

## Robert Owen and the Psychological Monitor

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Socialism, as Robert Owen and his followers conceived it, was an experiment in human engineering. Believing that the ignorance and selfishness of traditional society could be replaced by a new moral world, they devised disciplinary practices that taught obedience to the dictates of reason, kindness, and cooperation. The most powerful weapon in this pedagogic armory was the “eye of the community.” An integral part of the infant school curriculum, as it was of community life, the moral force of approbation and disgrace that flowed from the public scrutiny of behavior proved highly effective in the psychological control of the population. This paper explores the origin and development of Owen’s “monitor” and demonstrates how it became a central tool in the educational schemes developed at Orbiston, the first socialist community established in Britain.

On the title page of *A New View of Society*, Robert Owen announces the fundamental axiom of his social philosophy.

Any character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by applying certain means; which are to a great extent at the command and under the control, or easily made so, of those who possess the government of nations (Owen 1967, 1: i).

The means to which Owen so confidently alludes had been perfected in his twenty-year effort to reform the habits of laborers working in his cotton mills. First in Manchester, during the 1790s, and then after the turn of the nineteenth century, in the industrial village of New Lanark, Owen proved himself one of the most successful managers in the textile business, revolutionizing manufacturing through the institution of standardized practices that recorded and controlled every aspect of the production process. Central to this scheme was a psychological regulator he named the “silent monitor,” a four-colored block of wood suspended above the machinery to publicly display each operative’s level of productivity. “Gradually the blacks were changed for blue, the blues for yellow, and the yellows for white (Owen 1967, 1:277).” Soldiering and theft were greatly reduced; productivity and profits soared. “Never perhaps in the history of the human race,” Owen boasted, “has so simple a device created in such a short period so much order, virtue, goodness, and happiness, out of so much ignorance error and misery (Owen 1967, 1:136).” He even claimed that a distinctive “expression of countenance” corresponded to the color shown, as under the public eye workers gradually learned to comply with the moral order (Owen 1967, 1:136).

The situation at New Lanark, where Owen owned the village in which the majority of his workers lived, provided for an even more extensive use of disciplinary

practices. Waste and ashes were collected, the streets cleaned, pigs and poultry banned, and houses washed and whitewashed regularly. Inspectors even checked for bugs! At 10:30 a curfew was imposed and the village was patrolled for drunks. First time offenders were fined, repeated intoxication led to expulsion. Owen even imposed financial penalties on men responsible for illegitimate births. One popular measure among the workers was the opening of a factory store, the first Co-op, where goods were sold at prices well below those of local retailers. If the villagers resented Owen’s intrusions in their private affairs, they nonetheless grew to accept his paternalism in exchange for higher wages and the real advantages of life at New Lanark.

But the complete transformation of human nature demanded even more radical measures. Workers and their families had to be educated at the showpiece of Owen’s industrial village, the Institute for the Formation of Character. Here classes were offered in a variety of practical and informative subjects; there were meeting rooms, a library, weekly concerts and dances. But the most remarkable feature of the Institute, which drew the attention of observers from across Europe, was the infant school. Believing that the child’s “temper or disposition is correctly or incorrectly formed before he attains his second year,” Owen gathered children just as soon as they could walk, convinced that by applying the right pedagogic methods at the time when the mind is most pliant, the young could be fashioned into moral, reasonable, and productive citizens (Owen 1967, 1:317). Adopting this concept, though not Owen’s social philosophy, many political and church leaders came to see the early education of working class children a panacea for the social ills of the new urban-industrial world. By the mid 1820s, under the energetic leadership of Samuel Wilderspin, the infant schools movement swept the country (McCann and Young 1982).

While these efforts to ensure the quality and efficiency of production made Owen one of the wealthiest industrialists of the day, it would be wrong to assume he was driven by a lust for capital. Unlike so many of his fellow manufactures—with whom he fought to institute laws regulating child labor—Owen was more concerned with the moral advancement of the workforce than the quest for profit. By 1813, under the influence of William Godwin and other radical thinkers, Owen published *A New View of Society*, expanding his ideas on the control of behavior from the sphere of industrial production to the formation of a more just community. Five years later, in *Report to County of New Lanark*, his thought matured into the advocacy of independent, self-supporting socialist communes, “villages of cooperation,” where, eschewing the capitalist economy and the perverse character traits it fostered, members would learn to think rationally and work for the common good (Owen, 1969).

