

# Robert Owen and Slavery

Robert Owen (1771-1858) is well known as a philanthropist and social reformer and even has a good claim to be regarded as the 'Father of British Socialism'. 'In addition he also believed in equal rights for men and women', writing in one of his publications *The New Moral World* that, '" Women will be no longer made the slaves of, or dependent upon men... They will be equal in education, right, privileges and personal liberty'."<sup>i</sup> Owen's major work, *A New View of Society*, contained 'extended discussions on factory issues and the attack on poverty, a major problem accompanying rapid industrialization, rural-urban migration and mushrooming towns and cities', but 'slavery, on which the whole edifice [of industrial growth] this ultimately floated, was not at this point mentioned... other humane issues commanded Owen's attention'<sup>ii</sup>.

In common with most cotton mills throughout Britain in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, Robert Owen's New Lanark mill used cotton from plantations worked by slaves in the USA, Brazil and Caribbean. This is a legacy for the whole of the British cotton industry; as David Olusoga puts it:

"The great bulk of that essential raw material came from the Mississippi Valley and the 'white gold' of the Deep South was harvested by the black hands of enslaved Africans. In the first half of the nineteenth century it was possible for slaves in the Southern states to spend most of their stolen lives producing the cotton that stoked Britain's Industrial Revolution"<sup>iii</sup>

In that sense, Owen had 'indirectly ... built up his fortune' from slave-produced raw cotton, 'though he never acknowledged it'<sup>iv</sup>. So although Owen (1771-1858) was atypical in many ways of most British capitalist entrepreneurs within the cotton industry (for instance in working hours and conditions, campaigning for limits on working hours for children and providing good standard living accommodation and educational opportunities), in the sourcing of the raw cotton that was the basis of the industry (all the way through to the 1860s), he was no different.

Although Owen took no part in the movement for the abolition of the slave trade (though his father-in-law, David Dale, 'at least had abolitionist tendencies'<sup>v</sup>), he was clearly not unaware of its success in 1807, dedicating his earliest published essay, *On the Formation of Character* (1813) to William Wilberforce, the prominent abolitionist leader (though Wilberforce later opposed Owen's plans, as presented to parliament in both 1819 and 1821 'for the amelioration of the condition of the lower classes'<sup>vi</sup> and declined an invitation to be part of a committee of the 'most respectable and intelligent public characters of all parties'<sup>vii</sup> to develop the scheme further).

Ian Donnachie characterises Owen's attitude towards the institution of slavery itself as 'continuing equivocation'.<sup>viii</sup> In a speech in Glasgow on 25 January 1815, as part of his campaign for improvement in the working conditions in factories, especially for children, he 'claimed that despite high levels of taxation the cotton trade was worth £35 million and supported 3 million workers whose condition, though certainly better than those in agriculture, was worse than the slaves of

the West Indies'.<sup>ix</sup> This was clearly a rhetorical comparison, though the context of his speech shows that Owen thought that the effects of early industrial capitalism, especially on child workers, were very grave indeed:

"It is only since the introduction of the cotton trade, that children at an age before they have acquired strength of body or mental instruction, have been forced into cotton-mills-those receptacles, in too many cases, for living human skeletons, almost disrobed of intellect, where, as the business is often now conducted, they linger out a few years of miserable existence, acquiring every bad habit, which they disseminate throughout Society. It is only since the introduction of this trade, that children, and even grown people, were required to labour more than twelve hours in a day, including the time allotted for meals. It is only since the introduction of this trade that the sole recreation of the labourer is to be found in the pot-house or gin-shop. It is only since the introduction of this baneful trade that poverty, crime, and misery have made rapid and fearful strides throughout the community" <sup>x</sup>

This view was not changed by a visit to the West Indies, *en route* to the USA in 1829. On San Domingo (6th January) Owen 'concluded that the freed coloured people he met were better dressed, cleaner, more orderly and polite than any other working people he had come across before'<sup>xi</sup>, whilst 'The slaves whom I saw in the island of Jamaica are better dressed, more independent in their look, person, and manner, and are greatly more free from corroding care and anxiety than a large proportion of the working-classes in England, Scotland and Ireland. What the condition of these slaves was in former times I know not'.<sup>xii</sup> According to Podmore, Owen was conducted on the tour by Admiral Fleming, then in command of the West Indies, so it is quite conceivable that the 'humane masters' who owned the plantations that Owen visited were hand-picked to be so. Owen would not be the first, or the last, to be taken in by a carefully-directed publicity tour, and it is worth noting that irrespective of the conditions that Owen saw there was a major slave revolt in Jamaica only two years later (1831-32)<sup>xiii</sup>

Nevertheless, Owen did not oppose the economic system of slavery within the British Empire as he did that of competitive capitalism within the 'dark satanic mills' of British industrialism, seeing the latter, on the first hand evidence that appears to have been available to him, as more demonstrably evil and in need of reform than the former. This was exemplified by Owen's involvement in the campaign for the 1832 general election. When he spoke in favour of the candidacy of Thomas Attwood, the leader of the Birmingham Political Union, Owen addressed not the 'the principal issues' of the national campaign, which included 'slavery, the trading monopolies of the Bank [of England] and the East India Company', but called on voters to 'elect the candidates most likely to support measures "to terminate class legislation and obtain the rights of humanity for yourselves and your children"; a graduated property tax replacing all other taxes; free trade; national education and employment systems; freedom of speech (and publication); and complete religious freedom'.<sup>xiv</sup>

