
A Lantern in the Darkness?
How Were Robert Owen's Essays on
A New View of Society **Influenced by the**
Scottish Enlightenment?



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The methods of the new historicism and attention to a fragment of Owen's historical record can be revealing, but much eludes us and especially about this pre-propagandist phase of his career.

Influences on Owen's thinking in the early 1800s are certainly much discussed and debated, because despite extensive decoding of the essays themselves and of his wider agenda for reform, a great many black holes exist beyond what we know about his deploying and explaining his own experience as a humanitarian employer in Manchester and at New Lanark.

Some of this paper derives from a recent bi-centennial article on the essays in *History Today*, but it mainly incorporates speculations about the business and intellectual world beyond New Lanark which Owen entered on his arrival in Scotland, and then around the time he was composing *A New View of Society*. Inevitably some is going over old ground, but I feel that there is a considerable amount more can be discovered to fill in a few of the blanks about this period in Owen's career, what was going on in the community, and how he saw its application in his plans for social regeneration.

The context of much of this is thus highly speculative, as we just do not know to what extent Owen was influenced directly or indirectly by Scottish thinkers and their ideas, but it does seem likely given his previous contacts with enlightened, reforming elites in Manchester, some of whom (as Non-Conformists barred from Oxford and Cambridge) had been educated in the Scottish universities. With remarkable speed Owen seems to have

integrated himself into similar circles in Glasgow and probably also in Edinburgh, far less such contacts as he established elsewhere, notably in London.

The last, of course, included, at the time he was supposedly composing his essays, the well known liaisons with the philosopher, William Godwin, possibly dating to 1808 or earlier, and with radical bookseller, Francis Place, among others. But caution is needed in Owen's reflections on their contributions to his thinking, and, indeed, what he said about them in his much later writings and his autobiography. We might just note, for those who do not know this, that very little Owen correspondence survives from this period either in Owen archives or those of possible recipients.

More widely there is also considerable debate about the origins and development of the Scottish Enlightenment and what made it distinctive. Certainly there were much higher levels of literacy in Scotland, encouraged since the Reformation, a higher proportion of participation in advanced schooling and higher education, and more direct contact with ideas from Europe and especially France and the Netherlands than from England. An extraordinary flowering of ideas and teaching in the natural and other sciences and in medicine, for which the Scottish universities were famous, occurred. *What* is well understood, *why*, however, is a matter of on-going contention.

A great deal was about practical application, as it was in thinking about the natural sciences, the economic order of society, seen most famously in Adam Smith's work, the rapid emergence of the new social sciences, in moral philosophy, in the advance of more secular ideas, in the upholding of the long established democratic tradition in Scottish education, and in how the poor, the sick, the aged and the infirm should be perceived and cared for.

Some of this had already touched Owen in Manchester (and would do so later in London) but I believe the influence of his new found context and circle in Scotland after 1800 may well have enhanced his confidence and confirmed his ideas about social reform issues and how people should be treated in the new industrial order, especially with regard to work in the factory system, the condition of children, the plight of the poor and the unemployed, education for the masses, and health and welfare generally.

Much of this was at an intellectual level, certainly, but it seems likely that Owen perceived the humanitarian thrust of much of this thinking on the part of some elites,

philanthropic individuals like Dale, other employers and improving landowners. At its most cynical philanthropy which paid profits was worth investment.

However as Owen soon found, the civic authorities in the burghs, the church or kirk, the clergy, or the ministry as it was known in Scotland, the local elites and nobility in the Scottish lowlands, were generally aware of enlightened ideas about improvement. Their implementation brought prosperity, New Lanark being an excellent if exceptional illustration, and with its philanthropic provisions, a possible counter to any breakdown in moral order among the working class so much feared by many of the elites.

However, as we will see under the general issues which prevailed in the background to Owen's writing the essays, the enormously rapid and concentrated industrialisation and urbanisation in the Scottish lowlands, later and faster than in England, especially in the lower Clyde region, had undoubtedly and obviously even by 1800 greatly exacerbated the social problems created by economic and social change.

As to key figures influencing Owen's thinking there were many within his circle, beyond the greatest and possibly most influential mentor, his father in law, David Dale. The extent of Dale's role as philanthropic employer at New Lanark and elsewhere nationally and internationally was well known before 1800. His participation in other humanitarian activities was extensive: poor relief, health and hospital provision, and recently revealed – prison reform and the anti-slavery movement. Owen thus became involved in much enlightened activity in Glasgow and beyond. He was effectively heir to this portfolio of practical reform – as much as a fair proportion of Dale's fortune after the latter's death in 1806. And the Dale family, notably his wife, Ann Caroline, should not be overlooked (among many other women) as humanitarian and enlightened influences.

