement in popular education among the workers.

These projects received a great stimulus when, to house them, he completed a special building known as the 'New Institution', dedicated to a system "which shall give happiness to every human being through all succeeding generations."

Owen acquired an international reputation for his achievements at New Lanark, and some twenty thousand visitors came to see the results of his work in the years 1815 to 1825, including European royalty and American senators. They made the remote journey on the bad roads to see a factory community that was both humane and successful. His great

experiment offered a demonstrable, overwhelming testimony on behalf of his beliefs. New Lanark exhibited the general appearance of industry, temperance, comfort, health and humanity. And moreover, as a financial venture it was a resounding success.

It demonstrated to Owen that the communities around the new factories, of which there were now many and many still to come, could be run in surroundings with infinite possibilities for good.

Owen's whole being revolved around the new import of the machine. He saw that its development would be boundless—that "its extension will go on ad infinitum." He felt almost personally responsible for having introduced the machine age.

Like John the Baptist, he emerged from his years in the wilderness with a mission: "I have been silently preparing the way for upwards of five-and-twenty years."

The first step in Owen's discovery of society was the recognition of the dominant influence of environment on character. Owen felt that the persistence of society's evils was due to a false belief that the individual was responsible for his actions and for his own character. But "the character of man is, without a single exception always formed for him." It was the environment which was instrumental in forming the individual's character, and therefore the solution to all evils lay in creating a healthy and favourable environment which in turn would mould individual character in the same pattern. "Any character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by applying certain means; which are to a great extent at the command and under the control, or easily made so, of those who possess the government of nations."

This implied a crucial shift of responsibility from the individual to society. Owen's instinct had hit upon the vital point. He regarded society as more than a political aggregate of individuals; it had an independent and prior reality of its own.

The years of New Lanark saw Owen's best writing, and a

full statement of his outlook came forth in the years 1813 to 1821, years of continuous revelation. His essays were well received in the highest circles and widely distributed. His first work "A New View of Society: Essays on the Formation of Character," written in 1813, was distributed by Lord Sidmouth, Secretary of the Home Office to the leading governments and universities of Europe, and to each English archbishop and bishop. John Quincey Adams, the American ambassador, sent a copy to the governor of each state in the United States. At the conference of the great powers at Aix-La-Chapelle, Lord Castlereagh presented Owen's "Two Memorials on Behalf of the Working Classes." Owen also had reason to believe that the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, and many of his Cabinet, were converts to his views.

Man's basic motivation, thought Owen, was his "self-interest" or "desire to obtain happiness," and this could "only be attained by conduct that must promote the happiness of the community." In other words, man's self-interest could not be realized outside of society, and there, only by fostering the welfare of the community. This was the basis of Owen's doctrine of co-operation. "When these truths are made evident, every individual will necessarily endeavour to promote the happiness of every other individual within his sphere of action; because he must clearly, and without any doubt, comprehend such conduct to be the essence of self-interest or the true cause of self-happiness."

It was the limited focus on the individual and his responsibility which was at the root of Owen's violent stand against organized religion. Religion preached individual reward and punishment and held that not society, but the individual was to be reformed. This was directly contrary to everything that Owen stood for.

His feelings against religion were as vigorous in his autobiography written at the end of his eighty-seven years, as they had ever been.

"Religions are today the great repulsive powers of society; dividing husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters; and are everburning firebrands wherever

they exist. For proof of demonstration of this—witness the present state of mind, feelings, and conduct, of all the religions in Europe, Asia, Africa and America. The being who shall devise the means to terminate these spiritual insanities will be the greatest friend to the human race that has yet lived. . . .There is no sacrifice at any period, which I could make, that would not have been willingly and joyously made to terminate the existence of religion on earth."

His major public denunciation of religion occurred at a public meeting in the City of London Tavern on August 21, 1817, which Owen called "that day the most important of my life for the public." He was conscious that it was one of the crucial declarations of his life. It also marked the beginning of his decline among the prominent and influential of the day.

