

From 'The Life of Robert Owen, written by himself' (1857)

Recollections of my Early Life [1771 - 1786]

¹ As it appears in the family great Bible, I was born in Newtown, Montgomeryshire, North Wales, on the 14th of May 1771. My father was Robert Owen. He was born in Welsh Pool, and was brought up to be a saddler and ironmonger. He married into the numerous family of Williams, who were among the most respectable farmers around Newtown. My mother was deemed beautiful and, for her class, superior in mind and manner.

On their marriage they settled in Newtown. My father took up his own calling as a saddler and ironmonger. He was also post-master as long as he lived. He had the general management of the parish affairs, being better acquainted with its finances and business, than any other party in the township.

Newtown was at this period a very small market town, not containing more than one thousand inhabitants,— a neat, ²clean, beautifully situated country village, rather than a town, with the ordinary trades, but no manufacturing except a very few flannel looms. I have not seen it since this clean village has been converted into a dirty but thriving manufacturing town of some consequence.

At this period there was a bridge of wood over the river Severn, which I remember with a deep impression, having nearly lost my life upon it. I was the youngest but one of a family of seven, two of whom died young,— William, Anne, and John, were older, and Richard was younger than myself.

I must have been sent to school at four or five years of age,— a Mr Thickens was the school-master. I used to have for breakfast a basin of flummery,— a food prepared from flour, and eaten with milk. One morning, I ran home as usual from school, found my basin of flummery ready, and as I supposed sufficiently cooled for eating. But on my hastily taking a spoonful of it, I found it was quite scalding hot. From that day my stomach became incapable of digesting food, except the most simple and in a small quantity at a time. This gave me the habit of temperance and of close ³ observation and of continual reflection.

In schools in these small towns it was considered a good education if one could read fluently, write a legible hand, and understand the four first rules of arithmetic. When I had acquired these small rudiments of learning, at the age of seven, Mr Thickens applied to my father for permission that I should become his assistant and usher. As I remained at school about two

years longer, these two years were lost to me, except that I thus early acquired the habit of teaching others what I knew.

But at this period I had a strong passion for reading everything which fell in my way. As I was known to every family in town, I had the libraries of the clergyman, physician and lawyer thrown open to me. I made full use of the liberty given to me, and I generally finished a volume daily. Among the books I selected were Robinson Crusoe, Pilgrim's Progress, Paradise Lost, Richardson's, and all other standard novels.

⁴ I followed the games played by boys at that period, – such as marbles, hand and foot ball. I also attended the dancing school for some time. In all these games and exercises I excelled, and was the best runner and leaper in the school. ⁹ I was esteemed the ¹⁰ best dancer of my class.

⁸ Our next neighbours were two maiden ladies by the name of Tilsley, and they kept a superior country shop for the sale of ⁹ drapery and haberdashery on one side, and groceries on the other. They required more assistance, and my services were borrowed, first on their more busy days, then every day in the week.

Having by this period read much of other countries and other proceedings, and, with my habits of reflection and extreme temperance, not liking the habits and manners of a small country town, I began to desire a different field of action, and wished my parents to permit me to go to London. It was promised that when I should attain my tenth year, I should be allowed to go.

¹⁰ The time had now grown near for my departure. From Shrewsbury I was to travel alone to London, my coach hire being paid for me. ¹¹ I was not to be alone when I arrived. My eldest brother, William, had obtained a saddler's business in High Holborn, and to him I was consigned.

¹² [After] six weeks, a friend of my father procured me a situation with a Mr James McGuffog, who carried on a large draper's business in Stamford, Lincolnshire. ¹³ Here I was at once installed as a member of the family. I was carefully initiated into the business, so as to accustom me to great order and accuracy. Many of the customers were among the highest nobility in the kingdom. I became familiar with the finest fabrics of a great variety of manufactures.

Mr McGuffog had a well selected library, which I freely used. I read about five hours a day. ¹⁶ I was all this time endeavouring to find out the true religion. I studied and carefully compared one with another. I was compelled to reject all of them. My religious feelings were immediately replaced by the spirit of universal charity for the human race.

After my three [four] years had expired, I returned to my brother's house in London with strong recommendations from Mr McGuffog. ¹⁸ I procured a new situation with Messrs Flint and

Palmer on old London Bridge. ¹⁹ The shop was full from morning until late in the evening and a large business was transacted. The duties were very onerous: I had but about five hours for sleep. This appeared more than my constitution could support, ²⁰ and I looked out for another situation. I was offered a very good one by a Mr Satterfield in Manchester at forty pounds a year.

Manchester 1786-1799

²² Mr Satterfield's customers were generally of the upper middle class. Our living was good, and I continued at his shop in St Ann's Square until I was eighteen [19] years of age. We sold wire frames for ladies' bonnets, made by a Mr Jones. He told me of the new and curious machinery being introduced into Manchester for spinning cotton. He had seen these machines at work, and he was sure he could make them, but he had no capital. He said that if I would advance one hundred pounds and join him in partnership, I should have one half of the great profits that were to result.

My brother William advanced me the one hundred pounds, ²³ and Jones leased a large machine shop. We shortly had forty men at work, making "mules" for spinning cotton, and we obtained wood, iron and brass on credit. I soon found that Jones had no idea how to manage workmen or how to conduct business. I knew that the men's wages must be paid, or it would end in our ruin. I therefore undertook to keep the accounts. I had not the slightest idea of the new machines, but I looked very wisely at the men. By intensely observing everything, I maintained order and regularity throughout the establishment.

We had not been in business many months when a capitalist applied to Jones to join him. They offered me for my share of the business six mule machines, a reel, and a making up machine with which to pack the yarn. I did not hesitate to accept their proposal.

²⁴ I rented a large new factory in Ancoats Lane, ²⁵ and I commenced business for myself in a small part of this, and let the remainder to tenants who paid my whole rent. I received three of the six mules promised, and engaged three men to work them, that is, to spin cotton thread or yarn from rovings, ²⁶ for which I gave 12s. per pound. ²⁵ I made it up upon the reel into hanks, and then made these hanks into bundles and wrapped them up neatly in paper. I sold them to a Mr Mitchell ²⁶ at 22s. per pound, ²⁵ and he sold the yarn to muslin weavers. ²⁶ I made about six pounds of profit each week and deemed myself doing well for a young beginner.

A Mr Drinkwater had built a mill for finer spinning, and was beginning to fill it with machinery, but his manager left him, ²⁷ and he had to advertise for another. When I heard of it, I proceeded straight to Mr Drinkwater's counting house and asked him for the situation. He said

immediately, "You are too young. How old are you?" "Twenty [21] in May this year", was my reply. "How often do you get drunk in the week?" "I was never", I said, blushing scarlet, "drunk in my life." "What salary do you ask?" "Three hundred a year." "Three hundred a year!" "I cannot take less. I am making that sum by my own business."

We went to my factory and I proved my statement to his satisfaction. He said, "I will give you the three hundred a year, as you ask,²⁸ and I shall require you to take over the management of the mill, and of the work people, immediately."

When I arrived at the³⁵ "Bank Top Mill",²⁸ I found myself in the midst of five hundred men, women and children, busily occupied with machinery, much of which I had scarcely seen. I said to myself, "How came I here? How can I manage these people and this business?"²⁹ I determined to do the best I could and began to examine what was in progress. I looked grave – inspected everything minutely – examined the drawings and calculations of the machinery. I continued this silent inspection for six weeks, saying merely yes or no to questions, and did not give one direct order until I felt myself master of my position.

I soon perceived the defects in the various processes and improved the quality of our manufacture.³⁰ I had acquired a knowledge of human nature which enabled me to gain the confidence of others and draw forth only their good qualities, and³¹ after six months I had the most complete influence over the work people. Their regularity and sobriety none could imitate.

At this time, Mr Drinkwater sent for me. I was yet but an ill-educated awkward youth, speaking ungrammatically a kind of Welsh English spoken in Newtown. I felt uncertain at Mr Drinkwater's summons. However he said, "I am well pleased with all you have done.³² If you will consent to remain with me, I will give you four hundred for the next year, five hundred for the third, and in the fourth year you shall join in partnership with a fourth of the profits." I willingly agreed.

