

ROBERT OWEN AND THE COMMUNITIES

by John Harrison

TWO hundred years after his birth Robert Owen is still popularly regarded as “the father of British socialism”. It is not always remembered, however, that the socialism he advocated was co-operative or community socialism. Owen did not think along the lines of the later socialists of the 1880’s. His approach was basically unpolitical and he rejected the notion of class struggle as a means of social change. Instead, he believed in communitarianism as a method of social reform. Society, he argued, was to be radically transformed by means of experimental communities, and this he regarded as a valid alternative to other methods of effecting change, such as revolution or legislation. The foundation of communities was not a series of more-or-less accidental happenings, but the attempt to put into practice a coherent theory of social change.

Owen arrived at a communitarian position for several reasons. First, like some other contemporaries, he felt that a sense of community was an essential element for satisfactory human relationships in any society. The absence of such community he diagnosed as the chief ill of British society in the early nineteenth century; society was fragmented and turned against itself. In his efforts to restore harmony to society Owen became a socialist and was led to condemn all institutions which “individualised” man. Second, given his doctrine of character formation and the importance of educational influences, it was logical to seek a more favourable environment than early industrial capitalism. In order to build the new moral world it was necessary to withdraw partially from existing society and its corrupting influences. Third, the building of communities (unlike most other types of social reform) could be begun right away, without any violence or mass support or disruption of the state. It was radical (in that it rejected the values and institutions of contemporary society) and it was practicable (at any rate for anyone, like Owen, who could raise the necessary capital). Fourth, in his appeal for support Owen was able to draw upon traditions of community which were familiar in various forms in both Britain and America. His new views of society could thus be presented as novel but

not outrageous – a requirement essential for any reformer who seeks wide acceptance of his views.

Owen's community plans matured rapidly between 1816 and 1820. Previously his philanthropic endeavours had been directed to improving working and living conditions at New Lanark, and then to education and factory reform. The "distress" which followed the peace of 1815 turned his attention to problems of the unemployed. In the *Report to the Committee of the Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor* (1817) Owen diagnosed the causes of unemployment and suggested as a remedy the formation of self-supporting communities, with accommodation arranged in a parallelogram of buildings, and provision for all the educational and social needs of the inhabitants. Here, in the form of an improved method of relieving the unemployed, was the first presentation of Owen's famous "Plan". Throughout 1817 he carried on a large-scale publicity campaign on behalf of his Plan and, as he attracted both support and criticism, was forced to elaborate and refine his ideas. In the process of doing this he extended his Villages of Co-operation to include all classes, not just paupers. He spoke of millennial terms of the great advantages that his Plan would bring for the future of mankind; and in the *Report to the County of Lanark*, submitted in 1820, he formulated a mature version of his plans for communities. The details of the Villages of Co-operation were as in his earlier proposals, but now embedded in a theory of co-operative socialism and prophetic utterance. Owen's Plan, which had begun as a method of unemployment relief, emerged as a scheme for the thorough reorganisation of society. Henceforth Owenism was thought of largely, though not exclusively, as a system of community building; and the largest practical commitment of Owen and his followers (measured by the amount of time, effort and capital involved) was to this end.

On both sides of the Atlantic (for Owenism was an Anglo-American movement) the community, or Village of Co-operation, became the central institution of Owenism. In America at least sixteen communities, either avowedly Owenite or influenced considerably by Owenite ideas, were founded. In Britain there were seven Owenite communities, and another three experiments in which Owenites participated. Further, there were in both countries several projected communities which never materialised. About most of these

communities we know very little, but for the three largest – New Harmony, Orbiston and Queenwood – material is more plentiful and secondary studies of them are available.

Owenite Communities

New Harmony was the earliest and the most ambitious Owenite community. To this day the little Indiana town on the banks of the Wabash river remains much the same as when Owen first saw it in December 1824 and made up his mind to buy it from the Rappites. Community life was begun there by the Owenites in May 1825 and continued amidst various vicissitudes until 1828, when the experiment was given up and the settlement lapsed into individualism. Lesser Owenite communities were also started in America in the 1820's at Wanborough, Illinois (1825), Blue Spring, Indiana (1826), Kendal, Ohio (1826), Yellow Springs, Ohio (1825), Valley Forge, Pennsylvania (1826), and Nashoba, Tennessee (1825).

