



A Legacy of ‘Propagandist Action’: Robert Owen, the Paradox of Working Class Pedagogy, and the Making of Britain’s Co-operative Movement

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What is the secret of British co-operation’s success? This essay argues that one answer to that question is: adult education. Drawing from cultural hegemony theory and historical literature, it shows that Robert Owen’s revolutionary philosophy of education fired many campaigns and institutional innovations: to dispel ‘false beliefs’; propagate a ‘rational social system’; and advance collective aspirations for ‘self-improvement’. Both an educational visionary and social reformer, Owen’s passion for ‘propagandist action’ thus laid unique discursive foundations for Owenist-socialism’s enduring legacy of popular education. It also drove British co-operation’s emergent counter-hegemony to the investor-owned firm through three overlapping waves: early Owenism’s founding-prophetic tradition, which subordinated co-operative shops to ‘villages of co-operation’; the local-democratic pedagogy that subsequently emerged around those shops; and the movement-spanning professionalism that defines Britain’s contemporary educational institutions. Accounting for this sustained tradition of educational activism thus helps explain British co-operation’s durability. For example, its robust and wide-ranging present-day educational innovations such as the Co-operative College, *Co-operative News*, or the Co-operative Party are artefacts of this distinctive legacy. Lessons from the British experience thus illustrate the potential to build on adult education’s evolving promise, with significant conceptual and strategic implications beyond British shores.

Introduction: Imagining a ‘New Moral World’

Approaching British co-operation’s Manchester headquarters, visitors to the Co-op Quarter encounter an imposing statue of Robert Owen (1771-1858). A 1919 plaque next proudly proclaims the twin-purposes of the Co-operative Union (now Co-operatives UK) as ‘propagandist and defensive action’. These memorials express a central fact of British movement history: that Owen’s many propaganda campaigns inspired popular faith in co-operative possibilities. Stepping inside Holyoake House further reinforces education’s enduring role in propelling movement gains: its tenants include *Co-operative News* (est. 1871), the Co-operative College (est. 1919), and the National Co-operative Archive (since 2007, managed by the Co-operative Heritage Trust). Add the Co-operative Party (est. 1917) and the

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UK Society for Co-operative Studies (est. 1967) and this diversified institutional array constitutes a significant intellectual and moral counterforce to British capitalism's hegemony. In fact, further underlining co-operation's profound debt to previous waves of 'propagandist action', Holyoake House is named for a devoted Owenist, co-operator, and crusading journalist (Diamantopoulos, 2022b; Gurney, 2017; Holyoake, 1906; McCabe, 1922; Yeo, 2017).

Yet, a restrictively scholastic definition of Owenite education — as a “self-contained element” on exhibit at schools for example — has distracted from this rich legacy of adult learning (Harrison, 1967). Of course, Owen himself considered his early learning innovations his “most significant achievement”: “by education ... I mean the instruction of all kinds which we receive from our earliest influence until our characters are generally fixed and established” (Harrison, 1967, p. 88). Similarly, Owenites routinely despaired over their peers' inherited prejudices. As the *New Harmony Gazette* argued: “it is on the education of youth, the projector of the new social system relies for ultimate success” (Harrison, 1967, p. 96).

Nevertheless, their pamphlets, newspapers, lectures, and libraries reflected Owenites' idyllic faith in “self-improvement” to overcome ignorance and the “second nature” acquired from a corrupt world. Despite readings of Owenite doctrine that downplay adult learning, vigorous efforts to transform popular consciousness defined their movement. By fostering literacy, numeracy, newspaper readership, rational autonomy, and civic engagement, the working class found in Owenism the means for its reinvention. From ignorance and deference to an emphasis on self-improvement and democratic action, this educational mobilisation had profound cultural effects on the structure of feeling and social character that typified movement ranks. Owenism, and the co-operative movement, thus tilled the terrain for the transformation of a pre-democratic Britain. Indeed, much as Calvinists' economic motivation to compete and accumulate reflected their quest for signs of grace and other-worldly salvation (Weber & Kalberg, 2013), education assumed the character of religious compulsion for early Owenism (Cole, 1930; Miliband, 1969; O'Hagan, 2011; Silver, 1971). Similarly, while the spirit of capitalism evolved with secularisation into an “iron cage” of rational calculation and control, it is also true that the early educational legacy imparted by Owenism morphed and evolved to distinctively shape contemporary British co-operation.

