



# The Uses of Robert Owen in Co-operative Education, 1844-1939

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Robert Owen has cast a long, benign shadow over the co-operative movement. In the early nineteenth century, his strand of utopian thinking punctured the emerging and increasingly dominant laissez-faire ideas of a new generation of political economists and highlighted the possibilities of a New Moral World. He became a central figure for the co-operative movement, particularly from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. In the creation of a co-operative story, Owen and Owenism served as pre-history, providing principles, ideas, motivation, and spirit that co-operators selectively adapted and put into practical action. He fitted into a narrative which commenced with the violent transitions of the Industrial Revolution and eventuated in a much-improved society with co-operators looking to a brighter future. While Owen was never viewed as a saint, accounts for children display elements of hagiography. Co-operative texts for children had to present wholesome influences which made it difficult to critique or selectively filter Owen's ideas and character — rather he had to be presented as a thoroughly good person, a friend, and hero. Historical nuance might be compromised in the desire to offer up a laudable model of the individual pioneer for future co-operative improvement.

Robert Owen has cast a long, benign shadow over the co-operative movement. In the early nineteenth century, his strand of utopian thinking punctured the emerging and increasingly dominant laissez-faire ideas of a new generation of political economists and highlighted the possibilities of a New Moral World that promised to replace the old immoral one. Owen's basic message that character is dependent upon circumstances was presented as firing a silver bullet into the heart of the "dismal science" of political economy. He has been characterised as a visionary who paved the way for working class association and self-help while challenging assumptions about the family, religion, and gender (Claeys, 1989; Harrison, 1968). He became a central figure for the co-operative movement, particularly at its height, from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century when his role was much debated, especially among co-operative educationists who wrote about Owen. Analysing this process of adoption provides insights into both Owen as well as the co-operative movement and education.

Owen engaged with a wide range of thought and practice. He was a significant figure to whom activists, historians, educationists, and utopians have repeatedly turned. He lived a long time, from 1771 to 1858, and was involved in a plethora of initiatives as an enlightened capitalist, founder of infant schools, writer and thinker on "social science", proposer and supporter of communities, a leader of the incipient working-class movement experimenting with various forms of union and co-operative action, as well as heading the Owenite movement with its "social missionaries" who propagated his ideas. Education pervaded the whole of his

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thinking. Social life was to be apprehended through the senses, as a rational process — it was not a life-stage but a “constant dynamic” (Silver, 1969, p. 23). He is often credited with the development of infant schools although his approach invoked much wider meanings of education. He digested a range of enlightenment thinking, singling out the eighteenth-century philosophical interest in the close interconnection between institutions and character. In particular, Helvétius proffered a radical notion of educability and Owen also visited Hofwyl in Switzerland where Johann von Fellenberg blended agricultural and moral education (Hamilton, 1983; Harrison, 1968; Silver, 1969).

The allure of Owen continued after his retreat from public life and final passing. Demoted by Engels to the wrong side of the utopian-scientific binary, socialists and educationists would nevertheless keep Owen and Owenism alive through the nineteenth century and, in the twentieth, resuscitate him as a forerunner or antecedent of modern times (Beer, 1920; Stewart & McCann, 1967). Despite Owen’s ambivalence about working-class agency, labour and social movements paid homage to him, notably labour leaders such as Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald (Claeys, 2011; see also Claeys, 2005). G. D. H. Cole noted that “No man has been a forerunner and patron saint of so many movements” as Owen (Cole, 1925, p. 24); he found it “extraordinary” that an enlightened capitalist could find himself heading the working-class movement (Cole, 1925, p. 27). George Jacob Holyoake, a supporter and diffuser of co-operative societies, had been a social missionary. His paean to Owen on unveiling the Newtown memorial in 1902, made bold claims for his influence:

... thanks to the doctrine of national environment which Owen was the first to preach — Knowledge is greater; Life is longer; Health is surer; Disease is limited; Towns are sweeter; Hours of labour are shorter; Men are stronger; Women are fairer; Children are happier; Industry is held in more honour, and is better rewarded; Co-operation carries wholesome food and increased income into a million homes where they were unknown before and has brought us nearer and nearer to that state of society which Owen strove to create — in which it shall be impossible for men to be deprived or poor (Holyoake, 1902, pp. 18-19).