### **Philosophical Antecedents**

Godwin, in particular, seems to have exerted a great deal of influence on Owen. In common with Priestly, though combining and even more strident critique of government (inherited from Rousseau), he combined the environmentalism of Holbach and Helvétius with the tradition of English dissent to formulate a moral necessitarianism in which mind and character would gradually be perfected by the inevitable force of truth and reason. The chief impediments to progress were institutions such as the church and aristocracy that created a dependent child-like population. But education was more powerful than government, and Godwin was convinced that freed from state control, schooling could shape all children into independent citizens able to act upon the central maxim of his utilitarian social philosophy, that personal well being coincides with the happiness of all.

Perhaps the greatest of ancient errors was the belief that people inherited different abilities according to their station in life, a notion cemented in the predestination thesis of the Calvinist worldview. Godwin was adamant "that the actions and dispositions of mankind are the offspring of circumstances and events, and not of any original determination that they bring into the world (Simon 1972, 32)." Reason, character, and virtue all flowed from the association of sensible impressions. There was "no essential difference between the child of the lord and of the porter," and if switched at birth, each would naturally learn to fulfill their appointed roles in life (Simon 1972, 33).

Priestly had interpreted the American and French revolutions as instruments of Providence, historical events that, by instituting radical principles, would bring about a time of peace and Christian piety. Godwin took this argument a step further. Extending the nonconformist commitment to free thought and independent action, he rejected all forms of political organization that placed private interests before public virtue – love of country, friends, even family were not to interfere with moral duty. He envisioned a society free of specialization and hierarchical divisions. Unencumbered by excessive wealth or poverty, people would live off the land in small face-to-face pastoral communities that promoted intellectual independence, and, through intimate social arrangements, moral dependence. The community was to behold the behavior of all in its gaze. "There is no terror" he asserted, "that comes home to the heart of vice, like the terror of being exhibited to the public eye . . . [and] no reward worthy to be bestowed upon eminent virtue but this one, the plain, unvarnished proclamation of its excellence in the face of the world." Sociability, not coercion, had to be the engine of social reform (Godwin 1793, 1:644).

It was not until the severe social distress of the late 1810s that Owen started to advocate the kind of economic and political arrangements proposed by Godwin. Painted as an atheist and a subversive by industrialists and property owners opposed to his factory reforms, Owen's plan to construct alternative, small scale agricultural communities in order to combat the widespread unemployment and famine

resulting from the failure of capitalism in the years after the Napoleonic Wars was widely received with a mixture of incredulity, ridicule, and fear.

Such responses were not surprising, for in addition to replacing money and the ethic of self-interest with labor notes and cooperation, Owen also proposed a radical revision of even the most basic social institution, the family. Openly opposed to the traditional marriage contract – which, he argued, reflected unions based on financial gain rather than bonds of affection – he painted the traditional home as a breeding ground of vice and self-interest. It was here that children

acquired all the most mean and ignorant selfish feelings that can be generated in the human character. The children within these dens of selfishness and hypocrisy are taught to consider their own individual family their own world, and that it is the duty of all within this little orb to do whatever they can to promote the advantage of all legitimate members of it. With these persons, it is my house, my wife, my estate, my children, or my husband . . . thus is every family made a little exclusive world seeking its own advantage, regardless, and to a great extent in opposition to all other families (Claeys 1989, 78).

### **Natural Pedagogy**

To secure genuine communal spirit, the whole of society had to become the child's family. As Plato had argued in the Republic for the education of the philosopher kings, so Owen demanded the separation of children from their parents in order to foster a truly social personality. Transferred to dormitories as soon as they could walk, the children of his utopia would be educated in infant, primary, and industrial schools that taught communitarian values, rational attitudes, and socially useful skills. Drawing upon the natural pedagogy developed by English followers of Rousseau, Owen designed a progressive curriculum that stressed play, sense learning, and scientific knowledge. Comparing discipline in the old and the new systems, he promised to substitute reason and kindness for ignorance and brutality. Punishment and emulation would be replaced by intrinsic motivation, and the meaningless memorization of words superseded by the goal of understanding the natural and social worlds. Above all, children would learn to live "without party." Free of class distinctions, they would discover that their personal well being coincided with the good of the community. The central site of these moral lessons was the playground, a miniature society free from the disciplinary constraints of the classroom, where every spontaneous act of pride, greed, and aggression could be monitored and corrected. Owen's goal was to develop an internal monitor, a social conscience that would guide the child from within -- and his instruments, the Lockian mechanisms of praise and disgrace. Shame, in particular was a powerful motivator. One of the most effective techniques Owen developed was to focus the power of the eye on offenders by having the entire class sit in judgment over their peers. As James Simpson, director of the Edinburgh Infant

School later explained some years later, children “rarely failed to take a just view of the matter and give a just punishment (Simpson, 1836, 239).”