³⁴ In about a year, I had improved the accuracy of the machinery used and gained the means to increase the fineness of the finished thread from 120 to upwards of 300 hanks in the pound.

³⁵ I was now known as the first fine cotton spinner in the world.

The celebrated³⁶ Dr Dalton the philosopher and a Mr Winstanley were intimate friends of mine, and we often met in the evenings for interesting discussions upon religion, morals and similar subjects. Here Dalton first broached his atomic theory. I acquired the name of "the reasoning machine", because they said I made man a mere reasoning machine, made to be so by nature and society.

However heterodox my opinions, I was solicited to become a member of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester,³⁵ under the Presidency of the late highly respected Dr Percival.³⁷ At one sitting of the Society, the subject of cotton was introduced. To my surprise

and great confusion, Dr Percival said: "Mr Owen can, I am sure, give us some valuable information upon the subject". I blushed and stammered out some few incoherent sentences, and felt quite annoyed at my ignorance and awkwardness being thus exposed.

Had it not been for this incident, it is probable I should never have attempted to speak in public. I knew more of cotton than any who spoke, and this induced me to write a paper upon this subject, which was read and discussed at the following meeting. ³⁸ I continued a regular member, and wrote a paper for each session, but on what subjects I do not now recollect.

⁴¹ In the third year, Mr Drinkwater sent for me again. He said "Unexpected changes have taken place lately in my family. The celebrated Mr Oldknow is to become my son-in-law. He wishes the entire business to be retained in the family, but you are entitled by our agreement to become a partner in my mills next year. If you will give up your claim to the partnership, you may name your own salary." I said – "I have brought the agreement with me, and I now put in the fire. Under these circumstances I cannot remain your manager with any salary you can give." He then said – "I hope you will remain until another manager can be procured to take your place." ⁴² To this I agreed.

After I left Mr Drinkwater's concern, I formed a partnership with two rich old-established houses, Messrs Borrodale and Atkinson of London and Messrs Barton of Manchester, to build mills on the Chorlton estate, near Manchester, under my management. I had to superintend the building, get the machinery made, and set the whole in action. Two or three years later, ⁴⁴ the Chorlton Twist Company was proceeding prosperously.

Having many customers in and around Glasgow, it became necessary for me to go to see them. ⁴⁵ One day on my first visit to Glasgow, ⁴⁶ I was introduced to Miss Dale, ⁴⁵ the daughter of a most extraordinary man – an extensive manufacturer, cotton spinner, merchant, banker, and preacher. ⁴⁶ She asked me if I had seen the falls of the Clyde and her father's mills. She gave me an introduction to her uncle, and I visited and inspected the New Lanark Mills under his guidance. They then consisted of a primitive manufacturing Scotch village and four mills for spinning cotton. I said as I stood in front of the establishment, "of all places I have yet seen, I should prefer this in which to try an experiment I have long contemplated."

On returning to Glasgow I called upon Miss Dale to thank her. She was just going to walk with her younger sisters on the banks of the Clyde and said perhaps I should like to accompany them. I readily assented. We met there once or twice after. At parting she said, when I came again to Glasgow she would be glad to see me.

⁴⁷ Upon my arrival the second time at Glasgow I called on Miss Dale, and walked with her and her sisters often again. ⁵⁰ On my third visit to Glasgow the morning walks continued. By degrees I ventured to ask Miss Dale if her affections were engaged, and she frankly said they

were not. But when I asked her permission to become her suitor, ⁵¹ she said, whatever her own feelings, she had little expectation that her father could be induced to give his consent.

I had never seen Mr Dale. Having heard that he wished to retire from business and to sell the New Lanark establishment, I called upon him at his counting house. He received me coldly. I asked if the report were true, and if so, on what terms he would offer the mills. "I would recommend you," he said, "to go and examine the establishment, and make your report to your partners, and if they should have any desire to become the owners of it, I shall be prepared to enter into a negotiation with them".

⁵² On returning to Manchester, I informed my partners. Two of them immediately accompanied me to New Lanark and were much pleased with the establishment. By this time, Mr Dale had been informed by his daughter of what had passed between us, but he was very adverse to our views. He said I was a stranger of whom he knew nothing. He wished to have an honest Scotchman to succeed him.

My partners and I waited on Mr Dale and explained our object. He was evidently ⁵³ taken by surprise, and said he would make the necessary enquiries and see us again the next day. We called at his hour of appointment and he said, "I am willing to treat with you for the land, village and mills at New Lanark, with everything as it stands." We enquired the price at which he valued this property. He said, "Mr Owen knows better than I do the value of such property, and I wish that he would name what he considers to be a fair price."

I was somewhat surprised and non-plussed, but I said, "It appears to me, that sixty thousand pounds, payable at the rate of three thousand a year for twenty years, would be an equitable price." Mr Dale, to the surprise of my partners, replied, "if you think so, I will accept your proposal, if your friends also approve of it." Equally to my surprise, they said they were willing to accept the terms. This occurred in the summer of 1797 [1799?].

New Lanark 1800 - 1825

⁵⁴ I had often to return to Glasgow to see Mr Dale respecting the change of proprietorship of the establishment, and his cold and distant manner to me gradually diminished, until he received me in a friendly manner. At length, Mr Dale consented to accept me for his son-in-law, and our marriage was fixed for the 30th of September. ⁵⁵ My property by this time had accumulated to three thousand pounds. Mr Dale proposed to give three thousand with his daughter.

Our marriage took place in Mr Dale's house. The ceremony was according to the marriage rites of Scotland and surprised me not a little. Mr Dale was there to give his daughter to me, and the younger sisters of Miss Dale for her bride's maids. The minister requested Miss Dale

and me to stand up, and asked each of us if we were willing to take the other for husband or wife, and each simply nodding assent, he said, without one word more – “Then you are married, and you may sit down”, and the ceremony was all over.

⁵⁶ It was thought necessary that I take the immediate direction of our Scotch business. ⁷⁸ I had but one-ninth interest in the partnership, but I had one thousand a year as sole manager. ⁵⁶ I entered upon the government of New Lanark about the first of January, 1800. I say ‘government’ – for my intention was not to be a mere manager of cotton mills, but to introduce principles in the conduct of the ⁵⁷ people, which I had successfully commenced in Mr Drinkwater’s factory, and to change the conditions of the people, who, I saw, were surrounded by circumstances having an injurious influence upon the character of the entire population of New Lanark.

I found my task full of formidable obstacles. The former managers had their own views, directly opposed to mine. I expected little assistance from them. ⁵⁹ They both left New Lanark.

⁵⁷ The people had been collected hastily from any place from whence they could be induced to come. They were surrounded by bad conditions, which had misformed their characters. The great majority of them were idle, intemperate, dishonest, devoid of truth, and pretenders to religion, which they supposed would excuse all their immoral proceedings.

I soon found that a reconstruction of the whole establishment would be necessary. I wished to make the old superintendents of the different departments my agents for the intended changes. But for new measures it was necessary to have new men, for the old ones preferred to leave their situations, rather than be engaged in a work of such reform as I contemplated, which they said was impracticable.

I had every bad habit of the people to overcome. Theft was very general and Mr Dale’s property had been plundered in all directions. ⁵⁸ There were two ways to govern the population. 1st, by contending against the people, – to have many of them tried for theft, some imprisoned and transported, others condemned to death. This has ever been the practice of society. Or 2ndly, to consider these unfortunately placed people the creatures of ignorance and vicious circumstances, for which society alone was responsible. I had to change their evil conditions for good ones and thus, in due course, to supersede bad characters by good. This required illimitable patience, forbearance and determination.

⁵⁹ I had learnt through experience and reflection ⁵⁸ “that the character of each of our race is formed by God or nature and by society: ⁵⁹ that none can form his own character”. I decided to govern New Lanark according to these new views – to commence the most ⁶⁰ important experiment for the happiness of the human race yet instituted. My friends smiled at what they called my simplicity and urged me not to attempt such a hopeless impossibility. My mind, however, was prepared for the task.