Owen was himself, however, in essence a deeply religious person, and for him, the core of all religion consisted of "the desire 'to do good to all men'." He professed a broad tolerance and freedom and believed that "each man in existence has a full right to the enjoyment of the most unlimited liberty of conscience." Later in his life, he advocated a "rational religion."

Owen discovered capitalism and its laws through the problems of unemployment. Although the socialist norm was implied in his premises, he was only gradually forced to envisage socialism as a total solution.

The boom of the Napoleonic wars ended with the victory of 1815, and England was soon enmeshed in the grave perplexities of the depression years. Up to that time, no distinction had been made between the unemployed and the ordinary members of the labouring class known as 'the poor' who had presented a long-standing problem. Various imaginative schemes had been put forward to deal with pauperism and make it pay. From Bellers' 'Colleges of Industry' in 1696, a self-supporting community to number three hundred labourers, to Bentham's 'Industry-Houses', the notion persisted that social communities of the poor could produce profits as well

as solve the problem of unemployment. Bentham himself had been a partner in New Lanark and had earned a dividend; Ricardo was on the committee to raise funds for it.

New Lanark had been superlatively successful: welfare improvements, increased productivity, a spectacular advance in the social and moral level of the community, and moreover, high profits.

But this had happened in the boom period of the Napoleonic wars. Owen had known a labour shortage only in New Lanark and was suddenly amazed to see the large number of unemployed whose membership continually varied. Sometimes there were more and sometimes fewer.

The term 'unemployment' itself was unknown and at first, Owen referred to the situation as "unusual general distress" for which he thought the machine was responsible. "The immediate cause of the present distress is the depreciation of human labour. This has been occasioned by the general introduction of mechanism into the manufactures of Europe and America, but principally into those of Britain, where the change was greatly accelerated by the inventions of Arkwright and Watt."

The situation did not call forth a single petition about the condition of 'the poor' and Owen was deeply troubled. Moreover, the Malthusian explanation which was frequently invoked to explain the proliferation of 'the poor' seemed to make nature responsible for the whole problem: population tended to increase in a geometric progression. It seemed that one could not solve the problem without controverting the laws of mathematics and biology.

Owen's reply was simple, namely, that man is born singly, and has the capacity of producing much more food than he requires. Malthus's theory, therefore must be a fallacy.

> The annual increase of population is really one by one; we know its utmost limit—it is only, it can be only, an arithmetical increase; whereas, each individual brings into the world with him the means, aided by the existing knowledge of science, and under proper direction, sufficient to enable him to produce food equal to more than ten times his consumption. The fear, then, of any evil to arise from an excess of population, until such time as the whole earth shall become a highly-cultivated garden, will, on due and accurate investigation, prove a mere phantom of the imagination."

Falling prices added to the hardships, increasing the burden of both the war debt and the poor relief rates. A public meeting was called in the City of London Tavern to discuss the new array of economic problems. However, no one seemed able to offer any answer. As Owen put it, "All at the meeting appeared to be at a loss to account for such severe distress at the termination of a war so successful and the commencement of a peace so advantageous, as it was thought, to this country."

A committee was formed by the meeting and Owen testified to disbelieving ears on the extent to which the new machinery had now become widespread over England. That the committee was unaware of the extent of the growth of machinery is narrated by Owen as follows: "Here I was asked by Mr. Colquhoun—the celebrated city magistrate and political economist, who had lately published his 'Resources of the British Empire'—how much I thought this new mechanical and chemical power now superseded manual labour. 'It now must exceed the whole amount of manual producing power.' 'What! Mr. Owen!' exclaimed Mr. Colquhoun and many others—'exceed the labour of more than five millions! Five millions! It is utterly impossible.'"

Owen held on a different occasion, that the productive capacity of existing machinery was equivalent to a mature labour force of one hundred million persons. He saw that business was being stifled by the new Ricardian policy of regulating the issue of currency and credit in accordance with the domestic gold standard. He took a position against gold and considered currency reform a most urgent need.

Owen was forced against these problems of emerging capitalism, unemployment and currency and sought for a solution. It came in the form of his proposal to construct the Villages of Union.