Interest in Owen has continued to the current day when co-operative values have been rediscovered and put to use in schools, universities, and the wider social economy. Memorials, conferences, and key events continue to attract attention (Smith, 2008; Thompson & Williams, 2011).

## Debates on Owen and Owenism

Part of the difficulty in understanding Owen has revolved around his long-term influence. The second and third quarters of the nineteenth century was for many years conceived as a time when the Owenite impulse for widescale change attenuated with the development of a successful set of shops in the serene setting of mid-Victorian Britain. On the centenary of Owen’s death, Asa Briggs declared in a lecture to the Co-operative College that by the mid-1850s:

the working class movement had become pre-eminently practical, focussing not on immediate transformations of society but on the gradual development of “association,” mutual self help. In the favourable economic climate of mid-Victorian Britain the better-off workers could take the lead in organisation, and both skilled trade unionism and prudent co-operation began to make their impact on national life. (Briggs, 1959, p. 13).

The distinction had also been found in G. D. H. Cole’s work but, in 1960, Sidney Pollard (1960) postulated a fundamental breach between the two periods with the revolutionary air of Owenism being deflated as the movement evolved from “community building to shopkeeping” (see also Gurney, 1996). The divergence between a turbulent revolutionary Owenite period and a tranquil reformist one appealed to a range of different perspectives. In the early twentieth century, groups such as the Plebs League, keen to create distance from the Workers’ Educational

Association and what it saw as a complacent co-operative movement, had also contrasted the early revolutionary disturbances with a later reformist tendency. These perspectives were to be challenged convincingly by historians such as Stephen Yeo and Peter Gurney who re-inserted a utopian desire back into the motivations of co-operators in the late nineteenth century, permeated by a continuing desire to remake the world on co-operative lines (Gurney, 1996; Yeo, 1988, 1995, 2010). In time, Pollard would himself come to recognise a more nuanced position (Pollard, 1980). We might add that Pollard, and to a lesser extent Briggs, wrote in the post-war years when life had appeared to settle down, in which the “new Jerusalem” had been transmuted into the everyday administration of various (welfare) state institutions. The 1958 Independent Commission report was frequently interpreted as a call for the movement to accept postwar divisions of labour which may have subordinated the provision of food to the mundane activity of “shopping”.

This would be to misunderstand the meaning and motivations of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, established in 1844, who are widely credited with being the first successful consumer co-operative (see Walton, 2015). Approximately half of the Pioneers may have been Owenites or at least influenced by Owen, alongside other influences such as Chartism (Cole, 1925). Owen played no role in this initiative. He distanced himself from the co-operative shops which were flourishing upon his return from New Harmony, somewhat taken aback by these working-class associations that apparently had an Owenite heritage. The relationship was mediated by William King’s *Co-operator* which was published in the late 1820s and early 1830s. On more than one occasion, Owen would express doubt about how such minuscule initiatives could bring about change or that working-class people could direct them with any success, being in part hampered by unpropitious circumstances.

The much-quoted Law First of the Pioneers is the crucial piece of evidence that reveals the community building intentions of the co-operators. Certainly, the early phase of co-operation did emphasise that “the grand ultimate object ... is community on land”, as articulated in the Fundamental Rules of the 1832 Co-operative Congress (quoted in Webb, 1921, p. 58). Yet, the nascent working-class movement was continually learning and experimenting to fathom a way out of their precarity and gain some autonomy and control over their lives. Law First (Table 1) does not mention ultimate objects but rather emphasises raising capital incrementally in order to bring “plans and arrangements” to fruition, starting with the now familiar store.

Table 1: Law First of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers

<b>Law First</b>	
1	The establishment of a store for the sale of provisions, clothing etc.
2	The building, purchasing or erecting of a number of houses, in which those members desiring to assist each other in improving their domestic and social condition may reside.
3	To commence the manufacture of such articles as the Society may determine upon for the employment of such members as may be without employment or who may be suffering in consequence of repeated reductions in their wages.
4	As a further benefit and security to the members of this Society, the Society shall purchase or rent an estate or estates of land, which shall be cultivated by the members who may be out of employment or whose labour may be badly remunerated.
5	That as soon as practicable the Society shall proceed to arrange the powers of production, distribution, education and government, or in other words, to establish a self-supporting home colony of united interests, or assist other societies in establishing such colonies.
6	That for the promotion of sobriety, a temperance hotel be opened in one of the Society’s houses as soon as convenient.