The population of New Lanark consisted of about 1,3000 settled in the village as families, and between 400 and 500 pauper children, whose ages appeared to be from five to ten, but were said to be from seven to twelve. These children were by Mr Dale's directions well lodged, fed and clothed. An attempt was made to teach them to read, and some of the oldest to write, after the business of the long day was over. But the children were exhausted, and many of them fell asleep during the school hours. The schoolmaster was kind and considerate, but what could he do with 400 or 500 children? The whole system was wretchedly bad.

I determined therefore ⁶¹ that no more pauper children should be received; that the village houses and streets should be improved, and new and better houses erected to receive new families in place of the pauper children; and that the interior of the mills should be rearranged, and the old machinery replaced by new. These changes were to be made gradually, and to be effected by the profits of the establishment. ⁶² My partners were all commercial men, and expected a profit in addition to interest for their capital.

⁶¹ My first task was to supersede the evil conditions with which the population was surrounded by good conditions. The profession of religion was essential for anyone to become respectable in any part of Scotland, and thus profession was deemed by many all that was necessary. Correct conduct was in much less estimation.

⁶² The evil conditions I had to contend against were the ignorance, superstition and consequent immoral conduct and bad habits of the population; the long day's work which they had to undergo; the inferior qualities and high price of everything which they had to purchase; the bad arrangements in their houses for rearing and training their children; and their prejudices against an English manufacturer becoming a hard task master, because I was going to adopt new-fangled measures.

The workpeople were systematically opposed to every change which I proposed, and did whatever they could to frustrate my object. I was prepared for these obstructions. My intention was to gain their confidence despite their prejudice to a stranger from a foreign country, as they considered England to be. My language was different from their lowland Scotch and the highland erse (they had a large mixture of highlanders amongst them).

⁶³ I had great difficulty in teaching them cleanly habits, and order, and system in their proceedings. The retail shops, in all of which spirits were sold, were great nuisances. All the articles sold were bought on credit at high prices to cover great risks, and the qualities were most inferior. I arranged superior stores and shops, from which to supply every article of food, clothing etc. which they required. I bought everything in the first markets on a large scale, and had articles of the best quality supplied to the people at cost price. This saved them full twenty-five per cent. The effects soon became visible in their improved health and superior dress, and in the general comfort of their houses.

At length an event occurred which enable me to gain the people's full confidence. We were receiving a large amount of our cotton from the United States. In 1806, the United States laid an embargo on their ports and no cotton was allowed to be exported. The price of all cotton immediately advanced very rapidly. ⁶⁴ To proceed in our operations was most hazardous: to discharge the work people would be cruel and unjust. I therefore concluded to stop all the machinery, retain the people, and continue to pay them their full wages. Henceforward I had no obstructions from them in my progress of reform.

⁷¹ I had one son born in a year after my marriage, – but he died in infancy. Another, named Robert Dale, was born the end of the second year, William Dale two years afterwards. Then followed two daughters – Anne Caroline and Jane Dale – about two years between each. Then David Dale and Richard, and my youngest daughter, Mary, closed the number of my family.

In the summer we lived in the cottage in the gardens in the centre of the village, and in winter we resided with my father-in-law in Charlotte Street, Glasgow. I rode on horse-back frequently to and fro from Glasgow where our warehouses and counting houses were situated.

Mr Dale was much attached to the family. He was one of the most conscientious and kind-hearted men I have ever met. Our religious notions were very different, but we had many friendly discussions on religion.⁷² He often concluded our discussions by saying – “Thou needest be very right, for thou art very positive.”

⁸⁰ After I had the confidence of the work-people, that which I found the most efficient check upon inferior conduct was the contrivance of a silent monitor – a four-sided piece of wood, each side coloured, tapered at the top, to hang upon a hook with either side to the front. One of these was suspended in a conspicuous place near each person employed, and the colour at the front told the conduct of the individual during the preceding day – black, bad; blue, indifferent; ⁸¹ yellow, good; and white, excellent. It was gratifying to observe the new spirit created by these silent monitors. At the commencement, the great majority were black; they were gradually succeeded by blue, and then by yellow, and some white.

⁸³ In searching out the evil conditions in which the workpeople were involved, their domestic arrangements for rearing their children from infancy appeared to me especially injurious. With the limited space in these dwellings, young children were always in the way of their parents, who were altogether ignorant of the right method of treating children.

⁸⁴ I wished to take these children out of those evil conditions. To erect a building for my purpose would require about five thousand pounds, but this I estimated would be amply repaid by the improved character of the children. I had then to overcome the prejudices of the parents against sending their children so young to school. And I was opposed in all my views by the parish minister.

While in Manchester, my mind had been deeply impressed with the importance of education. I watched Lancaster in his early attempts to instruct the poor, and assisted him, from first to last, with a thousand pounds. When the church of England set up Dr Bell in opposition to Lancaster, I offered his committee a like amount if they would open the national schools to children of every creed, but only half the sum if they persisted in their rule. They decided to keep their doors closed against dissent, and ⁸⁵ I thus saved my five hundred pounds.

I began in 1809 to clear the foundation for the infant and other schools. ⁸⁴ I had to meet the objections of my partners, who looked for a good return for their capital. ⁸⁵ I explained to them my intended measures, step by step, and the beneficial effects which I expected. Their spokesman replied, "Each of your propositions is true individually; but as they lead to conclusions contrary to our education ⁸⁶ and practices, they must in the aggregate be erroneous. We cannot proceed on such new principles for extending this already very large establishment."

My reply was, "I can direct this establishment only upon principles, which appear to me to be true, and through the practice which hitherto has been successful." Seeing them hesitate, I said, "If you are afraid to proceed with me, I will offer you a sum for the establishment, which I will either give for it, or accept from you". The reply was, "Your offer is fair and liberal. What is the sum you fix as its value?" I said, "Eighty-four thousand pounds". After conversing among themselves, they replied "We accept your offer, and the establishment is yours"

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Two wealthy Glasgow merchants, the sons-in-law of Mr Campbell of Zura, had previously made applications to join me in partnership. They now joined me in the business [with] a partner [of one of them] and Mr Atkinson, a partner in the [old] "New Lanark Twist Company", and we commenced under the new firm of the "New Lanark Company".

⁸⁷ Our late firm had continued for ten years, and, after paying the capitalists five per cent per annum for their capital, the profits to the firm amounted to sixty thousand pounds.

I had the greatest share in the new partnership of five, and I retained the thousand a year for the management of the concern. The new firm was proceeding successfully, and I had commenced building the new schools for the formation of character, when I discovered a strong spirit of dissatisfaction in the two sons-in-law of Mr Campbell. They had learnt that he had deposited twenty thousand pounds with me in preference to them, and they became very jealous of me in consequence.

They objected to the building for the schools, and all the improvements I had in progress for the increased comforts of the villagers. They objected to my scale of wages for the people,

and of salaries to the superintendents, which upon principle, and also for ultimate profit, were what the public deemed liberal.

They gave me formal notice not to proceed with the schools. I then said –“As I see you do not like my mode of managing, I resign as exclusive manager, I will relinquish the salary rather than be obliged to proceed contrary to my convictions.” This did not satisfy their wounded feelings. They would dissolve the partnership, and the works should be sold by public auction.

⁸⁸ Although I had more than seventy thousand pounds invested in the establishment, they refused to give me any part of it until after the sale, and I was obliged to borrow for my domestic expenditure. They said they did not think the establishment now worth forty thousand pounds. Their object was to depreciate the property, that they might purchase it enormously below its value.

⁸⁹ During this year (1813), ⁸⁸ I went to London sometime before the sale, to see to the printing and publication of four essays which I had written on the formation of character.

⁸⁹ I was also engaged in forming a new partnership for carrying forward the establishment at New Lanark. I was completely tired of partners who were merely trained to buy cheap and sell dear. I circulated a pamphlet with a view to obtaining partners who would assist my intended future operations. Such partners I found in Mr John Walker of Arno's Grove, Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher, Joseph Foster of Bromley, William Allen of Plough Court, Joseph Fox, dentist, and Michael Gibbs, subsequently Lord Mayor of London.