As this essay argues, Owen's signature devotion to education's transformative powers infused early British socialism, this enthusiasm also permeated co-operative circles and experiments (Gurney, 1999). Moreover, Owen's protracted and vigorous cultural insurgency against the “false beliefs” of religion, private property, and class prejudice (Owen, 1993a; Powell, 2011) helped co-operators resist ideological re-incorporation. In short, while Owen's co-operative views were largely prefigurative and paradoxical, his pedagogical ethos profoundly shaped subsequent developments. This animating faith in popular education drove early co-operation's take-off in the 1820s (Harrison, 1967; Podmore, 1924). Informing its mid-nineteenth century re-invention on the Rochdale model, a tradition of educational activism outlived both Robert Owen and orthodox Owenism (Holyoake, 2016; Woodin, 2012). As Holyoake House illustrates, this legacy has also encouraged educational modernisation since the late nineteenth century (Vernon, 2016; Woodin & Shaw, 2019).

In Gramscian terms, contemporary movement agencies such as *Co-operative News*, the Co-operative College, and the Co-operative Party are thus each artefacts of an epochal struggle, or “war of position”, to establish the values, ideas, and projects of co-operation's “emergent culture” (Williams, 1973); taken together, this evolving institutional nexus constitutes a “counter-hegemonic apparatus” that is both sophisticated and multi-faceted. For while Owen was continually forced to redouble his persuasive efforts by his exaggerated optimism in Enlightenment's capacity to effect speedy change (Miliband, 1954; Powell, 2011), Gramsci teaches that dissenting ideas do not spread without patrons, institutional supports, and “organic intellectuals” devoted to their diffusion (Hoare & Sperber, 2015).

Of course, contemporary capitalism's hegemonic apparatus is a well-worn theme in the social sciences (Miliband, 1969). Corporate think-tanks, front-groups, public relations agencies, mass media, and established schools and religious institutions all contribute to capitalism's cultural

reproduction. However, Gramscian interpretation also spotlights subaltern counter-institutions' role in contesting capitalist hegemony. This helps us understand how "every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture, and the spread of ideas" (Gramsci, 1977 [1917], p. 12). A Gramscian perspective thereby illuminates the ways in which the co-operators' revolution in economic life was predicated on a cultural revolution (Gurney, 1999). In short: hegemony analysis re-centres the role of propagandist action.

Of course, there is an apparent contradiction in the Owenist legacy. On the one hand, there are the facts of Owen's bourgeois rank, prophetic role, and propensity toward authoritarian control (including his preference for Establishment backers for his schemes). On the other hand, there is the equally important role which Owenism ultimately played in the democratic empowerment of the British people. While this evolving tension was real and its implications significant, it is perhaps more conceptually coherent to consider this as a paradoxical rather than contradictory relationship. While he did exercise charismatic and doctrinal dominance over his followers, he also used this dominance to promote an educational ethos that encouraged them to assert an independence of thought and action that would ultimately challenge Owenite dogma, transcend its limitations, and redefine the movement's course.

Against reductively economistic or hagiographic accounts, this work therefore focuses on those struggles for working-class literacy, intellectual and press freedom, and cultural empowerment through which movement gains were won. It thus builds on efforts to highlight adult education's importance in British co-operative studies (Gurney, 1999; Harrison, 1969; O'Hagan, 2011; Shaw, 2011; Woodin, 2012; Yeo, 2017). In particular, it shows that working-class learning laid the discursive foundations for an enduring British movement effectively to challenge the status quo, counter-pose co-operative views, and thus build-up co-operation's emergent counter-hegemony. Fundamentally an educational movement, it shows that Owenist-socialism's tradition of propagandist action thus uniquely enriched and energised British co-operation.

