

THE GREATEST UTOPIAN

SOONER or later everybody gets back to Robert Owen.* Educationists and co-operativists, secularists and spiritualists, communists, trade-unionists and socialists, each in their degree find in him some portion of their original inspiration. He was a pioneer in every way. Yet it is doubtful whether he originated anything, and certain that nothing he proposed proved of permanent value.

Robert Owen was the outstanding figure of a time of transition. In his personal and business life he rode on the crest of the rising wave of the industrial revolution. He made fortunes with amazing facility and dissipated them as easily. Towards the end of his long life he was quite mad : it is doubtful if he was ever quite sane, in the sober two-and-two makes four, Man-in-the-Street sense. Possibly because of that—because of his one-eyed devotion to his one idea (or to that one of its many faces that happened to be uppermost in his mind at the moment) he had a bigger personal influence upon the history of his time than ten thousand sane men who need no psycho-analysis.

The central idea around which the whole of Owenism developed has come to be—the necessary qualifications and modifications made—so much of a commonplace that it is hard to recapture the mood in which it made such a revolutionary stir. It is none other than our old friend—"man's character is made *for* him and not *by* him."

Given this as a starting point—with the necessary emotional and traditional background to make it a delivering truth—and you get first his enthusiasm for education, then his model factory in New Lanark ; then his repudiation of the orthodox Evangelical morality of Free Will Rewards and Punishments, and their Supernatural Sanctions ; then the notion of Model Communities, model villages in which men and women purged of inculcated hates and customary greeds would co-operate for common well-being.

These proving difficult to realise in practice, it followed logically that he should initiate propaganda societies, and societies for the experimental exchange of Labour products,—incidental and occasional schemes of co-operation having the potentiality of growing into the Real Thing. Baffled again by the complications of the economic reactions whose cure had seemed so simple, the next logical step followed—the Grand National Union. That, in collapsing

*Robert Owen. By G. D. H. Cole (Ernest Benn, 1955.).

under the sheer weight of its own success, liberated the forces which found expression as Trade Unionism and Chartism.

But into these Owen could follow only haltingly and with misgiving. What mattered political reforms in a state composed of people whose characters had yet to be re-formed? What avail was a Trade Union which could only make the best of a fundamentally immoral system? There was nothing for it but to fall back upon the propaganda of the great idea—and absorbed in the idea, losing every day more and more patience with the old order, more and more tenacious in experimenting with ideal communities, more and more living in a world of his own, nature had her revenge, as she will, and he began to see visions and receive communications from the Next World—a world where all characters were well-formed and where Reason dominated to the total exclusion of all passion but benevolence.

Owen's Socialism (says G. D. H. Cole) has often been called "Utopian" and distinguished by that label from the "scientific" Socialism of later times. The description is largely true. Owen's view of human character, extraordinarily valuable as a corrective to the prevailing tendencies of his time, in that it emphasised the influence of environment against those who imputed misery to the poor as a crime, he pushed sometimes to the length of supposing instant regeneration to be the certain result of a change in environment. He was wrong; but he was not stating a falsehood, but overstating a truth. Again in his emphasis on the associative basis of Socialism, and the necessity of building up the Socialist faith as a consciousness of co-operative capacity among the workers, he made a contribution to Socialist thought which, long lost to sight, is only now being again appreciated. As a writer he was long-winded and often prosy; as a man of action he made so many mistakes that his great successes have been largely forgotten. But in the realm of ideas he was immensely the greatest figure in the early development of British Socialism, and I think in the whole of British Socialist history. It is easy to laugh at Owen's foibles, such as his relapse into Spiritualism in his old age; but it is quite impossible not to recognise him as a great pioneer of the faith which, all the world over, the workers are still struggling to make the basis of a new Social System.

We have said that Owen was an outstanding figure in a time of transition. His doctrine, and, still more, a part, at any rate, of his practice, was (and in the form which it has survived still is) a great vehicle of transition.

He was in and of the Industrial Revolution. He saw the coming of the big-power factory and the possibilities of mass production. He proved with small resources and in the teeth of opposition the possibility of all that the Levers, Cadburys, Fords and Rowntrees have with opulence and applause accomplished a century later. Seeing this and doing it he had no illusions about his place in the scheme. While he never quite lost the initial manager-school-master-director's attitude towards the workers, it is still his outstanding merit to have believed that the workers had anything in them at all. And when he helped to form the Grand National

Union he had all but reached the point, little though he realised it, of formulating the doctrine that the "emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself."

We get so busy at times formulating plans and programmes that it is always possible to lose the end in the contemplation of the means. In all the anxiety for the real revolutionary policy which our time begets we are apt to forget that which is the real positive core of this doctrine. Political Programmes, Plans of Action, all these are the weapons of attack—or the defence which is only a modified attack. Behind all these, if they are to be fruitful must be the recognition of the basic revolutionary fact that in the process of class-struggle the working-class itself becomes transformed.

Owen's weakness he shares with the whole brood of reformers who imagine that we have only to change one detail of Man's environment—to shut up the public-houses, to substitute bananas for beef, to enlarge the number of cubic inches of oxygen available in a factory, to give a few more votes or count them a different way—and lo! there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

His strength was his own. He saw the fundamental fact that none before him had seen—that the working class in mass had within them a co-operative capacity which once it became developed to the pitch of general consciousness could be made a foundation upon which to build a New Moral World.

It was left to Marx to grasp the truth clearly and see wholly that which Owen had seen only vaguely and in part. Yet because he saw it even in little just when he did, and gave his life in the teeth of every discouragement to preach it to all the world, there are few names we should honour more highly than that of Robert Owen.

THOS. A. JACKSON.

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