Typical among Simpson’s many anecdotes was the story of J.H., a boy who, having spied another child’s lost penny under the stove, returned two hours later to claim his prize. When his crime came to light, J.H. was put on trial before the school. Humiliated before his friends, his embarrassment proved far more effective than the “few pats on the hand” to which he was sentenced. Asked some time later what he had learned from his experience, the boy replied that he had never stolen since. Why? Because “I listened to the *thing in my breast*, and that told me it was a crime (Simpson 1836, 241).”

Other socialists were quick to recognize the power of Owen’s disciplinary practices. Adapting the silent monitor to the classroom, T. E. Craig produced an abacus-like board of colored cubes that displayed every student’s behavior at the front of the classroom--and kept a register of these readings in his “Classometer.” Together, Craig reported, these devices “powerfully stimulated the pupil to moral and intellectual exertion and rectitude of conduct, by appealing to those faculties of the mind which are the best instruments in the hands of a judicious teacher for the rational development of the superior faculties (Stewart and McCann 1967, 1:162).” Simpson produced a similar register of daily behaviors tied to the activity of the student’s phrenological organs. And George Mudie, editor of the *Economist* (1821-1822) and a founder of the London Cooperative and Economical Society, explained how members earnest on psychological improvement would team up to monitor one another and admonish any faults that might endanger the “general harmony and mutual esteem and goodwill (Podmore 1924, 353).”

### **Orbiston: The First Society of Adherents to Divine Revelation**

Perhaps the most interesting application of Owen’s ideas on pedagogy and the formation of character was Orbiston, the first socialist community established in Britain. Situated 16 miles west of New Lanark, Orbiston drew 300 men, women, and children to live and work under Owen’s theories. Based upon the agricultural, architectural, economic, and educational principles laid out in Owen’s Report, the society’s leader Abram Combe formed the community around seven departments of industry and public works (Cullen 1971). The latest technology, scientific practices, and rational methods would ensure productivity and social order. Deep spade cultivation and other modern farming techniques would help produce food more efficiently; a clothing section would manufacture cheap tunics; and a common kitchen, dining room, laundry, and central heating system would avoid unnecessary duplication of domestic recourses. The non-profit general store would sell products for labor notes and a sense of solidarity would be fostered through open management, communal meeting halls, and integrated living spaces. As at New Lanark, however, the nucleus of system was the regulation of character. Once admitted adults would gradually be adapted

to the superior habits required for full membership, while children would be schooled from infancy according to the principles pioneered by Owen.

In contrast to Owen, Combe found a deep religious significance in this quest to fashion mind and character. He would engineer a truly Christian personality. Fusing Owenism and New Testament ethics into a liberal creed he provocatively named “The Doctrine of Divine Revelation (according to Reason),” Combe identified the laws of nature and morality as the instruments by which God’s will was to realized on earth. Christ was the first and greatest teacher of this secular gospel, and Owen its leading prophet. The key to human happiness was the elimination of all ideas, ceremonies, and practices that contained unnatural or irrational beliefs. Whatever was contradicted by experience or could not be understood by reason, had to be the product of the human imagination, a power most evident in religious myths and social traditions that distorted reality to match human desires. By ordering life according to the truths of reason and nature Orbiston would not only solve the problem of poverty, it would also demonstrate to the world “the utility and inestimable value of the practical precepts of Christianity.” It would, Combe insisted

demonstrate that UNION is better for all, than division and opposition is for any . . . that all children may be trained to prefer Temperance and Industry to Dissipation and Idleness, and Charity and Good-Will to anger and Animosity . . . that at least nine tenths of the misery that has so long afflicted humanity, is not a necessary consequence of the work of our Creator in our nature; formation; but that it proceeds from the removable Ignorances of Man, on account of which he has been induced to listen to the evidences of his own imagination, in preference to the knowledge which God has revealed to his sense and to his understanding (Combe 1823a, 61).