Easily taken for granted in Britain and misunderstood elsewhere, this legacy of popular pedagogy deserves greater scrutiny. For example, while uncritical and ethnocentric celebrations may idealise British co-operation, no other movement publishes an organ with *Co-operative News'* global reach and longevity (Diamantopoulos, 2021; Webster, 2021). Similarly, while some movements have formalised leadership training — including replicating the UK's Co-operative College — efforts elsewhere have not always succeeded (Shaw, 2011; Woodin & Shaw, 2019). Likewise, few have sustained the UK Society for Co-operative Studies' research focus (UK Society for Co-operative Studies, 2023) or paralleled the Co-operative Heritage Trust's educational work (Co-operative Heritage Trust, 2023). Moreover, the UK has a viable Co-operative Party (Carbery, 1969). Finally, Britain has recently pioneered co-operative schools (Woodin, 2015) and taken steps toward establishing a degree-granting university (Noble & Ross, 2020). These discursive firewalls against a hostile political economy and media-cultural environment (Diamantopoulos, 2022a; Mangan, 2021) help explain British co-operation's stubborn perseverance, even its "unexpected surge of political and intellectual approval and celebration" (Webster et al., 2012, p. 2). These agencies thus illustrate how educational agitation both continues to animate and elevate that movement; and boost Britons' outsized international influence. Symptomatically, readers from every country in the world except four visited the *Co-operative News* site in 2019 (Co-operative News, 2020).

Certainly, lessons from the historical and educational sociology of the British experience extends comparative understanding of contemporary possibilities. For example, the Co-operative Party's unique alliance with the Labour Party challenges the world-movement's normative commitment to political neutrality. Yet, contesting elections has successfully amplified co-operative voices: in June, 2022 the Co-operative Party elected 5 major city mayors and over 900 councillors across the UK, 25 Co-operative Party MPs in Westminster, 11 in Scotland, and 16 in Wales (Co-operative Party, 2022).

Overall, the unique nature, scope, and achievements of propagandist action in the British socialist tradition are conceptually and strategically significant. An exceptional outlier of inter-

generational educational commitment, this movement offers a natural experiment for assessing pedagogy's oft-neglected contributions. Following on Yeo's (2009, 2011) injunction, this study thus asks what twenty-first century co-operators can learn from Britain's experience — by focusing on that movement's distinctive legacy of educational struggle.

As this paper shows, British movement pedagogy has ranged from agitations to raise critical consciousness about society to the more institutionally-bounded tutoring in the model's distinctive principles and practices (which we more restrictively tend to consider “co-operative education” today) to forms of technical training such as accounting or inventory management (through which co-operators appropriated knowledge and skills otherwise monopolised by capitalist firms). Movement pedagogy is thus conceived as a diverse, wide-ranging, and dynamic cluster of educational practices variously geared to empower democratically the previously disenfranchised many (Diamantopoulos, 2015). Clearly, without this epochal mobilisation of knowledge, skills, and experience — and the intermediaries and networks that channeled their diffusion — there would be no British movement as we now know it.

The paper is structured as follows. Evidence for British co-operators' emphases on propagandist action are summarised across the distinguishing institutional features and conceptual paradigms of two successive, but overlapping, waves. The first section outlines early Owenism, beginning in the early nineteenth century and largely dominated by Owen's mobilisation of resources, his charismatic and doctrinal authority, and his campaigns for social reforms and “villages of co-operation” (Harrison, 1969). The second section pivots to working-class Owenism and the mid-century rise of the Rochdale imaginary, which shifted the locus of authority, action, and resource-mobilisation to the local shops' rank-and-file (Holyoake, 2016). Following on Williams (1973), British co-operation's development is thus characterised by the evolving relationship between the ‘residual’ cultural elements of early Owenist pedagogy and the later, ‘emergent’ emphases of working-class Owenism. Across this unevenly advancing frontier, propagandist action took different, conflicting, and developing forms; but popular education remained an important feature of that evolving movement.

Origins: Owenism, Educational Activism, and the Take-Off of British Co-operation, 1800-1845

When Owenists launched British co-operation's earliest significant mobilisations in the 1820s, they were propelled by the power of ideas as well as material needs (Holyoake, 1908). However, Owenism did not inaugurate popular learning in Britain. From early church-based programmes through the increasingly popular coffee houses, scientific and literary societies, book clubs, circulating libraries, and periodicals of the eighteenth century, their agitations built on (and against) these regionally diverse and evolving traditions (Kelly, 1962). For example, the temperance-advocating Owen launched his campaign for co-operative villages at the City of London Tavern in 1817 (Harrison, 1967). Throughout the nineteenth century, Owenism and co-operative education similarly overlapped campaigns to launch (and reform) mechanics' institutes, challenge (and mimic) clerical authority, woo (and circumvent) the press, and join (or dismiss) campaigns to extend the political franchise. Co-operators launched independent print-shops, bookstores, and (sometimes illegal) newspapers but also helped establish public libraries, adult schools, and university extension. Weaned on Owenites' devotion to pedagogy's liberating potential, their “co-operative education” was therefore often amorphous, shape-shifting, and even contradictory (Durr, 2017; Gurney, 1999; Holyoake, 1898; Woodin, 2012). For example, Owen dismissed the earliest co-operative shops — which later formed the movement's bedrock — as “mere trading associations” (Wiener, 1989).