The most cited proposal is the fifth point — to arrange their powers of production, distribution, education, and government in order to form a self-supporting home colony. For the Pioneers, steeped in Owenism, the core divisions of society corresponded with pliable powers that could be re-arranged: manufacturing, distribution, education, and government. These four essential

areas of social life were to be re-made and might overlap. For instance, for the Owenites, education could signify government or, as people became fully educated, the replacement of government (Claeys, 1989).

Despite the radicalism and ambition of this proposal, for Cole, Law First was a “curious hotchpotch” gleaned from Owenism and various co-operative experiments over the preceding period (Cole, 1944, p. 75). The point about home colonies did not represent a crescendo but is rather sandwiched between the proposals for a temperance hotel and to rent or buy land upon which unemployed members might be put to work. It is entirely possible that all these plans and arrangements were conceived as both practical and directed to social change rather than one a means to the other or as a binary opposition between reformist and revolutionary inclinations. Working-class co-operators were not delaying a revolutionary change but rather viewed it as something that had to commence from the here and now, it was part of the thinking that emerged from a broad and rich array of radical culture (Thompson, 1968; Yeo, 1971).

The significance of the early period of co-operation and Owenism was kept alive by Owenite missionaries, biographers, and journalists. Holyoake was the most notable social missionary who, like Owen, lived a long time and threw his hat into the co-operative camp. His history of the Rochdale Pioneers was to have a profound impact upon the movement and stimulated many societies into existence. Owen provided ballast for co-operators to create a legacy of educational thinking about co-operative character, knowledge, and learning as an impulse for liberation (Woodin, 2011).

In the 1870s, the Owenite Henry Travis critiqued the Social Science Association, bemoaning the fact that it did not understand the meaning of Owenite social science which aimed to promote “the happiness of every individual” based upon three kinds of knowledge — educational, economical, and organisational (Travis, 1877, p. 9). Travis corrected what he saw as a fault in Owen, and asserted that the people were active in fashioning their future circumstances. He envisaged that the working classes would harness social science and prefigure future relations:

It will remain for the leaders of the working classes, and the more advanced members of their trade unions and their co-operative trading societies, to adopt measures to exhibit to society an example of the arrangements and proceedings of the New System ... the advocates of Social Reform will be enlightened as to the means by which alone the state of society can be effectually improved (Travis, 1877, p. 11).

Co-operators discussed and sifted these various proposals. Another Owenite, William Pare, had been a social missionary who bridged relations between co-operative societies and the Christian Socialists and was the convenor of the first modern Co-operative Congress in 1869, drawing up its agenda. Pare outlined his plans to Congress for industrial colleges teaching both academic and vocational knowledge as part of community building initiatives. His account was thoroughly Owenite and he asserted a sense of continuity with the past although there was no resolution following his paper and the actual proposals seemed distant from the then priorities of the movement (Garnett, 1973; Woodin, 2019). However, the processes of evaluating Owen and Owenism would become embedded in the explicitly educational work of the co-operative movement.

Holyoake, Travis and Pare were germinating what would become a process of perennial recovery and adaptation and the contests over social science would reverberate through the century and into the next (Janes Yeo, 1996). The British co-operative movement was to stake a claim for Owen as a father of co-operation. The movement developed into a very significant social force between the 1840s and the late nineteenth century by which time co-operators had become extremely confident about their ability to foster widespread social change (Yeo, 1995). In fact, this relationship between the early and later phases of co-operation has often been considered as the key to understanding the meaning and significance of the movement. Certainly the writers of co-operative textbooks dwelled upon the topic.

## Texts for Children and Youth

The uses that the co-operative movement made of Owen and Owenism help us understand not only co-operation but also wider intellectual developments and social practices of remembrance. The co-operative movement gave particular emphasis to culture and education as a means of generating a co-operative consciousness based upon loyalty and a sense of belonging. Owenites and others questioned the meaning of education so that Holyoake could refer not simply to formal education but to imparting the “spirit of association” through participation in co-operatives (Holyoake, 1893). Equally, the development of demarcated educational activities allowed co-operators to sustain the bond between members and their businesses: “... the only way of speeding up co-operative achievement is to quicken the intelligence and increase the co-operative determination of the rank and file” (Hall & Watkins, 1934, p. 90). Indeed, the movement attempted to create a cradle to grave culture which embraced all members and, at various times, educational classes, lectures, study groups, discussion groups, choirs, film, dance, theatre groups, and pageants were organised.