To enter Orbiston applicants had to accept eleven articles of agreement. The first indicated that no distinctions would be recognized “except those of Nature and which arise from superior habits and attainments (Combe 1825, 33).” Men and women, it stated, were to be regarded as having equal rights in all respects. In practice, however, Orbiston was very much a male dominated society. There were separate meetings and facilities for the two sexes, and Combe stipulated that women would only be allowed half the credit men received at the store. Old society, he charged, had corrupted female nature, training women “to live entirely secluded from their fellow creatures, in a state of sloth and negligence, and in the daily practice of many pernicious habits” and “irrational notions (*Register* 1827, Wednesday March 14th 1827, 30).”

Other articles explained that members had the freedom to work as and when they pleased; that everyone would determine the monetary value their own labor; that the education of the children would be paid for by the community; and that Orbiston would be run by elected general manger – seemingly styled on Owen -- who, while

not subject to the majority's wishes, could be removed if he or she lost the confidence of the group. Finally, article XI required that all applicants had "to give, to the Spirit of Religion, of Loyalty, and of Ambition, which exists in the Human Mind, the direction which Experience proves to be most conducive to the general welfare and happiness of Mankind (Combe 1825, 34)." Here was Combe's license to manufacture character in accord with the principles of the new system. The members of the Orbiston community would become *adherents* to divine revelation, as slowly but surely they learned to follow the dictates of reason and experience. And the method? "All that is requisite" in regulating human desire, Combe confidently asserted, was to let "individuals know the nature of the impressions which their conduct makes upon the community," or rather, as he later qualified his argument, "the rational portion of Society (Combe 1825, 47)." "The Eye of the Community, and the inward feeling produced, will soon either create a change of conduct, or make the individual retire from the Society (*Register, II*, Wednesday January 31st, 1827, 9-10)."

In his analysis of motives Combe demonstrated his willingness to infuse Owen's teachings with the hereditarian insights of phrenology – he was, after all the brother of Britain's leading advocate of the new science, George Combe. "The Phrenological mode of arranging the faculties" he argued, promised to revolutionize education, teaching children "in a few hours, to have a more correct idea of the powers of the human mind, than those 'philosophers' have been able to obtain, by their own system, devoted to this one object." Combe, *The Sphere for Joint Stock Companies*, 28-29) Yet his own classification of instincts remained somewhat heterodox and obviously colored by his overriding commitment to the plasticity of human nature. Under ambition he identified seven basic instincts (the love of approbation and desires for knowledge, propagation, nourishment, exercise, comfort, and accommodation). The key to happiness was to tie these natural impulses to the concrete realities of life, as revealed by experience, rather than the artificial desires manufactured by the imagination. Introducing his own version of the monitor, Combe explained how each member's character would be quantified on a scale of goodness. If positive and negative habits on a given trait balanced, a score of 4 would be awarded, yielding a composite of 28 for all seven instincts. This number would then be recorded and each individual ranked in the society. As a person's behavior improved a committee of peers would then vote to elevate his or her standing -- the same practice would also be adopted with children, rendering, Combe believed "all other rewards and punishments unnecessary (Combe 1825, 53)." At first a natural aristocracy would rule the community. But as character improved, and individuals rose in rank, a society of equals would emerge. The extent to which these procedures were followed is unclear, but there is ample evidence in the pages of the Orbiston Register to show that public praise and disgrace were frequently and effectively used to shape behavior in the community.

### **Discipline and Pedagogy**

Combe knew that the long-term future of the community rested with the education of the children. Aware of the old adage, that

*Youth, like the softened wax, with ease will take  
Those images which first impressions make*

he embedded the Owenite principle that infants should be separated from their parents at age 2 into the very structure of the Orbiston estate (*Register*, 24, Wednesday December 13th 1826, 180). On either side of the main building dormitories were to be constructed with accompanying rooms to house "the infant children of both sexes, and the females under 18 years" at one end, "the children above six years of age, and males under 18 years, at the other (Combe, 1825, 68)." Breaking down the family was both a pivotal and a controversial axiom of the community. In addition to promoting a sound constitution, "good tempers and habits," the curriculum would ensure facility "in reading, writing, and accounts . . . the elements of most useful sciences; including Geography and Natural History," and a practical knowledge of agriculture and domestic economy, plus "a trade useful for employment and the improvement of mental and physical powers ("Rules and Regulations" 1822, 53)." Children would be eased into the work of the community, an hour a week at age eight, two at nine, and so on until they reached full-time labor at fourteen – he did not think anyone should toil more than six hours a day. Finally, the child was to acquire a knowledge of himself and human nature, "so as to "form him into a rational being, and render him charitable, kind, and benevolent to all his fellow creatures." (*Register*, II, Wednesday March 14th, 1827; 30) As for pedagogy, Combe embraced the methods employed at New Lanark and promised to establish a Normal School in order that the science of character formation could be refined and developed for other communities.