Dale was also a significant gatekeeper to both the attitudes and other people of reforming instincts, of whom we have time to characterise only a few. Needless to say in the small enclosed world of such elites, almost all knew each other through overlapping connections in the universities, particularly Glasgow and Edinburgh, the kirk, the law, commercial enterprise, the landed gentry and politics. All of these flourished and it is often forgotten, particularly by English historians, that even after the union of 1707, Scottish governance and the Scottish administrative state maintained their independence and continued to exercise huge influence over many aspects of life and society.

For one thing, it needs to be emphasised how significant was the role of the kirk in both education and poor relief, surely a factor in Owen's later controversies locally and nationally promoting his ideas in contradistinction to long established systems and institutions. Of course, he was not alone in this, Joseph Lancaster (a leading promoter of the monitorial system) and other non-conformist educational reformers facing similar challenges.

Patrick Colquhoun, successful merchant and a founder of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, although he had moved to London long before Owen's arrival in Scotland, was I think a highly influential figure, partly by virtue of his long association with Dale and his interest in reform. After shifting to London in 1788-89, he became a magistrate and concerned himself with police reform. His police proposal developed after 1792 was a system of regulations and agencies to supervise morals, manners and the health of society, published ultimately in 1796. Beyond this he interested himself in problems of the labouring poor, relief of indigence and provision of cheap elementary education. His promotional activities in tracts and pamphlets and lobbying politicians and the like, closely resembled the tactics adopted by Owen. Interestingly his *New System of Education for the Labouring Poor* appeared in 1806 and his *Treatise on the Population, Wealth, Power, and Resources of the British Empire* (1814) was said by Robert Dale Owen to be regularly consulted, indeed, pored over, by his father.

Of countless others, mainly the clergy and landowners, interested in humanitarian objects, those with quite specific interests in the poor included two leading Scottish kirk ministers, Henry Duncan and Thomas Chalmers, the former apparently a visitor to New Lanark on a number of occasions.

Duncan was an interesting figure who deserves a modern biography. The interests that may have influenced Owen were his activities in poor relief in a rural parish of Dumfriesshire, poor law reform nationally, plus his promotion of savings banks for the working class. He was another remarkable propagandist as a newspaper owner and editor, pamphleteer and novelist, as well as radical preacher who got himself into trouble with the authorities.

Chalmers was another reformer who started a distinguished career in the rural parish of Kilmany in Fife where he implanted reforms in the kirk's treatment of the poor. He soon

broadened his interests, as did Owen at the same time, to publish a typically enlightened work, *An Enquiry into the Extent and Stability of National Resources* (1808) and later a much more specific work on *The Temporal Necessities of the Poor* (1813). By 1815 Chalmers was in Glasgow where his work on improving the condition of the labouring classes really began. He found that what worked in a small agrarian community needed substantial modification in an urban industrial context, but it is surely not without its interest that Chalmers broke his new, larger, and much more populous parish into wards of similar population to New Lanark. Chalmers and Owen became acquainted and the former was a visitor to New Lanark, we think on several occasions.

Apart from Owen's well known connections with the popular educator, Lancaster, he was almost certainly in touch with Andrew Bell, co-originator of the monitorial teaching system. Like Chalmers, Bell had St Andrews connections, though his version of the system was developed in India running schools in Madras, where it was deployed as early as 1792. By the early 1800s he was promoting it in England, by which time it had been taken up by Lancaster. Later in 1811 he was persuaded by Anglicans to deploy his system along religious lines, the National Society for the Education of the Poor being designed to counteract dissenting notions promoted by Lancaster and Owen. Bell, like Owen, visited the educationists, von Fellenberg and Pestalozzi, whose methods, as it happened, generally eschewed anything resembling rote learning, but were adopted in part at New Lanark.

James Mylne and George Jardine were both professors in Glasgow, known to Owen through Dale and other over-lapping members of the Glasgow Enlightenment. For their time, even in a Scottish university system that was far more progressive than that in England, especially in the teaching of the natural sciences, philosophy and the social sciences, these two individuals stand out as innovators. This was particularly true of their closely proscribed curricula, plus what we might call instructional manuals, and experiments in teaching methods and assessment. They certainly seem to have had some affinity with public education and were present as supporters at the top table when Owen chaired Lancaster at a public meeting in Glasgow in 1812.