In Britain community building followed a parallel though not so extensive course. As early as 1821 a Co-operative and Economical Society was formed by a group of London printers, whose object was to establish an Owenite community. They got as far as setting up an interim system of "family union" at Spa Fields, under which they shared living costs while continuing to work at their normal jobs, and twenty-one families remained thus "congregated" until 1823. A more ambitious scheme for a complete Owenite community at Motherwell in Lanarkshire in 1822 failed to attract sufficient capital for its commencement; but in 1825 its chief promoter, Archibald James Hamilton, in association with Abram Combe, was able to launch the nearby Orbiston Community. This lasted until 1827 when, following the death of Combe, the experiment collapsed. A small Devon (or Exeter) Community can be traced for several months in 1826-27. But the next substantial Owenite effort was at Ralahine in Ireland in 1831-33. There a young squire, John Scott Vandeleur, converted his 618 acre estate into a co-operative association under the management of E. T. Craig, a Manchester Owenite, and the venture lasted for two years. Craig also appeared in the next Owenite community – at Manea Fen, Cambridgeshire, in 1838. A short-lived community at Pant Glas, Merionethshire, was begun by some Liverpool Owenites in 1840; and

another Welsh community, at Garnlwyd, Carmarthenshire, was run by the Leeds Redemption Society from 1847 to 1855.

The main Owenite effort, however, went into Queenwood (“Harmony Hall”) at East Tytherly, Hampshire, where the last major effort to build a community, from 1839-1845, was made. In America, the burst of Community building between 1825 and 1829 was followed by a period in which Owenism was dormant. But in 1843, amidst a general communitarian boom (mainly Fourierist), four new Owenite communities were founded: Promisewell in Pennsylvania, founded by the Society of One-Mentians (so named from St. Peter’s injunction, “Be ye of one mind”); Goose Pond, also in Pennsylvania; Skaneateles, New York; and Equality in Wisconsin, composed of British immigrants under the leadership of Thomas Hunt, a London Owenite and Chartist.

Problems and Priorities

In the preceding chronology only Owenite communities have been mentioned, and with most of these Owen himself was not directly connected. It must be remembered, however, that many more communitarian experiments, secular and religious, were tried, and an even larger number was projected. One hundred and thirty communities in America before the Civil War can be identified. In many of these, and in similar British ventures, Owenite influences and personnel can be traced. Owenites recognised their affinity with other communitarians and were regarded by their contemporaries as part of a larger movement.

The record of these “lost communities”, as George Jacob Holyoake called them, seems at first to be a dismal one. Few of them lasted more than two or three years, most of them were plagued by internal strife, and their impact on society at large appears to have been negligible. It is hardly surprising that the general verdict has been that they were a failure, particularly when contrasted with other methods of social reform which are judged to have been successful. The success-failure dichotomy, however, is not adequate for analytical purposes, nor does it altogether square with the views of the communitarians themselves. Owenites always had explanations for the collapse of a particular community, and reaffirmed that their faith in the soundness of the “social principles” was unshaken. An experimental approach implied

that there would be trial and error, not necessarily success. Moreover, a variety of factors could be adduced for the relative success or failure of an experiment. Despite Owenite blueprints no two communities were identical. Each one was a special blend of characteristics within a general Owenite communitarian framework. A judgement of failure in any absolute sense is not therefore very useful. The meaning of failure (or success) has to be considered in relation to the goals which the communities set themselves.