Secure in the revealed truth of God's moral government, Combe was in no mood to wait for investors. On March 18th 1825, with the sale of stock just beginning, 100 men were hired to construct the main building using stone mined from a quarry just 500 yards from the house. The dining room, kitchen, bake house, and the majority of one wing were completed in only six months. Next came the erection of the workshop, a five floor complex situated close by on the banks of the river, containing space for blacksmiths, weavers, carpenters, wheelwrights, printers, painters, shoemakers, and tailors. As the work progressed Combe commenced publication of the weekly Register, to teach his doctrines to new members and provide the world an accurate account of his momentous experiment. The first issue, on November 10th, explained the meaning of the term Divine Revelation – distinguishing the truths of reason and sense from the contents of the Bible – and laid out the principles the community would follow. There was an account of the building's progress addressed to the London Cooperative Society and some discussion of drinking among the workers. The second number contained a light hearted dig at Hamilton's organ of Wit for his reaction to hearing that Orbiston had been nicknamed "Babylon" by the locals; an

exposition of how each individual could wield the principle of Divine Revelation as the “line and plummet” of truth; a justification for the Society’s name; and some discussion of the character of the people applying for residence. This was to become an important issue for Combe in the following weeks as he struggled to reconcile his principles with the obvious dangers of admitting applicants of low character and ability. Unwilling to blame anyone for the effects of the old system he simply refused to turn anyone away who professed a sincere desire for membership. Those that faked interest, he consoled himself, would soon leave as they found the eyes of the community upon them. More positively, he distilled his views on knowledge and character formation into a series of seven lessons so that adherents would understand where their interests lay and how they might bring their physical and mental desires under rational control. A Catechism was printed so that all who entered could assent to the community’s principles. If an applicant did not agree with a particular item, they could submit their reasons in writing, but given the background of the majority who came to Orbiston, it is doubtful that many took this step seriously. In the third number, published as the roofers were busy laying slates and the carpenters modeling the interior, Combe tackled the thorny issue of who was to pay for the ambitious educational plan laid out in the *Joint Stock* proposal, given that many would enter the society without children. His solution was to advance each child a loan repayable, with interest, through future labor within the community. This would this be a sound investment for friends of the experiment, and, he was certain, a small debt of perhaps six months of labor the rising generation would gladly pay for the good of the society.

By April, as first stage of the project neared completion, Combe dismissed the workers and opened Orbiston to anyone willing to help finish the construction and start life under the new system. This proved to be something of a mistake, for as the *Register* indicates, without proper training, residents were still struggling with the building a year later. Originally the plan had been to advertise for members, but as word of the site spread, people flooded to Orbiston on their own accord, and to Hamilton’s disgust, none were turned away. Combe himself recognized that most “had come to avoid the evils of the old system, rather than obtain the advantages of the new” (*Register*, 16, Saturday, August 19, 1826; 121). Some were physically incapable of hard work, others had no trade or useful skill. There was also great deal of confusion over the system of payment. At the end of the first week, for example, several new members approached Combe demanding payment for the week they had been allocated to organize their apartments. Calling a general meeting he explained that everyone was to join a department according to their talents and interests and everyone would be paid for the value of the labor they chose to perform. But a month on this system proved a disaster. After an initial burst of enthusiasm listlessness and discontent quickly pervaded the community; work went undone and, fueled by factional divisions, members started avoiding the dining rooms and communal spaces. At first Combe thought it best to wait until individuals came face to face with the

consequence of their actions, after all, that was how God governed the world. But after discussions with more orthodox Owenites within the society, he hit upon the idea of reorganizing Orbiston along military lines. The community, he reasoned, was rather like a group of raw recruits who needed to be drilled in squads and organized into companies before they could operate as a whole. But Combe’s new scheme did not get off the ground. With only a few squads formed, he overexerted himself digging in the fields and suffered a physical collapse. Forced to return to Edinburgh and the care of his brother Andrew for two weeks, he faced up to the task before him. The population was coarse, boisterous and plagued with revolting habits. Drinking and the use of tobacco were on the rise, and dunghills were appearing below windows, even though the proprietors had employed a local man to empty pots. Calling the population a herd of animals, the resident and proprietor Captain Robert O’Brian, wrote to Combe cautioning him that “*complete failure* was now inevitable, unless we dismissed a great proportion of the present inhabitants, and supplied their places with a selection of superior workmen.” (*Registrar*, 16, August 19th, 1826, 125.) Given these remarks, it is understandable why O’Brian was so annoyed when Combe publishing his letter in the *Register*. To make matters worse, property values had dropped in the slump of 1826, and Orbiston was mortgaged way beyond its value. Such conditions presented a severe test. But Combe did not waiver in his commitment. Orbiston would meet both challenges; reforming the character of the most retched and promoting the interests of the capitalist even in an economic recession.