We might just note while dealing with university connections that many of the professoriate at both Glasgow and Edinburgh are recorded as visitors to New Lanark in Dale's time, and although no record of visitors survives for the early 1800s, this probably

continued. These people, like the many women who accompanied them, were clearly interested in the health and condition of children and in the school. Is it possible too, given the large numbers of university students signing in, and especially those studying medicine, that they were actively encouraged by their teachers to inspect the community as an example of enlightened practice?

Henry Brougham, who was prominent as an anti-slaver and supporter of Wilberforce, as well as a reformer on many fronts, notably education, studied at Edinburgh, becoming a lawyer. He was apparently a regular visitor to New Lanark, well known to Owen and sympathetic to his educational aims, which he may well have influenced. Indeed, Brougham was himself an exponent of working class education which became a key concern early in his career. He was mainly in London from 1803, becoming an MP in 1809, but the Scottish connection was strongly maintained both on reform issues north of the border and his interest in the famous periodical, the *Edinburgh Review*, which he co-founded in 1802.

Beyond the obvious personalities, of whom these are a small sample, there were numerous other individuals of reforming inclinations likely to have influenced Owen's thinking when he was writing the essays.

Kirk ministers and landowners, including many known to Owen, all had a stake in poor relief, schooling, public health and moral order, for which New Lanark seemed a model. The place was known for its humanitarian regime, particularly the treatment of children and its educational provision, and all of this made it an object of curiosity. Of course the relationship to enlightened improvement would be immediately obvious to most landowners and industrialists, as it must have been to Owen, since the planned village, a particular feature of Lowland Scotland, answered many of the problems of employing and housing displaced or migrant workers – and exercising social control over them. It is surely no accident that the later Village Plan was closely modelled not only on New Lanark, but other communities scattered around the Scottish landscape of improvement.

Some major if familiar issues briefly set the context in which Owen wrote his essays, notably, economic, social and political dislocation caused by rapid industrialization, the impact of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the major economic downturn(s) especially 1812 onwards, and real and potential social/political unrest. All of this undoubtedly disturbed the elites, locally, and nationally, as no doubt it did Owen personally.

But in explaining the causes and suggesting the solutions he took an enlightened view that at least in terms of social policy reflected the Scottish context.

Indeed Owen's agenda spelled out in the essays embraced many enlightened notions - including trying to mitigate the problems of rapid industrialization and social breakdown, promote progress, social and moral behaviour, plus "happiness", using New Lanark as a test-bed and model, and in the final essay, national and international applications of his ideas.

I would argue strongly for *A New View of Society* being read as a Scottish Enlightenment text which sees human nature as universal, that reason will dispel error and darkness from the human mind, that superstition can be attacked by reason, stressing the importance of education, of self-knowledge, and the reasoned conditioning of people. It also appeals to nature and the natural environment as part of a sustainability and environmental agenda, and, educationally as part of the curricula at New Lanark.

A New View of Society is a brilliant illustration of the notion that there are general, universally applicable rules that can be discovered through empirical means and the use of reason, which once identified will lead to progress and greater happiness. Enlightened ideas, says Owen, should be applied to reform issues – poverty, poor housing, diet, health, lack of educational opportunity. Finally, enlightened ideas do not progress neatly and steadily, but *experiment* (his emphasis) will prove their worth.

Concluding, I think Owen's links to the Glasgow Enlightenment are perhaps a little more obvious than they were, but further research is needed. That "Hot Bed of Genius", the Edinburgh Enlightenment, might also have influenced Owen for he is known to have visited the city from time to time, as the Dale sisters were being schooled there, and visits of inspection to another Dale enterprise in Perthshire involved travel via the city. Certainly the intellectual life of both cities was closely inter-related through over-lapping memberships. It is invariably forgotten too that Lanark historically had much stronger links with Edinburgh than with Glasgow, though I doubt if that was of much consequence to Owen.

To Owen's later detractors as a utopian visionary we should respond that he saw and spoke of his many schemes for reform as "experiments" or "trials", and as such, and in the context of the time, can be seen as remarkably innovatory. Much of what went on here in the

early 1800s and was cleverly promoted in his essays as a vision for the future, can be seen in this light.

Sadly, despite remarkable economic and social progress, some of the defects he describes are still prevalent, and ever aware of the danger of historical analogies, his proposed solutions have immediate meaning and value. It is no surprise, therefore, that two hundred years on they are still in print and serve as incentives to co-operation and social idealism.

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