⁹⁰ [They] asked me the price which I thought the property was now worth. I said we should not let it be purchased from us at less than £120,000. It was concluded that I should be empowered to bid to that amount. On the morning of the sale, I instructed my solicitor, Mr Alexander Macgregor, to bid for me. The sale had excited great interest in Glasgow, for I had become very popular in Scotland.

⁹¹ The sale commenced, and the property was put up at £60,000. Mr Macgregor bid £100 more. My opponents bid £900 more, Mr Macgregor £100 more. This mode of bidding continued until £84,100 when my opponents retired to consult together. They returned and bid £400 more, Mr Macgregor immediately bidding £100 more. As the bidding advanced to £100,000 my opponents became pale and agitated and again retired to consult.

Returning, they resumed bidding, £100 more each time, until they bid £110,000 and Mr Macgregor £110,100. Their agitation now became excessive, and their lips blue. They again retired to consult. They returned more excited than ever and carried on bidding as before until £114,000. Mr Macgregor immediately bid £114,100, and then my opponents finally stopped bidding, and the property was knocked down to me.

⁹⁴ The new partnership [was] ⁹⁵ formed of 13 shares, each of £10,000, of which I held five, Mr Walker three, Mr Foster one and Mr Allen one, all members of the society of friends. Mr Bentham, ⁹⁶ Mr Fox and Mr Gibbs [each] had one share. ⁹⁵ I proposed that, over 5 per cent for our capital and risk, the surplus gains should be freely expended for the education of the children and the improvement of the workpeople of New Lanark.

⁹⁶ After the transfer of the property was legally executed, we went to Lanark in a coach with four horses. A few miles from Lanark, ⁹⁷ we saw a great multitude running towards us. They called out to the postillions to stop the horses and untraced them from the carriage and they began to drag the carriage themselves, quicker than our horses could have dragged us up those steep hills. Our reception at Old Lanark was most cordial, the windows and doors being filled with women and children, to the astonishment of my Quaker friends. We were taken through all the streets of New Lanark, where gratitude, affection and delight were expressed in the countenances of [those at] the windows and in the street. It was a day which I shall never forget.

⁹⁸ The annoyance of my late partners was increased not a little, when upon balancing the accounts of our four years partnership, it was found, after allowing five per cent for the capital employed, that the net profit was £160,000. I now had a new field opening to me, and I commenced by hastening the building for the infant and other schools.

⁹⁹ After Mr Dale's death, my wife's four younger sisters lived with us for some years. As the house at the mills had become too small, I took a lease on Braxfield House, about quarter of a mile from New Lanark, and the seat of the late Lord of Session, Lord Braxfield. It was a beautifully situated residence, and I improved the grounds.

“A New View of Society” 1813

¹⁰³ My four “Essays on the Formation of Character” and my practice at New Lanark had made me well known among the leading men of that period. Among these were the Archbishop of Canterbury (¹⁰⁸ who was at all times most friendly to me), ¹⁰³ the Bishop of London, Mr Wilberforce, William Godwin, the first Sir Robert Peel. I must not forget my friends among the political economists:- Malthus, James Mill, Ricardo, Colonel Torrens and Francis Place. I always differed from them but our discussions were maintained with great good feeling. They were friends to national education but opposed national employment for the poor and unemployed.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Lancaster was becoming well known for his new economical plan for the education of the poor, by which one man could instruct a thousand children. I encouraged him to come

to Glasgow in 1812, and a great public dinner was to be given. ¹⁰⁷ He made it a condition that I be its chairman. I unwillingly agreed, believing myself unequal to the task. I was on the most friendly terms with many of the professors of the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, and two supported me on this occasion.

In my opening speech, I first declared in public my sentiments on the true formation of character and my principle that man was essentially the creature of the conditions in which he was placed, and the necessity of placing the rising generation in good circumstances. What I said took the meeting by surprise, and when I concluded the whole assembly applauded continuously.

This spontaneous approval induced me to write my four first essays on “A New View of Society” and on the formation of character. I was surprised by the manner in which they were received by the public, and especially by the higher members of the administration. ¹⁰⁸ Lord Liverpool and his cabinet were favourable to my views and friendly to myself.

¹⁰⁹ I had two hundred copies printed, bound with alternate blank leaves. Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary, ¹¹⁰ had these copies forwarded ¹⁰⁹ to the leading governments of Europe and America, to the most learned universities and ¹¹⁰ individuals. These parties were requested to make any objections which might occur to them on the blank leaves, and to return the copies. A considerable number were returned. None of the writers directly objected to any of the facts, principles or conclusions, but only remarked that various other parties would object.

When I was introduced to John Quincey Adams the American minister to our government, he asked me for copies for every state governor in the union. ¹¹¹ They prepared the way for the general good reception which I met with in that country some years afterwards.

I had forty of the Essays bound superbly, and I prevailed on the government to send a copy to each of the sovereigns of Europe and to their chief minister. A copy was conveyed to the Emperor Napoleon at Elba in 1814. ¹¹² I was informed that Buonaparte had studied this work with great attention and had determined, on his return to power, if he were allowed to remain quietly on the throne of France, to do as much for peace and progress as he had previously done for war. But the sovereigns of Europe refused to listen to his proposals for peace instead of war.

Factory Reform 1815

Having opened to the public my “New Views of Society”, my attention was directed to public measures for obtaining some relief for the children, young persons and adults employed in the rapidly increasing manufactories of wool, cotton, flax, hemp and silk. I visited most of the

manufactories of the kingdom to enable me to judge the conditions. I saw the importance of the machinery, and its rapid improvements. I became vividly alive to the deteriorating condition of the very young children and others who were made the slave of these new mechanical powers. This white slavery was far worse than the house ¹¹³ slaves whom I afterwards saw in the United States.

My first step was to call a meeting of the manufacturers of Scotland in 1815 in Glasgow, ¹¹⁴ to ask the government to remit the heavy duty paid on the importation of cotton, and to consider measures to improve the condition of young children and others employed in the various textile manufactures. The leading manufacturers of Glasgow attended in great numbers. My first proposal for the remission of tax on raw cotton was carried unanimously, but no one would second my motion for the relief of the children and others whom they employed. The meeting came to nothing. I had the address which I had read published in the press and sent copies to every member of both Houses of Parliament. It created a considerable sensation among the upper classes and the manufacturing interest.

I then proceeded to London to communicate with the government. I was referred to Mr Vansittart respecting the remission of the tax. I was well received by him, ¹¹⁵ and he said he would remit it [almost entirely].

I waited on leading members of both Houses, to promote a bill for the relief of the children and others employed in manufactures. I was in general well received. A meeting was called to consider who should introduce the bill in the House of Commons. It was suggested that Sir Robert Peel, an extensive manufacturer, would be a very fit person. I had no objection, ¹¹⁶ and called on him to ascertain his views. He very willingly accepted the office.

He attended the next meeting of the favouring members, at which all the arrangements were concluded for introducing the bill with all the clauses as I had prepared them. But Sir Robert Peel was too much under the influence of his brother manufacturers, and he allowed this bill to be dragged through the House of Commons for four sessions. When it was passed, it had become so mutilated that it became valueless for the objects I had intended.

Children were at this time admitted into the cotton, wool, flax and silk mills at six and sometimes even five years of age. The time of working was usually fourteen hours per day, sometimes even sixteen hours and in many cases the mills were heated to a high state most unfavourable to health.

¹²⁰ The bill in its original state limited the working day to ten hours, and the age of admission for children to twelve; and [required] the boys and girls to be taught to read and write previously to their admission; the girls also to be taught to sew and cook and do general domestic duties; and the factory to be kept clean.