Valuing union and mutual cooperation over the principle of equal distribution, Combe considered ways to stimulate members to work. His chance came when a number of tenets asked permission to establish an iron foundry. Believing it was inappropriate that they should sink their labor and capital into such a project without any opportunity of reward, Combe suspended the community’s rules and turned the group into an independent company where workers earned double stock from the profits of their labor. Not everyone was happy with the introduction of individual enterprise, but given the pressures on the community, Combe carried the day. The change was instantaneous. In a few weeks the industry and intelligence of group surpassed his fondest expectations. Similar plans were devised for other departments, and in short order the gardeners, shoemakers, printers, weavers, masons, and carpenters all had their own companies. By late August Combe was nearly ecstatic about the possibility of commercial success – the community would soon be able to afford holiday homes in Edinburgh and the Highlands, and workers might even retire at age 35. Recognizing that success still rested with the development of character, Combe redoubled his efforts to mold new citizens, only now he took a more piecemeal approach imploring sobriety and pleading with parents to curb the loud and boisterous behavior of their children. Combe was greatly aided in this endeavor by Catherine Whitwell, one of the teachers who had worked at the school in New Lanark. A committed Owenite with strong religious sentiments; she brought energy and

experience to the task of schooling the community's younger children. She also lectured on the Christian duty of parents, revealing to the Society that the entire history of vice and virtue could be accounted for by the character training individuals received by their seventh year. This was an important lesson. With one half of the building yet to be constructed, and parts of the existing wing still unfinished, many of Orbiston's 86 children were still forced to sleep in their parents' quarters. Those who were housed in the dormitories lacked adequate supervision: washing facilities were inadequate, and, according to later accounts, many were dressed in dirty or torn clothing. Add to this the problem of loud and rowdy games in the corridors and hallways, truancy and rebelliousness in the schools and it becomes obvious why, given the community's diminishing resources, education became such a pressing problem. Of great concern was the behavior of a few older boys whose unruly actions had been observed and reported by a correspondent from the *Glasgow Free Press*. These lads, Henry Kirkpatrick, the new editor the *Register* explained, were in the most unfortunate position of "having been born a little too soon." Because of its disorganized state, the community had done nothing to address all the bad habits they had acquired from their infancy and childhood in the old world. But now, as reason was developing, positive efforts were underway. Miss Whitwell had undertaken evening instruction in good habits and morals, "writing and arithmetic, geometry, drawing, music and dancing, geography, general history, etc.," and Alexander Campbell, a Glasgow carpenter who later joined the Ham Common Socialists, was superintending them during the day (Donnachie 1971, 28). Campbell reports that after explaining the essentials of order to twenty of the boys, they agreed to record all cases of misconduct in a book and elected superintendents to report on their behavior at each general meeting (*Register*, 24, Wednesday December 13, 1826). Their conduct, Campbell later reported, continued to improve. They met every Sunday to discuss the events of the previous week and the majority was gainfully employed learning useful trades. "So ardent were they in their proceedings," he cheerfully concluded, "that I am completely convinced that these boys, under proper management, will, in the course of a few years, be the most useful members of the community (*Register*, 25, Supplement, Wednesday December 27, 1826, 200.)" Every day, Kirkpatrick continued, brought new and exciting evidence that their great experiment in human nature was a resounding success. The "power of public opinion, so concentrated as it necessarily is under our present arrangements," was improving both young and old. Drunkenness, swearing, and smoking were all reduced; industriousness and virtue were on the rise. He was "very much inclined to think, that *no character whatever* could long resist the improving effects of *this manner of living together* (*Register*, 24, Wednesday December 13, 1826; 181.)"