Co-operative educationists arranged a structured programme, according to age, for young children, youth, and adults. Specific programmes would be developed in classes and youth groups, eventually via the Woodcraft Folk, Comrades Circles, British Federation of Young Co-operators as well as various auxiliary groups. Essay prizes and examinations featured questions on Owen. Age differentiation paralleled developments in progressive education and developmental psychology which identified stages of development that Jean Piaget and others would later elaborate upon (for instance, Piaget 1977). It also tied into a politics of evolution and human development that appeared to follow a stadial pattern. Recapitulation theory reverberated in the co-operative movement and Woodcraft Folk which held that the stages of civilisation corresponded to the stages of personal growth of the child who started off “savage” like. Similar assumptions seeped into the textbooks and readers on co-operation that were produced within the movement.

Owen was a crucial figure for writers of textbooks for children and young people. One key text, Isa Nicholson’s (1903/1926) *Our story: A history of the co-operative movement for young co-operators*, went through multiple editions and print runs; by the 16th edition of 1926, 800,000 copies had been printed and distributed. It was followed by Catherine Webb’s *Lives of great men and women: Short biographies of some heroes and friends of co-operation* (1911/1920) which was intended to provide a “bridge” to adult studies (p. 11), alongside Fred Hall’s *Sunnyside: A story of industrial history and co-operation for young people* (1919). The focus on great lives was not new but it represented a major way of writing history, apparent in Thomas Carlyle’s influential historical work *On heroes, hero-worship and the heroic in history* which argued that “Universal history ... is at bottom the History of the Great Men (sic) ... the leaders of men ... the soul of the whole world’s history” (1841/1926, p. 239). The co-operative movement was fundamentally a collective social force and co-operators were at once attracted and repelled by Carlyle’s arguments. As a result, they located the individual in a social and historical context, for instance, in texts such as Ramsden Balmforth’s (1902) *Some social and political pioneers of the nineteenth century* that had originally appeared in the *Co-operative News*. Balmforth explicitly questioned Carlyle’s approach to history in favour of placing individuals alongside trade unions, Chartism, educational reformers, and of course the co-operative movement (Balmforth, 1902; Woodin & Wright, 2023).

Co-operative texts for children are written like story books though firmly focused on imparting the value of co-operation. To the reader today, they may lack excitement and involve a fair amount of serious reading, but they would have been introduced with great enthusiasm and acclimatised to the needs of classes, read to groups or given to children. Sometimes they attempt to present the history of co-operation as an adventure, as did many history textbooks at the time. For instance, Nicholson commences her story in the “dark days” of child labour, poverty, and exploitation which, while distant from her time of writing, were nevertheless connected. With the appearance on the historical scene of Owen and the early co-operators,

she continues, “The dark clouds of misery were slowly lifting, and the first glimmer of dawn could now be seen” (Nicholson, 1903/1926, p. 23). Fred Hall explained how technical inventions, social reformers, and moral growth were bound together and helped to improve society and lead working people away from their miserable lives, the public house, pigeon-flying, gambling, and cock-fights; co-operation made them “rather ashamed” of such activities, preferring rational recreation, sports, lectures, music, and drama. While this was quite a present-centred historical account, it usefully identifies a sense of cultural change fostered by working-class associations, a point later developed by E. P. Thompson and other historians (Hall, 1919, pp. 90, 107; Thompson, 1968).

Early twentieth-century language choices in describing Owen reflected the growing interest in children and youth as people with distinct needs. Their actual and symbolic representation of the future dovetailed with a co-operative world to be made. But there was also a recognition of an ideal child being brought up within the movement. In embracing Owen and other significant individuals, the form of address is intimate, offering up “friends” and “heroes” to the children. We are induced to love and cherish Owen’s ideas and character:

Robert Owen’s personality was such a lovable one that we shall be able to greet him as a friend ... It is for the ideas he put into men’s (sic) minds, more than for the work he attempted or accomplished, that we cherish Robert Owen’s name so highly today (Webb, 1911/1920, p. 13).