¹¹⁶ The first plea of the objectors to my bill was that the legislature should not interfere with the masters' management of their business. This was at length over-ruled. The next attempt was to prove that it was not injurious to employ these young children for fifteen hours per day in ¹¹⁷ overheated close rooms, often filled with fine flying fibres, particularly in cotton and flax spinning mills. A committee investigated this question for two sessions before it could decide that such practices were detrimental to the health of these infants.

Sir Robert Peel, yielding to the clamour of the manufacturers, gave up wool, flax and silk, and they were struck out of the bill at the commencement. I sat with the committee every day, the only uninfluenced advocate for these children, whose minds and bodies were materially and cruelly injured. My evidence, as a master manufacturer, was too strong to be overcome, especially as my practice was in accordance with the bill as I first proposed it.

The manufacturers opposing these measures [sought] to diminish the influence of my evidence. [Two] were dispatched to Lanark on a mission of scandal hunting. They soon learned that the Rev Mr Menzies, the parish clergyman of old Lanark was an enemy to my proceedings at New Lanark. He had preached in the town for twenty years, and there was no perceptible change for the better among his parishioners. ¹¹⁸ The progress at New Lanark had aroused his jealousy. [He reported that] on 1st January this year (1816) on opening my new 'Institution for the Formation of Character', I had delivered an address of the most treasonable character against church and state.

¹¹⁹ He willingly went with the manufacturers to London, and the party asked Lord Sidmouth for an interview, which was granted. "We have come to make a charge against Mr Owen." "Ah, what is it? I know Mr Owen very well." "On the 1st of January, at the opening of his new "Institution for the Formation of Character", ¹²⁰ he delivered one of the most extraordinary, treasonable and inflammatory discourses that has ever been heard in Scotland." "Is this all the charge you have to make against Mr Owen?" "Yes, my Lord." "Then I dismiss your complaint as most frivolous and uncalled for. The government has been six months in possession of a copy of that discourse, which it would do any of you credit to have delivered." And he bowed them out.

¹²¹ I was so disgusted at the delays created by interested members, and at the concessions made to them, that I seldom attended the committee during its third and fourth years. My place was occupied chiefly by Mr Nathaniel Gould of Manchester and Mr Richard Oastler of Yorkshire.

Plight of the Unemployed 1816

What was called the revulsion from war to peace in 1815 had created universal distress among the producers in the British Islands. Barns were full, warehouses were weighed down with all manner of productions, and prices fell much below the cost at which articles could be produced. Farm servants were dismissed, and manufacturers were obliged to discharge their hands by hundreds. The distress among all workpeople became so great, that the upper and wealthy classes became alarmed, foreseeing that the support of the hundreds and thousands unemployed must ultimately fall upon them.

A great meeting was ¹²² held in the City of London Tavern to consider the cause of and remedy for this distress. The meeting was presided over by the Duke of York, and attended by all the prominent men of the day. That morning I was engaged to breakfast with the Bishop of Norwich. As he could not attend the meeting, [he requested me] to subscribe ten pounds for him.

All at the meeting appeared at a loss to account for such severe distress. A committee of leading statesmen, political economists and practical men of business was appointed, its chairman the Archbishop of Canterbury, to investigate this difficult subject. Upon this committee my name appeared – by whom proposed ¹²³ and seconded I never knew.

I attended the committee meeting next day and listened to speech after speech, but amounting to nothing relevant to the subject. At length, the Chairman requested that I speak. ¹²⁴ I had to force myself to overcome my diffidence and mistrust of my own powers. I said that the cause of the distress seemed to me to be the new extraordinary changes during so long a war, when men and materials had been in such urgent demand, to support the waste of our armies and navies upon so extensive a scale for quarter of a century. This gave great encouragement to new mechanical inventions and chemical discoveries to supersede manual labour in supplying the innumerable materials for war. The war was a most extravagant customer to farmers, manufacturers and other producers of wealth, and many became very wealthy.

On the day peace was signed, this great customer died, and prices fell as the demand diminished. The barns were full, the warehouses loaded; this very superabundance of wealth was the sole cause of the existing distress. Burn the stock in the farmyards and warehouses, and prosperity would immediately recommence. The want of demand compelled master producers to diminish their productions and the cost of producing. Every economy was resorted to, and men being more expensive, they were discharged, and machines made to supersede them. The numbers unemployed were increased by the discharge of men from the army and navy.

¹²⁵ Mr Colquhoun, the political economist, asked how much I thought the new mechanical and chemical powers now superseded manual labour. The population of the British Isles was about seventeen millions. [About] one fourth were producers: the wealth of Great Britain and Ireland was produced by their manual labour, assisted by mechanical and chemical power. I [replied that] it must now exceed the whole amount of manual producing power. Many exclaimed [that] it was utterly impossible. I said that the operations of about two thousand persons at New Lanark now completed as much work as sixty years before would have required the entire working population of Scotland.

The Archbishop [asked] what was the remedy for the distress. I said [that] ¹²⁶ I thought I perceived the remedy, and offered to prepare a report giving my views. The committee unanimously expressed a desire that I should do so.

A document presented to the Factory Committee of the House of Commons showed the number of spindles at work in all the cotton mills over the kingdom. This enabled me to estimate the amount of manual labour which [they] superseded – that of a population of eighty millions; ¹²⁷ and with the wool, flax and silk manufactures, two hundred millions.

The government, especially the Whig interest and the political economists, became alarmed by the number of workpeople out of ¹²⁸ employment and claiming their legal support from the nation. The political economists now conspired against the just, natural and legal rights of those who could not find employment and whose sufferings were extreme. They did not take into account that the wealth of the nation had increased in a much greater ratio than the poor's rate. Their measures starved the weakest and best of the poor, and drove others to theft, murder, and the poor females to prostitution. Meanwhile, there was abundance of uncultivated land. The rapid accumulation of wealth created by the industry of the people, now made abject slaves to the new artificial powers, accumulated in the hands of capitalists who created none of it, and who misused all they acquired.

¹²⁹ I was on intimate terms with each of the political economists, frequently breakfasting with them. I was most desirous to convince them that national education and employment could alone create a permanent rational, intelligent and wealthy population, and that this could be attained only by a scientific arrangement of the people, united in properly constructed villages of unity and co-operation. They, on the contrary, desired to convert me to their views of instructing the people without finding them national employment, and of a thorough system of individual competition. ¹³⁰ The political economists advocated individualism and they succeeded in converting the government and the public.

¹³¹ By my own experience and reflection, I had ascertained that human nature is radically good, and is capable of being trained, educated, and placed from birth, that all ultimately must become united, good, wise, wealthy, and happy. And I felt that to attain this glorious result, the sacrifice of the character, fortune and life of an individual was not deserving a moment's

consideration. My decision was made to overcome all opposition and to succeed, or to die in the attempt.

Before the next meeting of the Archbishop's committee, the government appointed a committee of forty members of the House of Commons, the "Sturges Bourne's committee on the Poor Laws". When I presented my report and explained the remedy I proposed, the Archbishop and the committee appeared at a loss. After [conferring with] the government party, the ¹³²Archbishop said: "Mr Owen – this committee is not prepared to consider a report so extensive in its recommendations, so new in principle and practice, and involving great national changes. We recommend you to present it to Mr Sturges Bourne's Poor Law Committee." I said I would do so.

Mr Brougham, afterwards Lord Chancellor, was a member of this committee, and through him I gave notice that I had a report to present, and that I was willing to be examined as a witness upon their bill. I attended in the morning of the day appointed. The members connected with the government had been acquainted by the Archbishop's committee with the outline of my report. When I entered the committee room, I found the forty members present. I was personally known to all of them. I opened out all my plans and documents on the table, making I have no doubt a formidable display. After I had waited some time [while] the leading members were in private conversation, the chairman requested me to withdraw into the next room [as] the members desired some private discussion.

I withdrew, and occupied ¹³³myself with writing, and was thus engaged the whole day, until Mr Brougham came to me and said –"Owen, we have been discussing whether you should be examined. and have come to no decision yet. The debate is adjourned until tomorrow morning, when you must again attend." In the morning I attended and occupied myself as before. The whole day passed before Mr Brougham came to me and said –"Well, Owen, this is an extraordinary business. The committee has only just now decided, by a small majority, that you shall not be examined." I said –"It is indeed strange, but of little consequence. I will find means to enable the public to learn my views."