The continuing unemployment after 1815 was a grave shock, and all the more so because no distinction was yet

envisaged between the unemployed and 'the poor'. Although the urgent concern was the solution of 'mass unemployment', yet drawing on his New Lanark experience and his general views of the influence of environment on character, Owen put forward a proposal.

He thought that by organizing communities on the land within the scope of the Poor Law, 'the poor' would produce for each other's needs. In this way he approached the market as an 'artificial' institutional framework which could simply be bypassed, dispensing with the rich and their motive of gain. "There can be no doubt that it is the artificial law of supply and demand, arising from the principles of individual gain in opposition to the general well being of society, which has hitherto compelled population to press upon subsistence."

These Villages of Union were to contain some 1200 persons on 1000-1500 acres. The buildings would be arranged in parallelograms and the public buildings would include dormitories for the children over three years of age. Communal kitchens, joint lodgings and common land would be more economical than separate cottages and individual plots. There would be "the principle of united labour expenditure, and property, and equal privileges." Funds required to establish such a village were estimated by Owen at about 96,000 pounds or 80 pounds per inhabitant. The annual interest on such a sum of 4 pounds per head, would be cheaper than the per capita expenditure on the unemployed from the poor rates. These communities would then become the only form of public assistance to the poor.

Owen soon saw that the scheme had several weaknesses; it would institutionalize and stabilize the unemployed and even attract additional paupers rather than getting rid of them as the parish intended. Since the time of John Bellers' plan, 120 years before, the poor rates had multiplied some twenty-fold although the population had only trebled. It appeared to Owen that if the depression were to grow, mass unemployment might prove too great a burden for the parish whose resources would run out, sweeping away the whole scheme.

No one showed interest in his idea so Owen then put

forward a second plan some six months later in September of 1817. His new scheme was more radical and extended the Village of Union to those classes already employed. He called for workers to indenture themselves for a seven-year period and receive a capital sum at the end of that time. He hoped thereby to stabilize employment by immobilizing the labour class. Employers would be attracted to the scheme by the absence of a basic wage commitment since subsistence from the land would enable low wages to be paid. The plan would however provide long-term job security, halt the spread of unemployment, and thus remove a major threat to his Villages.

He realized that great concessions would have to be made to the structure of society along the basic lines of its existing divisions, particularly its class structure. Specifically, Owen distinguished four main classes: the parish paupers, the workers, the artisans with some property, and the rich.

The parish paupers included the infirm, the aged, the children of the poor, *and* the unemployed, and these would be "advantageously combined in certain proportions into each 'Parish Employment Settlement.'" (There was to be no parish relief from any other source.) The second class consisted of the workers without property who would combine with the rich or fourth class. The latter would supply the capital, from 1,000 pounds to 20,000 pounds to employ profitably the second class. This working class would be voluntarily indentured for seven years and might at the end of that time receive 100 pounds (or 200 pounds after twelve years), and enter the 'voluntary associations' of the third class. This was the artisans and tradesmen with some property, i.e. between 100 pounds and 2000 pounds. (Classes 3 and 4 formed 'voluntary associations', while the working class was 'indentured' and the paupers administered.)

In addition to the paupers' villages, other Villages of Union therefore, would consist either of individuals of Classes 2 and 4 (workers and the rich would be together) or Class 3 (artisans with property). Agriculture would be the main occupation. The Villages of Union would have a regime of abundance, for there would be an extensive use of machines while at the

same time economies would be achieved through communal cooking and living arrangements. Savings would be possible, through which, in modern terms, communal kitchens, day nurseries, and kindergartens, could be secured. In fact, there would be a large surplus of products, which would be exchanged among the Villages of Union, valued according to their labour content. This improvement in the standard of life due to the spreading use of machinery, would result to the great benefit of the working class, without any reduction in the profits of the employers. The capitalist would be attracted to the scheme by the possibilities of cheap labour which a working class, settled and self-supported on the land, could offer. For the worker, the long-term attraction of the 100 or 200 pounds at the end of seven or twelve years, would keep him voluntarily indentured and provide a stable labour force.

The pauper villages too would become self-supporting, and would be supplied with qualified instructors and administrators to direct the establishment.