Familiarising Owen to young people was the priority. His character is reconfigured in idealistic terms, as unassuming but resolute, that children might emulate:

It is very wonderful to think of this quiet, shy young man going about his work and storing up in his heart and brain thoughts and ideas that should one day call the attention of kings, princes, statesmen, and people of all sorts and of all countries ... (Webb, 1911/1920, p. 22)

By learning from the past, children were being encouraged to fashion the future. Aspects of Owen’s personal characteristics and life provided an appropriate model for young co-operators; his novelty and innovation became an ideal of early twentieth century childhood. No doubt this felt like a legitimate move given the emphasis upon play in Owen’s pedagogy at New Lanark. He is placed at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution which is viewed as an abrupt break, an eruption in human experience which caused considerable distress. Nicholson narrates the childhood of Owen, his interest in things, books, and people and his gradual rise to take on the New Lanark mills where his vision of education and good conditions prevailed so that it soon became “an object lesson for the civilised world” (Nicholson, 1903/1926, p. 21). Owen the benevolent capitalist precedes Elizabeth Fry, William Cobbett, and John Ruskin as central figures in the creation of modern “civilisation”. He is placed alongside Lord Shaftesbury — two figures who made significant changes to society, known throughout the “civilised world, as great social reformers, friends of the poor and helpless and the saviours of little children” (Nicholson, 1903/1926, p. 12). One impulse behind this tendency may have been to place co-operation within mainstream society where co-operators were demanding recognition. Webb reached out to Owen and other pioneers as friends in the struggle for social improvements in the nineteenth century:

Their claim to our friendship is that they opened to our fathers (sic) doors of freedom ... The special type of heroes which those times and those conditions aroused ... Such men and women were the pioneers of the great social and political movements to which we owe so much of our prosperity today. Co-operation, trade unionism, free education, free trade, factory legislation, sanitary legislation, the parliamentary franchise — all these movements have been made possible by the work of the pioneers (Webb, 1911/1920, p. 8).

The heroic individual feeds directly into collective social movements and progressive social change. Owen was indeed deployed as a useful point of reference for contemporary developments even where the connections were more tenuous. For example, New Lanark experiments found their modern equivalent in co-operative factories and warehouses in which “Good wages, reasonable hours of labour, and a healthy working environment have brightened the lives of very many men, women and children”, slightly effacing the then contemporary

struggles of co-operative workers (Nicholson, 1903/1926, p. 73; see Gurney, 1996). Webb argued that Owen's "intuitive genius" about the "elimination of profit on cost" was a theory that "slowly evolved from the sixty years' practice of consumers' co-operation since 1844" (Webb, 1921, p. 39). Co-operative ownership of land, manufacturing, and wholesales represented a fuller realisation of "the germ idea of the early socialist co-operators" which was "community on land":

The land bought by co-operators for the extension of their business is in the truest sense socialised, rescued from the competitive system, made the common property of those who contribute to its development and enjoy its fruit; and the number of those who may thus become joint-proprietors of co-operatively owned land is ... practically unlimited (Webb, 1921, p. 40).

Moreover, Owen's notion that "character would be built up by proper environment" was translated as "children could be taught to be good and happy always if they were surrounded by decent comfort, kindness, and gentle teaching" so that "modern council schools" inherited the legacy of New Lanark (Webb, 1911/1920, pp. 18, 24-5). Thus, traditions of community and mutual ownership were blended in a vision of progressive change (Woodin et al., 2010).

In pitching their message to children, these writers encroached upon a "Whig interpretation" of history which charted an incremental but steady story of progress (Butterfield, 1931). As a finale, Webb argues that Owenite experiments failed but "[w]ith the Rochdale Pioneers began a new form of society ... it was the men (sic) who caught the true spirit of Robert Owen who built the foundations of these new successes. He sowed the seed, our fathers (sic) tilled the soil, and we are reaping the harvest" (Webb, 1911/1920, p. 31). The labour movement perspective was not a pure celebration of the nation as it was but rather a world of democracy and equality to be constructed in the future. Of course, civilisation and evolution inevitably butted up against assumptions about the perceived backwardness of certain populations and the mention of "savages" (Hall, 1919, pp. 47, 48).