Yet, Owen's contributions stand out. Campaigning tirelessly against ignorance, superstition, and an established order that stymied human potential, he fought for working-class learning and invested heavily in diffusing co-operative ideas. In fact, Cole argues educational philosophy was “the basis of Owenism” (1930, p. 96). Owen's first and most important work was *A new view of*

society; or, essays on the principle of the formation of the human character (Owen, 1993a). As its subtitle suggests, it focused on education's transformational possibilities. Although fostering the trade-union, co-operative, and socialist movements, Owenism was most fundamentally an educational movement. Its other manifestations all sprouted from Owen's germinal conception of human nature's plasticity — and the ethical imperative to expand our inherent potential. This radical humanism was the inspiration at the Owenist imaginary's centre; the sun of self-improvement around which all other causes revolved (Cole, 1930; Harrison, 1969; O'Hagan, 2011; Podmore, 1924; Silver, 1971). Beginning with Owen's philosophy of education and his experiments with early learning, adult education spilled over into non-formal settings, such as public lectures, and the informal channels of the Owenist press and the movement's sprawling associational life. First sprouting at New Lanark's industrial community, Owen's wide-ranging popular pedagogy would uniquely — and profoundly — imprint Britain's emerging co-operative movement.

Taking charge of New Lanark's cotton mills in 1800, news of Owen's path-breaking reforms became known across Europe. While employers routinely hired children as young as five from poorhouses in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Owen refused to employ children under ten, limited child-labourers' workdays, and built a school (Cole, 1930). These measures each expanded the scope for working-class children's learning — and emphasised its importance when many doubted it (O'Hagan, 2011).

Against his business partners' reluctance, Owen solicited backing from reformers (including Jeremy Bentham) to launch the Institute for the Formation of Character in 1816 (Cole, 1930). Schooling children working in the mills, creating the first known nursery school, and providing adult mill-workers with night schools and public halls moved learning to the centre of working-class life. A storey was also added to each house, a company store provided affordable supplies, and free healthcare was introduced. While his competitors enforced a 13 to 14 hour workday, Owen reduced New Lanark's day to 10 ½ hours. Addressing over-crowding, basic needs, health care, and a shorter workday all further supported broad educational aims — for children and adults alike.

In this social laboratory, Owen tested his revolutionary philosophy that improved circumstances could nurture capacities previously suppressed — and that working-class circumstances should therefore be changed. Employing 2,500 workers, including 500 children, New Lanark was amongst the world's largest factories (Donnachie, 2011). A bricks and mortar success story, it cemented Owen's reputation as a credible reformer. Symbolically ratifying his determination to do right by common people, this halo effect lent Owen the moral and intellectual authority to lead; it also insulated him from his many critics. For example, when an embargo against the United States during the War of 1812 stalled production for four months, he continued paying wages (Cole, 1930). Such widely publicised measures transmogrified Owen into working families' secular saint.

From this sturdy reputational platform, Owen campaigned for wider societal reforms. Extending his voice across Britain, he invested in alternative educational structures, alternative associational forms, alternative journalism, and an atheistic alternative to otherworldly salvation. He thus launched a determined, comprehensive, and life-long propaganda campaign to challenge the established order's cultural hegemony — and transform the UK. He even considered his campaigns for public office pedagogical: a form of "public address" (Yeo, 2009, p. 25).

Owen first published his views in 1813 (Harrison, 1967). Prefiguring municipal socialism at New Lanark (Webb, 1899), Owen's *New view of society* (1993a) anticipated the welfare state by calling for public works during recessions, public education, teacher training, an increased minimum working age, and a shorter working day. Affirming working people's dignity and education's emancipatory power (Silver, 1971), and backed-up by a newspaper campaign, his *New View* thus pioneered propagandist action for humane alternatives to an industrialising capitalism. First released as pamphlets addressed to the authorities, possibly to avoid

prosecution for sedition (Donnachie, 2011), this intellectual “coming out” both launched his lifelong campaign against poverty and his charm offensive to win-over decision-makers and public opinion.