In a day or two I published in the daily newspapers an examination of myself, as I imagined the best informed of the committee would have made. Next I decided to call a public meeting in the City of London Tavern "to consider a plan to relieve the present distress, to remoralise the lower orders, reduce the poor's rate, and gradually abolish pauperism".

New Lanark Schools 1816 - 1825

¹³⁴ I was making great progress with my New Lanark experiment, and it was becoming widely known. I had now completed the first institution for the formation of the infant and child character – the infants being received into it as soon as they could walk. ¹³⁵ I charged the parents three shillings a year for each child, and they paid this most willingly. The expense of the three gradations of schools was about two pounds per year for each child, but the difference was amply made up by the improved character of the whole population.

The children were trained and educated without punishment, and were by far the happiest human beings I have ever seen. The infants and young children, besides being instructed by sensible signs – the things themselves, or models and paintings – and by familiar conversation, were taught dancing and singing, and the parents were encouraged to come and see their children at their lessons.

In addition, there were day schools for all under twelve years of age, after which they might enter the works, as mechanics, manufacturers, or in any branch. We had iron and brass founders, forgers, turners in wood and iron, machine makers, and builders in all branches. The annual repairs of the establishment cost upwards of eight thousand pounds.

I also organised arrangements to supply all the wants of the population. They had previously been necessitated to buy inferior articles, highly adulterated, at enormous prices. By the time the arrangements were completed, some of the larger families were earning two pounds per week, and [they] told me that my new arrangements to supply their wants saved them ten shillings weekly.

All the houses in the village, with one hundred and fifty acres of land around it, formed parts of the establishment, working as one machine with ¹³⁶ the regularity of clockwork. I have mentioned the measures which I adopted for the detection and prevention of theft. My object was to prevent, not to punish crime. I could detect the loss of a single bobbin in any one of the four sets of hands through which they had daily to pass.

There were four large mills filled with machinery old and ill-arranged. This was replaced, and the whole newly arranged. I was greatly averse to punishment. To prevent punishment by the overlookers, who had been accustomed to whip and strap the children and young people, and who often from ignorance abused their authority, I invented what the people soon called a telegraph.

¹³⁷ I had to visit London often while I continued my plans for the general amelioration of all classes, and was thus absent from New Lanark ¹³⁸ for weeks. I had an accurate daily return sent to me of the results in every department. The daily report of each coloured telegraph was

entered in the character books every night [for me to] inspect on my return. I had divided the establishment into four general departments and had taken great pains to train the four persons at [their] head. When I expected to be absent for a long period, I called these four together and explained fully what I wished to have done. On my return, I uniformly found my wishes fulfilled.

I adopted the same practice with the teachers in the three gradations of schools, with as much success as I could expect from inexperienced young persons of both sexes, not always capable of making due allowance for the varied natural character of each child.

My most important charge was the new infant school. I daily superintended its progress. It was in vain to look to teachers upon the old system of instruction by books. I ¹³⁹ had to seek among the population for two persons with a great love for and unlimited patience with infants, and willing unreservedly to follow my instructions.

The best I could find was a poor simple-hearted weaver named James Buchanan, who had been trained by his wife to perfect submission to her will. Thus the simple-minded, kind-hearted Buchanan, who at first could scarcely read and write, became the first master in a rational infant school. Infants so young also required a female nurse. I was fortunate in finding for this task a young woman, about seventeen years of age, known as Molly Young.

The first instruction I gave them was that they were never to beat any of the children, or threaten them, or use abusive terms, but were always to speak to them kindly. They were to tell the infants under their charge (from one to six years old) that they must do all they could to make their playfellows happy, and that the older ones should take special care of the younger.

These instructions were readily received by James Buchanan and Molly Young and they faithfully adhered to them. ¹⁴⁰ The children were not to be annoyed with books; but were to be taught the uses and qualities of the things around them, by familiar conversation when the children's curiosity excited them to ask questions.

The room for their play in bad weather was sixteen feet by twenty. Their school room was of the same dimensions, and was furnished with paintings chiefly of animals, and with maps, and was supplied with natural objects from the gardens, fields and woods, which always excited their curiosity. Maps of the world on a large scale were hung in the room to attract their attention. Buchanan was taught how to instruct the children [in their use] for their amusement – for with these infants everything was to be amusement.

It was most encouraging and delightful to see the children's progress in real knowledge without the use of books. ¹⁴¹ Here, two untaught persons, James Buchanan and Molly Young, accomplished results which astonished the most learned men of their generation, moulding the children into beings unlike all [others].

¹⁴³ Travellers of distinction, home and foreign, came increasingly to see “the wonders of New Lanark”. [None] could refrain from expressing wonder at the joyous happiness of these children of common cotton spinners. Being always treated with kindness, and altogether without fear, they exhibited a natural grace and politeness.

Standing up, seventy couples at a time, the children would go with the utmost ease and grace through all the dances of Europe. In their singing lessons [they were] trained to harmonise; it was delightful to hear one hundred and fifty [of them] singing the old popular Scotch songs with simplicity and unaffected feeling. ¹⁴⁴ In their military exercises, both sexes went through their evolutions with precision, led by young drummers and fifers

Their lessons in geography were no less amusing. All the classes were united in one large classroom. On a [very] large map of the world were delineated the usual divisions and circles for the cities and towns, but there were no names. One of the one hundred and fifty children took a light wand, and another would ask him to point to such a district, island or town. When the holder of the wand could not point to the place asked for, he had to resign the wand to his questioner. The children learned to ask for the least thought-of places, that they might obtain the wand.

This room was also their class reading apartment. It was forty feet by twenty feet, and twenty two feet in height, with a gallery to accommodate strangers. At these lessons, six to eight masters and mistresses were usually present.

¹⁴⁵ In the adjoining apartment were two hundred and fifty or three hundred children busily engaged at their respective desks, writing or accounting. This room was ninety feet by forty feet and twenty two feet high, with a gallery on three sides, and a pulpit at the end, from which I addressed an audience of about 1,200 when I opened the institution.

Among the thousands who came to see these previously unheard-of proceedings was the Grand Duke Nicholas (later Emperor of Russia), [who] was much pleased with my two youngest sons. ¹⁴⁸ A lady of the highest rank of our own nobility, after witnessing the kindness of the children to each other and their unrestrained happiness, said, with tears in her eyes – “Mr Owen, I would give any money if my children could be made like these.” My good and kind-hearted wife, knowing how much time I spent among this great family, ¹⁴⁹ would jokingly say – “Why, you love those children better than your own.”

¹⁵³ I have dwelt so much on the infant school established. at New Lanark, because it was the first rational step ever carried into practice towards forming a rational character for the human race. ²³² That which I introduced as new in forming the character of the children of the working class may be thus stated –

- 1st. No scolding or punishment of the children.

- 2nd. Unceasing kindness to all the children by every teacher.
- 3rd. Instruction by familiar conversations, the taught always allowed to ask questions.
- 4th. These questions to be answered in a rational manner, and any want of knowledge to be fully admitted.
- 5th. No regular in-door hours for school; when minds commenced to be fatigued, to change it for physical exercise or music.
- 6th. Exercise in military discipline, to teach order, obedience and exactness, to improve carriage, and to prepare them to defend their country. They were taught to dance well, to improve their appearance, manner and health.
- 7th. But on the first indications of lassitude, to return to in-door mental lessons. ²³³
- 8th. To take the children out to become familiar with gardens, orchards, fields and woods, domestic animals and natural history generally.
- 9th. To train the children of the working class to think and act rationally.
- 10th. To place them in surroundings superior to those of the children of any class.