There was, however, a perceived difficulty in connecting Owen to the co-operative movement and so articulating the agency of working-class co-operators in the present. The dominant mode of charting progress did not easily explain the relation between Owen and the co-operators. Owen was presented as an enlightened capitalist, a supporter of high wages and good living conditions in which progressive education served to illustrate his fundamental insight that circumstances determined character. Yet, the exact link with the co-operative movement remained vague. While the summary at the end of Chapter 4 in *Our story* mentioned co-operatives, labour exchanges, trade unions, and magazines and other actions, surprisingly none of these had been covered in the chapter. Perhaps they were considered too complex. Webb likewise demoted the co-operative aspects of Owen's thought and practice to a brief paragraph, outlining how the Owenite communities were mooted before people were ready for them and so remained "merely experiments" (Webb, 1911/1920, p. 29). Even though it is presumed that the modern co-operative movement grew out of these ideas, there was a reluctance to address the exact connections which could be deferred until students were more mature: "this part of our hero's history is more interesting to older students of social economy" (Webb, 1911/1920, p. 29).

Hall's *Sunnyside* also downplays actual co-operative initiatives while defending a co-operative future. Hall adopted a format in which a group of children listen to the tales of "Old Jason" threading together his personal memories of Owen and his travels which provides continuity with the past. He tells us that Owen's ideas found an outlet in the interpretations and actions of the people which was partly at variance with Hall's own history of co-operation where co-operators are given more creativity in interpreting Owen. Old Jason recollected that legislation on working hours:

Was not enough for Owen, and as he could not persuade Parliament to do any more, he turned to the people themselves and told them they must unite, or co-operate, in order to make the conditions better themselves. It was hard work for Owen, for the people were still very ignorant ... many co-operative experiments were made as a result of his telling people they should co-operate or join together in

schemes which would enable the workers to become their own masters. I have not time to tell you about all these experiments, but you must read about them in some of your books on Co-operation. Besides, later on, I am going to tell you what happened at Sunnyside as a result of the work of Robert Owen and some of those who believed like him ... who came to Sunnyside to give lectures and persuade the people to form co-operative societies (Hall, 1919, p. 64).

The educability of the working class is recognised here; for Owen, it had been more of a theoretical construct, something dependent upon changed circumstances. Hall's account is generous to Owen's belief in working-class people which helps to sustain his narrative about working-class creativity. On the relationship between character and circumstances, *Sunnyside* recognises that:

Mr Owen pitied the children particularly, for he said that if children did not have a proper schooling they could not help being ignorant when they grew up (Hall, 1919, p. 60).

Yet, this assumption was not quite extended into adulthood. In describing the inventors of technical improvements, he noted that "poor working men (sic) ... often prove to be clever men when they have an opportunity of using their cleverness" (Hall, 1919, p. 25). As a result, the Rochdale Pioneers were more able to work together to gradually establish a "co-operative community" with fair wages, work for all and popular control of farms, factories, and shops. It was the initiation of a teleological process that *Sunnyside* projected into the co-operative future:

The co-operative society, after several years, owned all the factories in Sunnyside. It provided more regular work, paid better wages, and gave better conditions than any other employer for miles round. By this time the society owned nearly all the shops in Sunnyside, which was fast becoming a co-operative community. The poor had nearly all disappeared, for there was work for all who wanted to work, and it was counted a disgrace for any person not to work if he was well and able (Hall, 1919, pp. 116-17).

This account stitched community building and shop-keeping into the fabric of community life with the final sentence problematising those who do not work, presumably the wealthy.

## Co-operative Textbooks

Similar themes suffused "adult" textbooks that were produced for members, classes on co-operation, industrial history, and other courses which took place in local societies, the Co-operative College, and via correspondence courses. Thomas Hughes and E. V. Neale were first into print in their *Manual for co-operators* (1881/1888) which later developed into *Foundations: A study in the ethics and economics of the co-operative movement* (1916). Hughes and Neale felt impelled to recognise Owen as an "eminent thinker" but were keen not to be bound by his ideas, particularly relating to the family and religion. On the contrary, their concern with moral development and voluntary effort was sourced in Christianity. While the Christian Socialists made a significant contribution to the co-operative movement, tensions arose as co-operators became increasingly independent of their middle-class supporters. Partly in response to the philosophical complexity and meanderings of these texts, which may have appeared to be somewhat distant from the everyday life of co-operators, Sir Arthur Acland and Ben Jones wrote the more concise and plainly written *Working men co-operators* (1884/1932) which makes brief mention of Owen who, we are informed, "set men's minds upon the track of co-operation" (Acland & Jones, 1884/1932, p. 14). Later writers from within the movement included Catherine Webb whose *Industrial co-operation: The story of a peaceful revolution* (1921) specifically mentions the course on the History, Theory, and Practice of Co-operation. This was followed by Hall and W. P. Watkins, *Co-operation: A survey of the history, principles, and organisation of the co-operative movement in Great Britain and Ireland* (1934). "Hall and Watkins" took on almost Biblical status as it became a standard textbook. It would not be replaced until 1961 when Arnold Bonner published his *British Co-operation: The history, principles and organisation of the co-operative movement* (1961). In theory, these volumes succeeded each other but in reality they remained popular and/or went through multiple imprints