Preaching for “socialism” and openly defying blasphemy laws by denouncing religion, 1817 marked Owen’s arrival as a public figure (Claeys, 2011). He issued a “diatribe so violent” that some considered him “slightly mad”; conversely Owen believed “the world and its beliefs were crazy” (Cole, 1930, pp. ix–x). Buttressing his poor relief report (Owen, 1993b), he targeted his addresses to newspapers. After five years’ agitation, the first law limiting work hours for women and children was passed in 1819. Propaganda again both boosted reform and Owen’s profile as its champion (Donnachie, 2011). Opening new doors of opportunity to working-class families, shorter work-days marked another important symbolic victory — ratifying that there were moral limits to exploitation; that bourgeois hegemony was fragile and shifting; and that reforms could be won through concerted action. A testament to Owen’s growing mastery of propagandist action, workers repaid his “princely sacrifices” (Holyoake, 2016, p. 94) with increasing devotion.

Owen increasingly commandeered the power of the press. He issued over 200 publications — not including many newspaper articles and letters. Another 2,000 items were published by or about his followers (Harrison, 1967). Owen spent a small fortune to propagate his faith: regularly circulating pamphlets with print-runs in the thousands, sending copies of his *New View* to government leaders, copies of his addresses to newspaper editors (Harrison, 1969), and copies of those newspapers to clergy (Pankhurst, 1991). Harrison (1969) estimates that 2.5 million tracts were circulated from 1839 to 1841. Owen also published newspapers, including *Crisis* (1832-4) and *New Moral World* (1834-45), with the latter’s weekly circulation peaking at 40,000 (Donnachie, 2011). Meanwhile, *The Times*’ daily circulation ranged from 11,000 in 1837 to 30,000 in 1847 (Williams, 2011). As Foxwell argues, Owen “brought socialism down from the study to the street, and made it a popular force” (Silver, 1971, p. 83). Transforming Great Britain into a classroom for radical pedagogy, books, pamphlets, and periodicals brought new hope for a better future into mechanics’ institutes and working-class pubs, coffee houses, and homes — where they were often read aloud for the many who remained illiterate. George Mudie edited the first organ to use the term “Owenite”, the weekly *Economist* (1821-2); he viewed education as “the steam engine of the moral world” (in Harrison, 1969, p. 147).

Beyond campaigning, lobbying, and running for office (Escott, 2011; Miliband, 1954), Owen’s speaking tours traversed Britain, Ireland, Europe, the USA, and Mexico (Donnachie, 2011; Podmore, 1924). However, one concept more than any other defined — and limited — early Owenism’s co-operative imaginary. After an 1820 workers’ revolt in Glasgow, Owen (1993c) recommended forming “villages of co-operation” for industrial capitalism’s dispossessed. Launching seven communities over two decades (Harrison, 1984), experimental communities swept Britain, Ireland, the US, and Canada. Like New Lanark’s powerful demonstration effect, Owen hoped model communities would inspire others. In the communes, Owenites’ educational gusto was evident early. For example, three lectures a week at New Harmony (1825-7) would help adults transcend their origins (Harrison, 1969). As the *New Harmony Gazette* implored “a whole community can become a new people, have their minds born again, and be regenerated from the errors and corruptions which ... have hitherto everywhere prevailed” (p. 145). Schooling at New Harmony and Orbiston (1825-7) favoured engagement over severe, rote learning. Orbiston established a library and theatre.

While there is not space here to capture how profoundly Owenist pedagogy prefigured, paralleled, and buoyed the co-operative societies’ rise, the first Co-operative Congress in Manchester in 1831 launched a dedicated five-year campaign of organisation and propaganda. However, it is perhaps the Association of All Classes and All Nations (AACAN) (est. 1835) which offers the most striking illustration. Scaling up Owen’s agitations after the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union’s 1834 collapse, the AACAN convened discussions, lectures, and public meetings; it issued cheap publications; and it launched a team of “social missionaries” to spread the good word across the land. By 1839, there were ten district missionaries and a