Public Meetings 1817

¹⁵⁴ The proceedings connected with the public meetings ¹⁵⁵ I held were minutely narrated in all the London newspapers, the Times taking the leading interest. ¹⁵⁶ I generally purchased thirty thousand additional copies of the newspapers, and had one copy sent to every parish minister, every member of both houses of parliament, one to each chief magistrate and banker in each city and town, and to leading persons in all classes. To meet the public excitement, I [also] published three broadsheets. The forty thousand copies were called for in three days. The extra publicity [cost] me four thousand pounds. Broadsheets one and two were published on 30th July and 9th August, announcing the meeting to be held ¹⁵⁷ on 14th August.

On the 14th, the large room of the “City of London Tavern”, where all the great public meetings were held, was crammed to its utmost, and thousands [could not gain] entrance. I delivered my address to attentive silence. [Afterwards, there was some] disorder before an adjournment [to 21st August] was moved. The next day, my address was accurately reported in every London newspaper. I sent such numbers to the post office that all the mail coaches were delayed twenty minutes in leaving London.

I was informed that [my proceedings] had alarmed the government, which I by no means intended. I asked Lord ¹⁵⁸ Liverpool for an interview, which was immediately appointed for the next day. Lord Liverpool [received] me with considerable agitation and said – “Mr Owen, what is your wish?” It was evident that the government felt they were at my mercy. ¹⁵⁹ I replied that all I desired was that his Lordship and his cabinet would allow their names to be upon the

committee of investigation which I should propose at the meeting the next day. His Lordship [agreed] – I never saw anyone so immediately relieved.

¹⁵⁸ I had pondered well after the first meeting what course to pursue to gain ultimately my great object – the change of a false, wicked and most cruel system of society, creating misery to all, for the true, just, merciful and good system, securing the happiness of all. I had discovered that the great obstacle to progress and improvement was Religion, [which kept] mankind in the most gross and childish ignorance, destructive of all rational faculties.

¹⁵⁹ What I intended to say at the adjourned meeting was too important to be left to the inaccuracy of reporters. I told them that if they came to me when my address should be about half delivered, they should be supplied with copies of the whole. I had sixteen copies made, having a blank space, which I filled up in the morning before the meeting. I gave no one the least idea of my intentions.

¹⁶⁰ I went to this meeting by far the most popular ¹⁶¹ individual in the civilised world. I commenced my address, and continued amidst much applause from the friends of the cause which I advocated, until I approached that part in which I denounced all the religions of the world as now taught. I said – “ A more important question has never been put – who dares answer it, but with his life in his hand, a willing victim to truth? Behold that victim! Then, my friends, I tell you that hitherto you have been prevented from knowing what happiness really is, solely in consequence of errors, gross errors.”

A breathless silence prevailed. I finished the sentence as stated in Paper no. 3, and paused. My expectations were that such a daring denouncement of all existing religions would call down on me the vengeance of the bigot and superstitious, and that I should be torn to pieces. But to my great astonishment, the most profound silence ensued ¹⁶². All seemed thunderstruck and confounded. After a long pause, about half a dozen clergymen attempted a few low hisses, but these were immediately rebutted by the most heartfelt applause. I said to the friends near me – “the victory is gained. Truth openly stated is omnipotent.”

I then proceeded, and finished my address, which was again loudly cheered. A long debate followed, by those who desired to defeat my proposed resolution for the appointment of a committee to investigate my plans for the relief of the poor. By seven o'clock, the respectable part of the audience had left, and workpeople [had been] brought in. I knew that I had destroyed my popularity with those legion who had been taught to believe and not to think. When the vote was taken, there was great confusion. The majority were decidedly in my favour, but to terminate the meeting peaceably, I decided the resolution negatived.

I have [ever] considered that day the most important of my life – the day on which bigotry, superstition and all false religions, received their death blow. ¹⁶³ From this day, the religious sects commenced their machinations to counteract these daring proceedings of a mere

manufacturer of cotton, [though] I was styled the prince of cotton spinners. ¹⁶⁴ My political opponents were also not idle, but their proceedings were frank and open. Those who preferred the individual system, – whether or not the social was practicable, were numerous and powerful. ¹⁹² The word “Infidel” was the watchword of attack with all my opponents.

¹⁶⁴ My friend Henry Brougham saw me the day after the meeting, and came to me, saying “How the devil, Owen, could you say what you did! If any of us” (meaning the then so-called Liberal party) “had said half as much, we should have been burned alive, – and here are you quietly walking in the street!”

On the Continent 1818

¹⁶⁶ Soon after this, Professor Pictet, the celebrated savant of Geneva, came to invite me to France and Switzerland and the continent generally. He said that his friend Cuvier, the celebrated French naturalist, would come over and meet us in London, and we could return with him to Paris. The Duke of Kent gave me a letter of introduction to his friend the Duke of Orleans (afterwards King Louis Philippe). A French frigate was sent to bring [our] party to France. After landing at Calais, we travelled by carriage to Paris.

¹⁶⁷ My first visit was to the Duke of Orleans. He was at this time a thoughtful watchful character. My views were too well known, he said, to allow him openly to appear to countenance me. The next day we visited the Prime Minister. He said that he was deeply interested in my late public proceedings in London, which he added, were too profound and too advanced for immediate adoption.

¹⁶⁸ I was next introduced to La Place, the astronomer and Alexander Von Humboldt the scientist. We often met [them] to converse freely on public affairs. It was surprising to discover their childish simplicity relative to human nature and the science of society.

¹⁶⁹ I remember the Duke de la Rochefoucault, who took me to see his cotton spinning manufactory. I examined the business and found that I was manufacturing the same fineness of yarn, but of much better quality, at New Lanark, at fourpence per pound cheaper. Evidently the Duke required a high duty on ¹⁷⁰ British cottons to enable him to proceed.

For six weeks the Professor and I luxuriated amidst the most distinguished men in Paris. I was made the lion of Paris. I was continually at a loss to account for [this]. After this, the Professor and myself, joined by my sisters-in-law, proceeded to Geneva, [where] ¹⁷² I was gradually introduced to all the elite. ¹⁷³ I paid a visit to my partner, Mr John Walker of Arno’s Grove, who was residing on the Lake of Lucerne.

¹⁷⁴ On my return to Professor Pictet at Geneva, we visited the three then most noted schools for the poor in Switzerland. The first was Father Oberlin’s Catholic school, well conducted on

charitable principles, according to the old mode of teaching. ¹⁷⁶ The great earnestness and benevolence of this poor curé interested me very much.

¹⁷⁷ Our next visit was to Yverdon, to see Pestalozzi, [whose] theory was good, but whose principles were those of the old system. His school was one step in advance of ordinary schools. We were much pleased with the honest simplicity of the old man.

We [then] went to Hofwyl, and I was introduced to M. de Fellenberg, who had a poor school and also another for pupils of the more wealthy and upper classes. Here we remained for three days. I found that M. de Fellenberg possessed rare administrative talent and a good knowledge of human nature. His school for the poor [was] admirably conducted, ¹⁷⁸ and the schools of the upper class [were] two or three steps in advance of any I had yet seen. M. de Fellenberg became a disciple of my "new views". I strongly recommended him to commence an infant school, [but] he judged that ¹⁷⁹ he had as much on his hands as one man could direct.

My two eldest sons, Robert Dale and William, were now sixteen and fourteen years of age. They had received as good a private education as could be given by well selected governesses and tutors. Their characters had been formed on rational principles and I had no fears to send them from home to acquire foreign languages. I looked everywhere for the best surroundings in which to place my sons, to complete their education. I had seen nothing to equal this establishment. I agreed to send my sons and place them under M. de Fellenberg's especial care.

I intended to visit Frankfurt, and to be at Aix-la-Chapelle during the Congress of Sovereigns. It was agreed that Mr Walker should take the place of the Professor, and should assist me in Germany. I reluctantly parted from the Professor. ¹⁸² I wrote at Frankfurt the two memorials which I intended to present to the Congress of Sovereigns. I had them printed in English, French, and German, in the same pamphlet. The Germanic Diet was now sitting in Frankfurt, attended by the representatives of twenty-two different governments.

I had a letter [of introduction] to M. Bethman, the well-known Frankfurt banker ¹⁸³ and host of Emperor Alexander of Russia. The secretary to the Congress, M. Gentz, had arrived. He was in the full confidence of the leading depots of Europe, and in favour of the old system of society. M. Bethman arranged a sumptuous dinner, and invited the secretary and myself.