over a significant amount of time. These texts were bolstered by the histories of co-operation, notably Cole's 1944 volume. Each of them gave varying amounts of attention to Owen although, collectively, a number of themes emerge.

There are similarities and differences to the textbooks for children and young people. The shared starting point for the co-operative movement was the Industrial Revolution fed by "men and machines" — inventions as well as new theories from Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus — which unleashed new powers but sorely neglected and exploited the poor. While the Industrial Revolution provided a definite historical break, as outlined in texts for young people, there was a nuanced recognition that co-operation as a principle was as old as, and even older than, humanity — examples of co-operative bees and ants being reminiscent of Peter Kropotkin's assault upon social Darwinism (Kropotkin, 1891/1939). Webb also mentions the visions of Plato, Bacon, Piers Plowman, and Thomas Moore as all diffusely expressing the spirit of co-operation (Webb, 1921, p. 2).

Owen is represented as unlocking the secret of the new system of capitalism while it was in the process of being constructed. Webb's volume, which has a frontispiece portrait of Owen, explains that he "pointed the way of escape from the evils of competition by means of association, and he has been well called the 'father' of Co-operation" (Webb, 1921, p. 2). Out of Owen's experiments, she argued, "the seed was sown, the direction of advance indicated", an illustration of how the roots of inter-war Britain were being traced to the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, unlike much of the writing for young people, these authors were now keen to tease out the precise connections between Owen and the co-operative movement. We discover that the "theory of co-operation" did not emerge from Owen's philanthropy but rather from "nearly a century's growth and experience" of working-class self-help (Webb, 1921, pp. 13, 50). The core Owenite insight is crystallised while discarding what were seen as the superfluous musings of Owen, particularly on the family and religion. Hall and Watkins lamented that he "threw away what advantages he gained by his persuasive manner, personal charm, and disinterestedness by introducing his views on various side-issues and outraging the prejudices of his audiences" (Hall & Watkins, 1934, p. 51).

Despite their reservations, however, Hall and Watkins claim Owen for the co-operative movement which, in its tangible achievements, collectivised his visions. For example, the *Co-operative Magazine*, which ran from 1826 to 1830, "rendered the invaluable service of disentangling the ideas of co-operation in industry from Owen's personal views on social institutions in general" (Hall & Watkins, 1934, p. 52). There were problems with Owen's frequently patronising position which could be dismissive of the attempts at co-operation by the working classes (Mercer, 1947). Yet, the practical realisation of Owen's ideas was taken a step further by the Irish landlord, William Thompson, and Dr William King's work in Brighton. Thompson was useful for Hall and Watkins as he argued that a community could be started with lower levels of capital than Owen had envisaged. Through the writings of King, the "missing stepping-stone was supplied by the working men themselves" (Hall & Watkins, 1934, p. 56):

In Dr King's co-operative theory the wagon of joint shopkeeping is hitched to the star of a noble social ideal. The idea of cheapening the price of goods by co-operative store keeping, which came from the common sense of the working classes, is linked to the idea of community organisation, which came from the Utopian vision of Owen and Thompson (Hall & Watkins, 1934, p. 59).

While many communities on land were judged to have been too small (Hall & Watkins, 1934, p. 66), the working class fathomed practical solutions:

throughout the industrial North small groups of working men were still persistently organising stores. Robert Owen would never admit store-keeping to be worthy of the name of co-operation, and publicly disowned it more than once; but there was in store Co-operation a germ of common sense that the plain practical men of Lancashire and Yorkshire rightly refused to abandon. In due time another "slip of Owenism grafted upon a stock of common sense" was to grow up into the co-operative movement of today (Hall & Watkins, 1934, p. 74).