number of assistants. The Association took its educational ethos so seriously that it tested both its missionaries' and members' knowledge of Owenite doctrine (Harrison, 1969; Tsuzuki, 1971). In fact, its branches' varied instruction and recreational offerings competed with churches, pubs, and even family life (Yeo, 1971). Challenging clerical authority while imitating evangelical style, Owenites particularly antagonised clergy. Refused access to public rooms, they built "Halls of Science" to stage Sunday schools, children's day-schools, adult classes, tea parties, and large lectures by district missionaries (Harrison, 1969). By 1840, Halls operated in Birmingham, Bradford, Coventry, Huddersfield, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Sheffield, and beyond (Kelly, 1962). Then known as the Rational Society, the movement rallied thousands of members across sixty regional branches with 50,000 attendees at weekly lectures (Yeo, 2011). Staging 1,450 lectures in one year, Harrison (1969) argues the Owenites' "propaganda machine" was unequalled.

Characteristically, at the outbreak of France's 1848 revolution, a 76-year-old Owen sprinted to Paris, contacted the provisional government, issued pamphlets, and published his "Address to the French nation" in several newspapers (Desroche, 1971). Similarly, he spent his final year launching social science societies (Tsuzuki, 1971) and negotiating a new school system in his Welsh birthplace of Newtown (O'Hagan, 2011). These final initiatives reflected Owen's lifelong commitment to educating for social change.

Despite his shortcomings (Cole, 1930; Miliband, 1954; Tsuzuki, 1971) and his communities' failure (Harrison, 1969), Owen popularised socialism, trade unionism, and co-operation in Britain — by mastering the art of propagandist action and tutoring those who followed. The spectacle of New Lanark, his writings beginning with *New View of Society*, his reform campaigns, his leaflets, his speaking tours, and his publications such as *Crisis* and *New Moral World* all sowed important early seeds for that cultural revolution (Gurney, 1999). Educational intermediaries included the Co-operative and Economical Society of London (est. 1821), the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge (1829-34), the AACAN (later the Rationalist Society), and over 100 periodicals, either avowedly Owenist or which routinely reported on Owenism (Harrison, 1969). Training "social missionaries", launching local Halls of Science, and making over mechanics' institutes along Owenist lines all reinforced the diffusion of co-operative ideas. Even the Owenites' choirs and teas had a pedagogic purpose: countering individualism, isolation, and competitiveness with conviviality (Yeo, 1971). Uniquely animated by its parent movement's intoxicating faith in popular learning's emancipatory power, early British co-operation was thus born and raised as a profoundly educational movement. That its enthusiasms for propagandist action outlived Robert Owen should thus be unsurprising.

Reformation: Working Class Owenism, an Evolving Movement Pedagogy, and the Rochdale Imaginary, 1821-71

It has been argued that the dialectical character of co-operative learning, as inherently unstable, poses distinct challenges to its conceptualisation (Noble & Ross, 2020). Indeed, a paradigm shift in "co-operative education" accompanied orthodox Owenism's decline and the Rochdale model's rise in the mid-nineteenth century. While building on Owenism's residual tradition by staging classes, hosting recreational activities, opening reading rooms and libraries, and issuing publications, the movement's educational centre of gravity shifted to the shops' working-class cadres. These foot-soldiers of consumer co-operation were hardened by the battles of Owenism, Chartism, the Radical Unstamped, and earlier struggles to establish co-operatives and trade-unions (Fairbairn, 1994; Hollis, 1970). Certainly, the rank-and-file had made Owenism's vast achievements possible through the first half of the nineteenth century. Despite "the enormous condescension of posterity", often fostered by great man hagiographies which banish activists to the shadows (Thompson, 2016), working-class co-operators made this movement: they attended meetings, evening classes, and public talks; corresponded with others; conversed in coffee houses and pubs; gathered in Halls of Science and mechanics' institutes; read the working-class press and radical authors; and launched their own discussion

circles, bookstores, newspapers, and co-operatives. This widening web of thinkers and activists drove co-operation's progress across a wide-ranging educational frontier — including compelling their movement figurehead to reconsider his initial disinterest in “mere trading associations” (Wiener, 1989).