When the dinner was over, the conversation was so directed as to engage the secretary and myself in a regular discussion. I stated that the means now existed, for society founded upon the principle of union, to saturate society with wealth sufficient to supply the wants of all through life. "Yes," the learned secretary replied, apparently speaking for the governments, "we know that very well, but we do not want the mass to become wealthy and independent of us. How could we govern them if they were?"

¹⁸⁴ I had discovered that I had a long and arduous task before me, to convince governments and governed of the gross ignorance under which they were contending against each other, in direct opposition to the real interests of both.

¹⁸⁶ As soon as the sovereigns met, I hastened to Aix-la-Chapelle, and completed the two memorials to the Governments of Europe and America. I applied to Lord Castlereagh, the representative of the British government at this Congress. He promised to present these documents to Congress. He did so, and it was [later] stated to me that [they] were the most important documents presented.

“Report to the County of Lanark...” 1820

¹⁸⁷ Many matters now requiring my attention in England and Scotland, I hastened my departure homeward. ¹⁹¹ On my arrival in England I [met] the full extent of opposition which my so public uncompromising denunciations against all the religions of the world naturally excited. But my antecedents were unassailable. I had for more than a quarter of a century governed one population in England of five hundred and another in Scotland of two thousand five hundred, and had produced, by a new mode of governing by love and wisdom, results never before witnessed.

¹⁹³ From 1815, I often resided at 49 Bedford Square, the town residence of my friend and partner John Walker. The Dukes of Kent and Sussex occasionally looked in upon me to study the model which I had there of the new surroundings which I proposed [for] the poor and working classes. ¹⁹⁴ A committee was formed to promote my “New Views”, and the Duke of Kent was its chairman. ¹⁹⁵ His letters to me evince his anxious desire to improve the condition of the suffering classes.

²⁰⁰ I had published a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, on the union of Churches and Schools, which was widely circulated.

²⁰³ The poor law guardians in Leeds were in difficulties about maintaining their increasing poor. They turned their attention to the plans I had published, and I was requested to visit Leeds and explain the practical measures which I recommended. On my arrival, a public meeting was called, and the Mayor presided. The meeting was crowded to excess. I explained my views, not only by word, but through my model. The meeting was unanimous in its warm approval. The poor law guardians immediately appointed three delegates to visit New Lanark and to report the actual practice in that now far-famed establishment:— Mr Edward Baines, proprietor of the Leeds Mercury, Mr John Cawood, a wealthy manufacturer, and Mr Robert Oastler, a highly respected citizen.

²⁰⁴ They came and examined the schools, mills, machine manufactures and foundries, the unique arrangements for providing the inhabitants’ food and clothes, and the pleasure grounds

etc. Their report was widely circulated, and is a full answer to the many objections, because the superior condition of the establishment was effected without religious interference.

I was often much amused with earnest and sincere religious persons who came to inspect the New Lanark schools and establishment. After expressing their astonishment and great delight with the wonderful results, they would say—“Ah, Mr Owen, if you would but add to all these beautiful proceedings our religious views, your establishment would be perfect”.

205 I then would ask the well-meaning party, whether they had ever seen such practical results produced by any persons possessing their religious opinions? “No, they had not”— was the answer without exception. I replied— “You very naturally desire my practice with your faith and religious prejudices. My experience leads me to believe that your religious views and this practice are incompatible.”

²¹⁵ I had become a great favourite with Lord Lauderdale, one of the most influential members of the House of Peers. I had had engraved a beautiful picture of my proposed arrangements to give education and useful constant employment to the poor. I brought him one of ²¹⁶ these engravings, [which] he examined. Then he exclaimed —“Oh! I see it all! Nothing can be more complete for the working classes. But what will become of us?”, meaning the aristocracy.

Petitions [in favour] of my new views were brought before both houses of parliament, signed by the nobility and gentry of the county of Lanark and some of its presbyteries, and by members of the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. ²¹⁷ In the House of Lords, the debate was taking a favourable turn, when Lord Lauderdale arose and said —“My Lords, I know Mr. Owen, and I have examined his plan, and I tell your Lordships that if you countenance Mr Owen’s New Views, there is no government in Europe that can stand against them.” This speech decided the question.

²²⁴ That system which is to establish the Millennial state of goodness and happiness upon earth was not to be introduced by persons of rank and status. Truth needs not the aid of names. Such is the Great Truth: “That the character of man is formed for him without his knowledge, and may now be well formed from birth for all.”

²¹⁸ In 1819, I was invited by Mr. Coke of high agricultural fame, at Holkham, to his celebrated annual sheep shearing. I accompanied our mutual friend, his Excellency Richard Rush, ambassador from the United States. Mr. Coke was an honest Republican in principle, and no respecter of persons merely on account of their rank.

²¹⁹ He told us that when he came into possession of the Holkam estate, it was let at 3 shillings per acre. He required an advance of 2s. per acre. The tenants said that they could not afford 5s. per acre for land so unproductive. At this period, Norfolk imported considerable quantities of wheat. Mr Coke [then] took the estate into his own hands. He told us he was then receiving

25s. an acre for the whole estate. And, through his example, Norfolk [now] exported large quantities of wheat.

²²⁸ While I was busily engaged in London at the end of November, 1819, I received intelligence from New Lanark that one of our large cotton mills had been burned, and all engaged on it thrown out of employment. I immediately made arrangements to give them occupation, without their being obliged to leave the establishment to seek work elsewhere.

²²⁵ I was induced to offer myself a candidate to ²²⁶ represent in the House of Commons the Royal Burghs of Lanark, Selkirk, Peebles and Linlithgow, [following] the demise of the [previous] member. ²³⁰ I arrived home about the middle of December and was occupied for some weeks in new arrangements consequent on the burning of the mill, giving the candidates opposed to me the benefit of a long first canvass.

[When] I visited the Burghs, I found Selkirk and Peebles positively engaged to my opponent, and that Linlithgow had declared to me. Four of the old Lanark voters upon whom I had every reason to depend had, by being feasted and kept intoxicated, been bribed over to my opponent. I made it a condition that not one shilling should be expended for me to bribe one voter. I lost the election by four voters.

²³³ In 1819, another panic occurred in the commercial world, arising from the proceedings of the Bullion Committee of the House of Commons. Such was the distress, produced artificially, that thousands upon thousands of the working classes were out of work and starving, and the smaller tradesmen were ruined. The county of Lanark suffered from a great surplus of unemployed people.

It being noticed that there was no distress ²³⁴ among the population of New Lanark, I was called on at a great county meeting to express my opinion as to the cause of this great evil and to point out a cure. I made a report, [which] included a statement of a permanent remedy, by society being reconstructed. ²³⁹ My report to the county of Lanark [was] published and excited intense interest in the years '20, '21, '22, and '23. [It was] ²³⁴ the first publication which explained the practical science of society, to unite all as members of one superior and enlightened family, so as to make all physically and mentally healthy, good, wise, consistent and happy. But the world was quite unprepared to comprehend such a report in 1820.

²³⁹ It called forth the creation of the 'British and Foreign Philanthropic Society', with the view of forwarding the principles and practices which I advocated. I was so beset to commence the experiment [of] a model community, that I consented [to] a public subscription. To my surprise, £50,000 was subscribed. Many of my more ardent friends would not be satisfied unless I would permit them to commence, and would give them my assistance. I felt constrained to agree. It was determined to commence the first model community on the lands of Mr J.A. Hamilton of Dalziel, a few miles from New Lanark. [1821, nothing came of it.]

²³⁵ [In 1820] one of my partners, William Allen, limited by Quaker prejudices, began to depreciate my mode of education at New Lanark and recommend the abandonment of music, dancing and military discipline. I proceeded in my usual course for two or three years, but gradually perceived the necessity for a separation at no distant day.

²⁴⁰ I will here [1821] conclude this first division of my life – requesting my readers to study attentively the various divisions of the appendix.