Abram Combe, by now restricted to his bed in Edinburgh after a second collapse, also had reason to be hopeful. In his absence the community, under Hamilton's stewardship, had taken a radical turn. Crashing a meeting called to consider whether the joiners and carpenters should

form a company patterned after that of the foundry men, several of the more orthodox Owenites challenged the efficacy of policies that undermined the philosophy of the community. Defenders of individualism argued that "the minds of some members were not yet prepared to go the full length of the system" and that without the stimulus of profit it would be impossible to maintain productivity (*Register*, 24, Wednesday December 13, 1826; 181.). The Owenites responded that "the generous motive would always far surpass the selfish" and that if anyone were found remiss in his duty, the eyes of the whole community would be upon them (*Register*, 24, Wednesday December 13, 1826; 181.)." In the end collectivism won the day, and a proposal was accepted, with some opposition, that any surplus should be shared by all members, "according to the time occupied by each." Combined with the promise that expenditure would be trimmed and funds saved in order to purchase the community, the proprietors cautiously embraced the tenant's declaration. To prove their commitment to this new order, members had to assent to Owen's doctrine that "character is formed for and not by the individual" and meet the test of re-election in a secret ballot. While nobody was ostracized in this process, this bloodless revolution was not without its wounds. Combe also supported the move to equal distribution, but thought it rather precipitous, and cautioned the group not to force its will on the approximately one-third of the Society who opposed the new system. They had to learn the value of this principle for themselves. Even so, he was insistent that greater order be brought to the enterprise and, extending his earlier notion of squads, instituted a system of supervision, which broke all work down into divisions and branches. In weekly meetings directors and superintendents would report on productivity, expenditure, and the performance of all the workers.

Anger with the new regime and the course of the community's affairs boiled to the surface when the outspoken O'Brian submitted a fiery letter to the *Register*. Published in the first issue of the New Year, he declared himself and his friends fundamentally opposed to equal distribution (a scheme, he charged, that had been instituted to profit the elite who directed the community), the selection of tenants, and the care and education of children. He also resented being "impressed, into a Society under the nick-name of Adherents to Divine Revelation, where nothing was meant, than natural religion, to the exclusion of revelation, as received amongst mankind (*Register*, II, 262, Wednesday January 17th, 1827, p. 2.)." Evidently considering himself a cut above the "brawny labourers" whose idle ways, coarse language, and rude manners had subverted the entire experiment, he feared for the mind and morals of his children. Indeed, education was dear to O'Brian's heart. Without casting any aspirations on Catherine Whitwell, "whose zeal, disinterestedness, good feeling, perseverance, and talents" were beyond question, he deplored the lack of organization and investment in what was after all the community's most important division (*Register*, II, 262, Wednesday January 17th, 1827, p. 2.). O'Brian had a bold solution. Establish a boarding school, "a manufacture of mind," for between one and two hundred fee paying students. The money generated would then fund all the

expenses of rearing Orbiston's children, including a "school of labour" – he had no "objection to the amalgamation of the two classes of children, as soon as their habits of cleanliness and acquirements justified such mixture (*Register*, II, 262, Wednesday January 17th, 1827, 5.)." Both could be run by the same teachers, and he had in mind a fully qualified assistant for Miss Whitwell and two gentlemen from Switzerland who had studied with Pestalozzi for 9 and 12 years. The sticking point, he explained, was that to accommodate the new inmates, the Society's children would have to vacate their dormitory and sleep in the attic until the new wing of the building was complete. Combe, who admitted his neglect of the children while he struggled to assure the economic security of the Society claimed that he "felt a considerable aversion to hire teachers at a high salary, both because our funds required to be managed with economy, and because I thought that men who required to be tempted with money to engage in such an undertaking, were by this very circumstance disqualified for this office (*Register*, II, 28, Wednesday February 14th, 1827, 18.)." It should be noted however, that the Society did have several other paid employees, including the director of the Agricultural department. As for O'Brien's views on the admission of tenants, Combe responded that it was *he* who was unacceptable. Orbiston had been established "to Banish Poverty and Vice, and to ascertain to what height the lowest of the working classes could be raised by their own industry, under a system of Justice and Equity." *Register*, II, 28, Wednesday February 14th, 1827, 15. How could this object be achieved if he was forced to "look upon a poor or even vicious individual as unworthy of admission?" *Register*, II, 28, Wednesday February 14th, 1827, 15. "I am still compelled to think I acted judiciously in rejecting none of the applicants," he concluded. *Register*, II, 28, Wednesday February 14th, 1827, 15.