Owenism's educational ethic had long also suffused those working-class organisations outside Owen's direct control. For example, the weekly *Economist* (1821-2), the *Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald* (1826-30), and *The Co-operator* (1828-30) variously strove to adapt Owen's ideas to working families' needs through the 1820s; a flourishing co-operative press thereby helped birth working-class Owenism (Durr, 2017; Hollis, 1970). For example, the London Co-operative and Economical Society — founded in 1821 by a group of printers including the *Economist's* Mudie — established a co-operative store and housing co-operative (Harrison, 1967). William Carpenter's *Weekly Free Press*, later the unstamped *Political Letters* (1828-31), was the voice of the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge (1829-31); this information clearing-house staged lectures and issued pamphlets for Britain's 300 co-operative societies then in existence. Carpenter posed the paradox between Owen's tutelage and workers' empowerment in 1830: “(Owen) impressed on our minds a conviction of our importance ... convinced us, working men (sic), that we were the pillars of the political edifice; that we sustained the whole superstructure of society” (in Hollis, 1970, p. 217).

The decisive shift came in 1845 when orthodox Owenism collapsed (Harrison, 1969). The Queenwood community's failure bankrupted the Rational Society and ended the *New Moral World*. The co-operative movement's focus thus narrowed to shops; and its leadership shifted decisively to its widely dispersed, working-class base. Co-operation's pedagogical paradigm also shifted: from its residual dependence on Owen's charismatic and doctrinal authority and the failed project of villages of co-operation to the shops' emerging needs. Like early Owenism's rise to prominence, supporting consumers to lead surging shop-formations demanded a sweeping, if largely informal, campaign of popular education. In this phase of co-operators' cultural struggle, a new generation of organic intellectuals erected and staffed the institutional scaffolds of this counter-hegemonic agitation — which eventually fixed on popularising the Rochdale Method. Pamphlets, handbills for meetings, lecture notices, newspapers, and books would be the tangible artefacts of their campaigns to cultivate an emergent public of working-class co-operators — and what Holyoake called “the co-operative mind” (1898, p. 7).

For example, many shops established libraries and reading rooms (Holyoake, 2016 [1893]; Kelly, 1962; Woodin, 2012). Some sponsored classes for members and their families. Picking up where Owenite branches left-off, shops staged exhibitions, choirs, demonstrations, tea parties, and children's days. Like their early Owenist progenitors, they aimed to foster co-operative values and a sense of community. Co-operators were thus as committed to education in the second half of the nineteenth century as Owenites were in previous decades (Gurney, 1999).

George Jacob Holyoake's role was pivotal in popularising the Rochdale model (Diamantopoulos, 2022b; Gurney, 2017; Holyoake, 1906; McCabe, 1922; Yeo, 2017). Editing several radical newspapers, including *The Reasoner* and *The Leader*, he opened Fleet Street House to many radical causes, publications, and speaking tours. His newspaper chronicle of the Rochdale Pioneers (later a book in many editions and languages) (Holyoake, 2016 [1893]) successfully spread consumer co-operation, much as Owen's writings and the New Lanark experiment previously encouraged villages of co-operation. Like Owen, Holyoake intuitively grasped the power of a successful example from the New Lanark experience; unlike Owen, he saw the future in working-class managed co-op shops. Like Owen, Holyoake was a champion for propagandist action; unlike the gentleman-prophet who appealed to philanthropists and state authorities, Holyoake's working-class roots and editorial craft-work more readily struck a resonant popular chord. From 1841 to 1877, several publications he edited or co-edited told co-operation's story — a story which *New Moral World's* end had otherwise silenced. This stable included *The People's Review*, *The Cause of the People*, *The Counsellor*, *The Secular World*, *The Social Economist*, and *The Secular Review* (Yeo, 2017).

Certainly, the Pioneers embraced Owenism's preoccupation with self-improvement from their start in 1844. They designated funds for a library, subscribed publications for their reading rooms, and staged classes. Reflecting nearly a century and a half of agitating for adult learning, their robust educational enterprise better anchored learning opportunities in everyday routine. Members could read newspapers, sign-out books, register for classes, and socialise while collecting their week's supplies. Much as Halls of Science earlier transplanted Owenism in specific branches, many shops became flourishing community centres. This realised the Pioneers' aim to establish "a germ of a new social life" (Holyoake, 2016 [1893], p. 157). However, there were many, many more shops than there had been Halls. Moreover, self-generated revenues helped co-operators scale-up community learning.

