



Guest Editorial

Robert Owen and Co-operation: Introduction to Special Issue

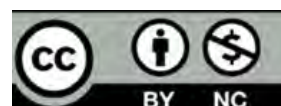
Chris Williams

Robert Owen (born 1771, died 1858) has been commonly regarded as the “father” of the co-operative movement in Britain and as the inspiration for co-operative ventures worldwide. British co-operators, George Jacob Holyoake prominent among them, stewarded Owen’s reputation in this regard during both the latter stages of Owen’s long and eventful life and in the decades immediately following his death. This stewardship included unveiling memorials to Owen both in Newtown, Montgomeryshire (where he had been born and where he returned to die), London, and Manchester. Such a process of co-operative “canonisation” was taken up in other countries, with Owen’s co-operative “disciples” keen to align their organisations and policies with the fecund body of thought and writing that Owen represented, and the considerable reputation that he enjoyed. In his essay in this issue, Gregory Claeys explores Owen’s legacy as it stands more than 250 years after his birth.

Co-operators were not alone in seeking to benefit from attaching themselves and their movement to Owen’s significant profile. As Friedrich Engels acknowledged in *Socialism: utopian and scientific* (1892, p. 50), “every social movement, every real advance ... on behalf of the workers links itself on to the name of Robert Owen”. Yet, as Mitch Diamantopoulis explains in his essay, the direction taken by the co-operative movement was not automatically aligned with Owen’s own thoughts or efforts in this domain. The focus on consumer co-operation, from the Rochdale Pioneers onwards, represented something of a divergence from Owen’s interests, which were predominantly located around producer co-operatives, labour exchanges and co-operative communities (sometimes branded as “villages of co-operation”). Furthermore, writers in the liberal rather than the socialist tradition prioritised co-operation over the more explicitly socialist elements of Owen’s legacy; to some extent the Fabians followed their lead.

Scholarship on Owen and co-operation enjoys a long, distinguished history. The aforementioned George Jacob Holyoake, in addition to writing a biography of Owen, set out his claims as early as 1875 in his *History of co-operation in England*. Beatrice Potter’s *The co-operative movement in Great Britain* and Benjamin Jones’s *Co-operative production* both appeared in the early 1890s, paying further tribute to Owen’s salience. Sidney Pollard, whose scholarship is traced and analysed in depth in Christopher A. Olewicz’s contribution, wrote on the transition in the

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movement “from community building to shopkeeping” for *Essays in labour history: In memory of G. D. H. Cole* (1967, edited by Asa Briggs and John Saville). And, as Tom Woodin explains in his essay below, Owen inhabited a central role in the co-operative movement’s understanding of its own history.

After the early 1970s, work on Owen shifted away from the focus on co-operation to embrace a plethora of topics on which Owen wrote and about which his various categories of followers enthused. In their contributions, Patrick Doyle and Victoria W. Wolcott show how Owen’s inspiration connected to land reform movements in Ireland on the one hand, and to on-going efforts made by Black American Owenites to establish both their own economic freedom of manoeuvre and their civil rights on the other hand. Furthermore, Akira Kurimoto and Tsuyhoshi Yuki, in their different ways, explore Owen’s remarkable and lasting influence on the Japanese co-operative and labour movements. And Owen’s record as a businessman at New Lanark, which of course predated his involvement in and leadership of the co-operative movement, can also be understood as offering lessons for a more co-operative model of entrepreneurship, as Morris Altman explains in his essay. J. F. C. Harrison’s words are as true in the twenty-first century as when he went “In Search of Robert Owen”: “... each generation takes what it finds to be usable from [Owen’s] writings. Yesterday it was infant education, co-operative ownership, and profit-sharing; today it is feminism, community, and concern for environmental or ‘green’ issues” (1992, p. 180).

Yet, for all the diversity of recent work on Owen, co-operation remains a constant thread. As Stephen Yeo commented, the continuities between the co-operative movement of Owen’s day and that of our own are more prominent than the continuities within socialism: “Members of co-operative and mutual enterprises with shared hopes and disagreements about their practice ... would recognise each other’s discourse ... the power of the co-operative movement ... remains recognisable across time” (2010, p. 240). It is in this context that this special issue of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* reflects on the state of global scholarship and current research on Robert Owen’s ideas about, and his influence over, co-operation and the co-operative movement.

Editor’s Note

I should like to thank Nick Matthews, for originally suggesting this special issue; Jan Myers, Anita Mangan and Francesca Gagliardi, of the former and current editorial team, for all their expertise, assistance and understanding; the many different peer reviewers for the contributions to this issue, who gave off their time and expertise so generously; and Olive McCarthy and Mary Shaughnessy of the Centre for Co-operative Studies at University College Cork, for their advice and support.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Professor Noel Thompson (1951-2018), my former colleague at Swansea University, and co-editor of the 2010 volume *Robert Owen and his Legacy*. Noel was a great historian, a formidable marathon runner, and a much missed friend. I am sure he is currently very busy in the celestial New Jerusalem putting Robert Owen straight on a few points of political economy.

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