In the 1820s Owen and his son Robert Dale Owen founded an Owenite community in America, New Harmony in Indiana; slavery was not a feature of this community, despite Indiana being a slave state until at least 1826. One of Owen's followers, Frances Wright, visited New Harmony in

1825 and influenced by what she saw there and by the ideas of the communitarian and anti-slavery enthusiast George Flower of Albion, Illinois, purchased a 200-acre plantation about fourteen miles from Memphis, Tennessee, known as Nashoba:

"Her object was to buy or persuade benevolent masters to donate slaves who would earn enough to purchase their emancipation and at the same time prepare themselves for freedom by education... Nashoba then became an experimental, racially integrated community based on Owenite doctrines." <sup>xv</sup>

Both Robert Owen and his eldest son, Robert Dale Owen (1801-1877), were trustees of Nashoba; Robert Dale moving to live there when the community experiment of New Harmony came to an end in 1827.<sup>xvi</sup> Robert Dale wrote of Frances Wright:

"She condemned, indeed, in strong terms- as enlightened foreigners were wont to do- that terrible offence against human liberty (tolerated, alas! by our constitution) which the greatest war of modern times has since blotted out. [He's referring to the American Civil War here.] But she did more than condemn the crime of slavery; she sought, albeit with utterly inadequate means and knowledge, to act as pioneer in an attempt to show how it might be gradually suppressed."<sup>xvii</sup>

Robert Dale Owen later became the leader of the Working Men's Party in New York which, unlike most Democrats of the time, was committed to the abolition of slavery in the United States. He served two terms in the Indiana House of Representatives and was elected to the US House of Representatives in 1842 and served in the Ordnance Commission to supply the Union army during the American Civil War (1861-65). In 1862 Owen wrote a series of open letters to U.S. government officials, including President Abraham Lincoln and U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase<sup>xviii</sup>, to encourage them to support general emancipation. Owen's letter of July 23, 1862, was published in the *New York Evening Post* on August 8, 1862, and his letter of September 12, 1862, was published in the same newspaper on September 22, 1862. In another open letter that Owen wrote to President Lincoln on September 17, 1862, he urged the president to abolish slavery on moral grounds. Owen also believed that emancipation would weaken the Confederate forces and help the Union army win the war. On September 23, 1862, Lincoln issued a preliminary version of the Emancipation Proclamation. In *Emancipation is Peace*, a pamphlet that Owen wrote in 1863, he confirmed his view that general emancipation was a means to end the war. In *The Wrong of Slavery, the Right of Emancipation, and the Future of the African Race in the United States*, a report that Owen wrote in 1864, he also suggested that the Union should provide assistance to freedmen. In March 1863 he had been appointed to the Freedman's Inquiry Commission, which was a predecessor to the Freedmen's Bureau, which had been doing exactly that.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Harris (2020) p 22  
<sup>ii</sup> Donnachie (2011) p15  
<sup>iii</sup> Olusoga (2016) p25-26  
<sup>iv</sup> Donnachie (2000) p 117  
<sup>v</sup> Donnachie (2011) p 15  
<sup>vi</sup> Podmore (1906) pp263 & 275  
<sup>vii</sup> Donnachie p 180  
<sup>viii</sup> Donnachie p 255  
<sup>ix</sup> Donnachie p 122  
<sup>x</sup> Podmore p187  
<sup>xi</sup> Donnachie p 255  
<sup>xii</sup> Podmore p 339  
<sup>xiii</sup> Forsdick & Hogsbjerg (2017) p 129  
<sup>xiv</sup> Escott (2011) p 143  
<sup>xv</sup> Harrison (1969) p 167  
<sup>xvi</sup> Armytage (1971) pp 222-224  
<sup>xvii</sup> Owen (1874) p 298  
<sup>xviii</sup> See <https://faculty.evansville.edu/ck6/bstud/lincoln.html>

## REFERENCES

- Armytage, W. H. G. (1971) 'Owen and America' in Pollard, Sidney & Salt, John (eds.) *Robert Owen: Prophet of the Poor* (Macmillan)  
Donnachie, Ian (2000) *Robert Owen: Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony* (Tuckwell Press)  
Donnachie, Ian (2011) 'Robert Owen: Reputations and Burning Issues' in Thompson, Noel & Williams, Chris (eds.) *Robert Owen and his Legacy* (University of Wales Press)  
Escott, Margaret (2011) 'Robert Owen as a British Politician and Parliamentarian' in Thompson, Noel & Williams, Chris (eds.) *Robert Owen and his Legacy* (University of Wales Press)  
Forsdick, Charles & Hogsbjerg, Christian (2017) *Toussaint Louverture: A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions* (Pluto Press)  
Harris, Penelope (2020) *Robert Owen and the architect Joseph Hansom: An unlikely form of co-operation* (Brewin Books Ltd)  
Harrison, John F. C. *Quest for the New Moral World: Robert Owen & the Owenites in Britain and America* (Charles Scribner)  
Olusoga, David (2016) *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (Pan Books)  
Owen, Robert Dale (1874) *Threading My Way: Twenty Seven Years of Autobiography* (G.W. Careton & Co)  
Podmore, Frank (1906) *Robert Owen: A Biography* (George Allen & Unwin)