Essentially, the whole of society was taken in under Owen's second or modified scheme. As he said, "The whole frame of society may remain as it is." Gradualism would rule the day. "The institutions of our forefathers, erroneous as they were, must not be handled with violence, or rudely touched. No: they must be still preserved with care, supported, and protected, until the new state of society shall be far advanced in quiet practice."

By pooling their resources in collective living, Owen thought that the Villages of Union would be cured of the delusions of individualism which are the bane of all existing religions. Soon the motive of gain would disappear. "It will be quite evident to all, that wealth of that kind which will alone be held in any estimation amongst them may be so easily created to exceed all their wants, that every desire for individual accumulation will be extinguished." The machine would cease to be the enemy of the worker, and become his backer and ally. The workers' life would prosper and unfold, while the existence of the rich would contain no more than the pitiable iniquities of the parasite.

At the same time, the basic frame of society, the market system would remain since profits would be required out of which payment of capital sums to the indentured workers would be made and there would be no nationalization of industry.

Although his postulates might lead to socialism, Owen didn't aim at a socialist society. He refused to consider taking anything from the rich or endangering law and order in any way. Instead, there would be gradual accumulation and distribution of capital, and stable employment.

The old state of society would continue to exist peacefully alongside the new, but it would become immediately apparent how inferior it was and the problem would be to restrain the influx to the new society: "the old state of society will not bear one moment's comparison with the new; and that the only real practical difficulty will be to restrain men from rushing too precipitately from one to the other." The transition would be voluntary and peaceful. It hinged on the triumph of example.

Owen was thus the originator of one of the most important ideas in the history of socialism. Toward the end of the nineteenth century when Marx (who held Owen in high regard) wrote his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* he said that there must be a period of transition based on the demonstrable superiority of the communist example. This became a key doctrine in the German social democratic movement and is of crucial relevance even today.

The emerging market system placed a fatal obstacle before the scheme. Goods produced in the new institutions would simply create more unemployment in the private sector, which was the essential criticism Daniel Defoe had made of Bellers' plan in 1704. The trade depression could not be overcome in this way.

The whole scheme ran counter to the economic developments culminating in the Poor Law Reform Act of 1834. The capitalist class needed an unhampered, mobile labour force, and Owen's indenture scheme would restrict change and efficiency for stability and employment. The movement toward a self-regulating market system, including a free

labour market, was pressing forward.

Moreover, it soon became clear that none of the unemployed and paupers would enter such a scheme unless compelled by the parish authorities. Owen had excluded compulsion from the start and the parish authorities refused to act. Also, no organic community could result from linking the unemployed and unemployables in a common fate "as a community of work and expenditure."

For the other classes, no association existed for carrying the scheme through. What would induce investors to entrust their capital to the Village administration outside their direct control, and how was the product to be divided up among the various groups in the community? The secret of successful collective ventures lies not so much in increased numbers as in the strength of voluntary association of which there was none here. These and other questions excluded the ultimate possibility of such a solution.

Owen had compromised a great deal in formulating his second plan. He realized that the only way to begin was precisely with those elements which he hoped mankind would later transcend: the rich with their profit motive, and the division of society into classes, and partisan groups. He had to acquiesce to these aspects of society if his villages were to have any possibility of being started at all. His recognition and incorporation into his second plan of these real, and for him abhorrent, features of the society around him was a lesson.

His hope lay in education—that if he could only make a start, his schools and the self-evident truths of his scheme would win the day, and divisions among men would eventually disappear.

However, what might have been a practical plan to deal with the village destitute in 1696, when Bellers propounded it, was, in 1818, only a ditch dug by children on the beach to stop the tide. The ocean of capitalism that was headed by the juggernaut of the machine, was breaking in upon mankind.