For example, the Pioneers published their own *Almanac* in 1854. Noting that "the objects of this Society are the *social and intellectual advancement* of its members", it advised readers to "make the best use of the time thrown on your hands for your intellectual improvement, means for which are provided in our libraries and news-rooms" (pp. 135–136). Once wealthy gentlemen's preserve, their Society boasted Rochdale's best library by 1877 (Kelly, 1962). 13,389 books, 27 daily newspapers, 55 weeklies, and a range of other periodicals circulated across its 14 branch and reference libraries. Staging classes in science and art, it offered telescopes, microscopes, maps, atlases, and globes. Holyoake proclaimed "co-operative information ... the cheapest the working class ever found" (2016, p. 135). Equipping working-class Britain's educational revolution, UK co-operators had enrolled 2,253 students across 134 lectures by 1884. They operated 194 newsrooms, 69 circulating libraries, and 47 lending libraries (Kelly, 1962). By 1887, movement libraries stocked 200,000 volumes (Gurney, 1999). A decade later, they held nearly 350,000.

Holyoake also celebrated these holdings' variety. "Gentlemen's news-rooms and libraries are subjected to clerical censorship" — with contentious books on theology and politics forbidden in the name of "good taste". By contrast, workers' co-operative collections embodied their "intellectual boldness": "owing nothing to anyone, they fear nobody, nor suffer intellectual control by anybody". This would protect them from "being made into half-minded men (sic)" (Holyoake, 2016, p. 136).

For Holyoake, educational programmes, libraries, and store journals were important means for fostering fraternal relations. Animated by the "spirit of association" rather than a short-term, strictly technical pedagogy, Holyoake thus had in mind the cultivation of a new social character.

Certainly the Pioneers felt strongly enough about education's value to work for it, fund it, and even fight for it. For example, their charter originally devoted one-tenth of their profits to education. Against the Registrar's refusal, they repeatedly tried to redefine education. After several months the Registrar finally accepted their allotment of 2 ½ percent. Similarly, when the *Industrial and Provident Societies Act* was amended in 1856, forbidding educational and recreational expenditures, the Pioneers stood amongst those co-operatives continuing to stage classes, subscribe newspapers, and maintain libraries in defiance of the law (Gurney, 1999).

In sum, this second wave of pedagogical activism continued to embody early Owenism's animating faith in adult education. However, that residual culture was in decline in the second half of the nineteenth century; the locus shifted away from the sectarian trappings of the villages of co-operation, Halls of Science, or the pages of the *New Moral World*. Increasingly, co-operation's emergent culture was based not on Owenist dogma, as propagated by social missionaries or their prophet; instead, it was rooted in the primacy of co-operative shops, their libraries and educational activities, a wave of shop-focused co-operative publications which had begun with King's *Co-operator*, and the organising manual and many periodicals later published by Holyoake. This was a transition toward a more dispersed, democratic, and working-class led pedagogy. Spawned by Owenites' educational enthusiasms, the co-operative shops incubated a new generation of leadership, that leadership broadened-out, and together they charted a course for consumer co-operation's epochal expansion across Britain.

Conclusion: A Lingering Legacy of Propagandist Action

As public libraries and learning opportunities expanded through the late nineteenth century, the scope of co-operators' pedagogical tradition narrowed to internal movement concerns. Building educational intermediaries between initiatives of local co-operatives and the movement's apex organisation, consumer co-operation's growth drove that increasingly centralised, professional, and specialist infrastructure to span the UK. This modernised apparatus divided the labour between the *Co-operative News* (est. 1871), the Co-operative Party (est. 1917), the Co-operative College (est. 1919), the U.K. Society for Co-operative Studies (est. 1967), and the Co-operative Heritage Trust (est. 2007). Accompanying co-operation's consolidation as a unified sector, these third wave innovations mirrored the launch of second tier economic organisations such as the Co-operative Wholesale Society (est. 1863), the Co-operative Insurance Society (est. 1867), the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society (est. 1868) and the movement's apex organisation the Co-operative Union (est. 1870 as the Co-operative Central Board; now Co-operatives UK). From the late nineteenth century, British co-operation thus leveraged new scale-economies to more systematically and efficiently organise movement learning. While twenty-first century co-operative education's scope and nature is profoundly transformed, it nevertheless bears the unmistakable imprint of Owenist-socialism's faith in education's power to change the world; like Manchester's statue of Robert Owen, or the naming of Holyoake House, this popular learning apparatus is also a tribute to the enduring power of propagandist action.

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