It is worth noting here, being aware of the Whiggish and institutionalised focus of Hall and Watkins and other writers on co-operation, that their account may well have influenced E. P. Thompson's seminal *Making of the English working class* which also uses the metaphor of grafting Owenism onto the working-class movement. Thompson's focus on the period as one of exploitation and hardship but also of working-class experimentation was comparable with these earlier writers. Although Thompson and others from the Communist Party Historians Group broke away from institutionalised accounts of labour history, there were nevertheless some parallels in the new context, similar perhaps to the way that Raymond Williams's (1961) *Culture and society* could be traced to adult education and labour movement culture in the 1930s (Goldman 1995).

Furthermore, the search for workable forms of co-operation by the working-class movement did not diminish its revolutionary potential:

... if by revolution we understand a complete change, the objects and plan of the Rochdale Pioneers can be described with truth as revolutionary.

A world organised in accordance with their plan would indeed be totally different from the world of competition and greed, jealousy and strife, distress and poverty, of 1844; and the change would still be a revolutionary one, even if these objects were attained only slowly ... direction is of more importance than speed ... Whilst recognising the prevailing individualism which made it necessary to provide immediate benefits for their members instead of benefits that would come only when the millennium was established, they nevertheless showed by their plan that it was not impossible to keep their eyes upon the heavens whilst their feet were upon the ground, and they had a tremendous faith in the perfectibility of mankind (Hall & Watkins, 1934, p. 86).

With their feet on the ground and eyes upon the heavens was a common way that co-operators infused incremental daily work with utopian visions. It provides further evidence that co-operators identified continuities with the earlier history. Revolution and reform were not conceived as oppositional forces but were tendencies that could be moulded according to need.

## Co-operative Stories

In the creation of a co-operative story from the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, Owen and Owenism were conceptualised as pre-history, providing principles, ideas, motivation and spirit that co-operators were to put into practical action. Not only did Owen provide an understanding of competitive capitalism, he also outlined the principles by which it might be replaced. Owenite ideas were pored over and selectively adopted by the aggregated power of working-class co-operators who drew intellectual kudos from Owen's writing, practical examples, and public impact. Owen's centrality to the history of the early nineteenth century helped to affirm the importance of co-operation a century later. He fitted into a narrative which commenced with the violent transitions of the Industrial Revolution and resulted in a much-improved society with co-operators looking to a brighter future. Recounting the lives of individual pioneers was a popular mode of thinking and history writing that co-operators engaged with and altered significantly. Of course, it was the Rochdale Pioneers who represented the true origin story of the movement, had been influenced by Owen and made direct connections to his work. So, while Owen was claimed by co-operators, he was modified to produce both an idealisation and a critical evaluation of the individual in relation to historical change.

From the outset Owen was never viewed as a saint whose life was to be recovered pure and whole even though the accounts for children display elements of hagiography. The influence of early twentieth-century progressive education can be identified in co-operative texts for children who had specific needs. They were to be exposed to wholesome influences which made it difficult to critique or selectively filter Owen's ideas and character — rather he had to be presented as a thoroughly good person, a friend, and hero. Historical nuance might be compromised in the desire to offer up a laudable and admirable model for late nineteenth and twentieth century co-operative children. Inevitably, the problematic aspects of Owen had

to be downplayed in a historical mode of writing that centred on the individual pioneer. For co-operators, children were recognised not just as having separate needs but also as future co-operators so that the nurturing of their growth involved taking responsibility and working for general improvement. The ideal child was placed at the heart of social change so that individual and social aspirations coincided.

The progressive nature of this account highlighted continuous expansion leading to a future characterised by co-operation and democracy. The movement was saturated in a theory of progressive social change although in this case working class co-operators were placed at the vanguard — they were literally working for the future. In doing so, the material existence of the movement lent credence, reassurance, and conviction that a world built on co-operative principles was an actual possibility. Contemporary readers will be struck by the confident assumptions about progress as well as the silences in this account, for example in relation to race and empire or even to the evils of capitalism that tended to be positioned in the past rather than representing a major challenge to a movement that expected to continue expanding as it always had done. Nevertheless, Owen would continue to be a significant figure in the movement, as someone who provided a wholeness of vision, committed self-belief and willingness to challenge existing structures, all traits which proved attractive to co-operators. In the post-war period, it is thus not surprising to find co-operators justifying comprehensive schools, democratic practices or housing co-operatives in Owenite terms (for instance, Waddington, 1960).

## The Author

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