After a few years, Owen saw that he was making no progress toward starting a Village in England. The New World, he

thought, might perhaps offer a more suitable locale for his plan than the Old. In 1824 he left for America to inspect a site of 30,000 acres and a village, which the Rappites, a religious sect of German peasants, had put up for sale. He purchased the area and a year later formed the Co-operative Community of New Harmony. However, the difficulties were insuperable. Quarrels and dissension rent the community, whose members were from widely varied backgrounds. It split into several smaller groups and the venture dissolved in a few years. The discipline and control which Owen could maintain in his factory village of New Lanark was altogether lacking here in a voluntary community. Owen lost the bulk of his fortune—about 40,000 pounds—and returned to England in 1829.

In the meantime Owen's doctrines had been taken up principally by the new and growing trade union movement. Since the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824 the workers had been free to organize. Owen founded the modern trade union movement and became its leader virtually against his will. In his Report to the County of Lanark, Owen had already put forward the principles of labour as a standard of value, and in 1832 he founded the National Equitable Labour Exchange where producers' co-operatives could exchange goods on the basis of 'labour time'. The idea of a private issue of notes was by no means unusual at the time, and for a while the "Labour Notes" were circulated in London without difficulty. However the venture failed during the trade crisis of 1834. Owen intended the "Labour Notes" to replace the gold standard, but he did not realize that setting labour hours on commodities in a market system (which set its own prices) was doomed to failure.

The Grand National Consolidated Trades Union was formed in 1833 and consisted of a number of guilds of craftsmen, artisans, retailers and other 'trades' along with the working classes. At one time it claimed a membership of almost a million and formed one of the largest social movements of the day. The purpose was "to form themselves into lodges, to make their own laws and regulations—for the purpose of emancipating the industrious and useful classes from the

difficulties which overwhelm them." Owen kept to the idea of the economic autonomy of the labouring class.

The workers and artisans wanted a general strike but he insisted on gradualism and non-violence from the start: "All the individuals now living are the suffering victims of this accursed system, and all are objects of pity; you will, therefore, effect this great and glorious revolution without, if possible, inflicting individual evil. . .without bloodshed, violence or evil of any kind, merely by an overwhelming moral influence, which influence individuals and nations will speedily perceive the uselessness and folly of attempting to resist."

The power of this new trade union alarmed the manufacturers, and after a year of strikes, lock-outs and prosecutions the 'Grand National' was shattered. The National Building Guild, organized to provide employment and "superior dwellings" for the various members of the building crafts, did not fare much better.

The one movement to survive, of all the many that came forward in his name was the consumers' co-operative movement started by the 'Rochdale Pioneers' in 1844 with a small store in Toad Lane. Owen however, was little interested in this venture which ended up as the largest consumers' association in the world and was the most enduring organization of the Owenite movement.

The later years of Owen's life were occupied for a while by the unsuccessful experiment of establishing a Village of Union called Queenwood in Hampshire. Owen was appointed Governor and began erecting extensive buildings and a fine school, when the financial strain on the enterprise proved too great and forced it to give way.

Owen died at the age of eighty-seven after writing a splendid autobiography which reiterated his views as firmly as ever.

Owen was a true hero of the age: philosopher, friend of kings, multimillionaire, a Ford, Nobel and Carnegie rolled into one. In this favoured position and in his absolute dedication to mankind, lie the key to his depth and comprehensive perspective.

From the first, he saw the import of the machine and read man's future in its lineaments. In that naked dawn, technology revealed its essentials to him. He never envisaged retreat or defeat but faced up to the reality with all its implications. He held on to the machine whether it was to bring salvation or would be accompanied by everlasting suffering. Either humanity would be saved or salvation must be given up as hopeless. In any case, reason had gone to its limit and complaint was of no avail.

Owen's efforts were swept away by the onrushing forces of a burgeoning market society, man's initial response to the machine. For some, the postulates of this society were regarded as the limit of human initiative and valour. But Owen saw beyond the market to a society built on different moral foundations. What he reiterated was his recognition of a truth indelibly stamped on our consciousness in a technological civilization—the transcending reality of society for man's inner existence.

His life was a personal testament to this truth. His initial determination was boundless and heroic but implicit in it was the resignation to bear up to the unavoidable. But before man could resign himself to those evils of the machine which were intractable, the limits had first to be tested.

The standard that Owen set leaves us in awe.

August 1958