The aims and objectives of the experiments were of three kinds. First, there were the declared aims of the community, usually embodied formally in a constitution or declaration. “For the promotion of science and industry”, declared the Blue Spring communitarians, “we, the undersigned, believing that the numerous ills which are inflicted on mankind ... may be avoided ... by adopting the social system recommended to the world by Robert Owen, do mutually agree to enter into an association of union and co-operation.” Second, underlying this, and not always revealed in the clauses of the constitution, were more general objectives. These were in the nature of assumptions about the role of the community in society at large. The goals of the community were interpreted as encouragement of certain processes or solution of various problems. Ralahine, for example, was regarded by its founder and later by its apologists, as a method of dealing with the “Irish problem” and avoiding future agrarian outrage. In the American communities Owenism frequently became a means of coping with the practical difficulties of pioneer settlement – and once these difficulties had been overcome the *raison d’être* of the community seemed to disappear and it soon disintegrated. Third, the community could satisfy certain personal goals, particularly of people who were in some way social misfits. It offered a solution to problems of personal deficiency or social maladjustment, and had an obvious appeal to those who sought security or escape from the world. The larger communities such as New Harmony and Orbiston collected their share of such types. The Owenite community was also attractive to a certain type of social reformer who wished to try out his theories in practice. All communities had their vegetarians, teetotallers, non-smokers and fresh-air-and-cold-water faddists.

The Provision of Capital

In their pursuit of these general goals, the individual communities wrestled with many common problems. The raising of capital to commence operations was perhaps the crucial issue. In his *Report to the County of Lanark* Owen considered four possible sources of capital: landed proprietors or large capitalists, “established companies having large funds to expend for benevolent and public objects”, parish and county authorities, and associations of farmers, mechanics and tradesmen. All the Owenite communities which were founded in fact fell into the first or last categories. Nine communities were financed by a single person or by a small group of proprietors. The remainder relied upon the subscriptions or shares of the settlers themselves. Legal ownership was vested in the suppliers of capital, and this reality did not always harmonise with communitarian aspirations. Property relationships, and especially the degree of communism to be expected, were a fruitful cause of argument. Owen was in theory an advocate of community of property and equality of remuneration, but was by no means consistent in his statements at various times. In no Owenite community was complete communism attained. The nearest to it was communal ownership of all the land under some form of trusteeship and individual ownership of personal property. Nor was complete equality of remuneration practised, but rather credit was given according to the number of hours worked or the value of goods produced. Intertwined with arguments about property were issues of democratic control and leadership. In all communities careful provision was made for weekly or monthly meetings of all the members to discuss business and elect officers, and no aspect of community life seems to have flourished more strongly.

Membership

Details of the membership are available for some communities and enable us to try to answer the important question of what sort of people joined them. If the communities are surveyed as a whole the total membership embraces a wide range of social status and occupation. Retired philanthropists, business men, professionals, intellectuals, farmers, skilled artisans, labourers – together with their wives and

children – can be found. Only members of the aristocracy were conspicuously absent. Somewhat more useful than this overall classification, however, is a division into communities with a relatively homogeneous membership (such as Blue Spring, Ralahine and Queenwood) and those which were heterogeneous (like New Harmony, Yellow Springs and Orbiston). Contemporaries were very ready to correlate the amount of confusion and disagreement in a community with the degree of heterogeneity. The problem of selection of the membership was clearly of vital importance, but in many cases was given little attention.

Economically there seems to have been no intrinsic reason why the Owenite communities should not have flourished – as did the Shakers or the Amana communities or Oneida. Although in theory the Owenite Village of Co-operation combined both industry and agriculture, in practice the Owenite communities were all basically agricultural, the farming being carried on collectively. In most cases it was subsistence farming and in no community was large-scale commercial farming undertaken. There was usually little surplus to sell. Similarly the small industries seldom did more than meet the needs of the community itself. The gap between this humble reality and the grandiose ideals portrayed by Owen and the propagandists for communitarianism could hardly have been greater. In no case was a community built which conformed to the ideal specifications laid down for optimum numbers, size of land holding, types of members and architectural design. No community had anywhere near the two thousand members regarded by Owen as necessary for a viable experiment. The famous parallelogram design was never translated into bricks and mortar. In fact Owenites had to adapt their ideas as best they could to what was available, braced by that optimism which they had learned from their leader. “Let the business be at once set about in good earnest”, proclaimed Owen in the *Report to the County of Lanark*, “and the obstacles which now seem formidable will speedily disappear.” Alas, the experience of community building in Britain and America proved otherwise.

This essay is based on material in the author’s “Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America” (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), which contains further detail and documentation.