Such public battles did not help heal the divisions within the community, which as time passed, appear to have solidified into three distinct camps: the Owenites who ruled the management committee and through the press controlled the official voice of the community; the defenders of individualism, who grew increasingly unhappy with the new order, its methods of control, and its austerity measures; and the laborers, who less concerned with ideological struggles, remained in the community to meet their immediate needs. Orbiston limped along. Generally reports were optimistic. The *Register* boasted of the Society's increasing refinement – it theatre, coral music society, and public lectures. With over a thousand pear and apple trees planted, a dairy and piggery established, the agricultural department proudly demonstrated that it could easily support 100 families on 300 acres of land. The press even apologized for its failure to publish the *Register* due to a backlog of orders. When after months of suffering, Abram Combe finally succumbed on August 11th, 1827 he died believing that Orbiston "was established beyond the point of failure (Podmore 1924, 371)." "If *any* epitaph is written on me," he pleaded, "may it simply be . . . THAT HIS CONDUCT IN LIFE MET THE APPROBATION OF HIS OWN MIND AT THE HOUR OF HIS DEATH." *Orbiston Register*, II, 34 Wednesday

September 19th, 1827., 69. Owen, who was visiting from New Harmony, arrived at Combe's bedside just six hours later.

With William Combe now in charge of finances, it became evident that hefty interest payments left little profit with which to pay off the community's £40,000 debt. The foundry, for example, reported only a small surplus of £232. Fueled by O'Brien's warnings that the community was on the verge of breaking up several proprietors refused to meet their financial obligations, and funds became scarce. In March William Combe wrote to Hamilton complaining of the Society's lack of funds. Without an immediate infusion of cash, he warned, "the consequences may be very serious (Donnachie 1971, 156)." Money was advanced to carry the group until harvest time, but was evidently either insufficient or poorly managed. As gloom spread, the Orbiston's problems were further exacerbated by the rise of soldiering, the reporting of false hours, and the pilfering of food from the Society's storehouse – presumably given or sold to family and friends in the locality. Preaching more self-denial and generous conduct the *Register* asked how, under such burdens, the group could ever hope to create stock? Workers started to lose confidence in the enterprise, and the value of the stock plummeted – Robert Hicks left selling his shares at 50% of their original value. As austerity measures were increased and the prospect of acquiring any real wealth diminished, life under the eye of the community proved too much for many residents. Positive till the end, the final issue of *Register* followed George Combe's "Memoir of Mr. Abram Combe" with a bucolic picture of residents eagerly and cheerfully reaping in the corn. There was with none "of that brutal swearing and obscene jesting which are most commonly so disgusting in the in the harvest field," but a polite and intelligent discourse "on interesting topics related to the community (*Register*, II, 34, Wednesday September 19th, 1827, 71.)." The whole tenor of the place had changed. Men, women, and children all showed striking improvements in character. Where once residents spent their Sundays idling in their rooms, they now found on the benches clean and well dressed, quietly "reading books or contemplating the beauties of the scenery, being evidently pleased and satisfied with the circumstances in which they are placed (*Register*, II, 34, Wednesday September 19th, 1827, 71.)."

The whole affair finally came to a head as the Society defaulted upon its mortgage payments and the Scottish Union Insurance Company elected to call in its £16,000 loan. This meant the immediate liquidation of the company and all its assets. Just three months after Abram's death, an eviction note was served to the residents. Taking charge of the auction, George Combe sold the community's produce and machinery without reserve, and place the building a property up for sale. Of little use to other manufacturers, Orbiston remained on the market for over two years until it was purchased by a neighboring landowner for only £15,000. A longtime opponent of the experiment, she immediately had the building razed. Not a stone remains to mark the site. Several members of the foundry company wound up in debtor's prison and William Combe fled to America, where as his brother George later put it, "he

displays the same want of energy on the other side of the Atlantic that formed so striking a feature of his character on this (Cullen 1971, 324).”

In 1841 Owen presented *A Development of the Principles and Plans on Which to Establish Self-Sustaining Home Colonies*. As his subtitle indicated, the father of socialism was still convinced that “Ignorance, Poverty, and Crime” could be permanently removed and the material benefit of all classes assured, “by giving a Right Application to the now Greatly Misdirected Powers of the Human Faculties (Owen 1841, app 1).” To support his argument, Owen included in his appendix a chapter from George Combe’s *Moral Philosophy* (Combe, 1846). Owen clearly approved of Combe’s analysis of the Old World – his critique of Capitalism and the social institutions that brutified the minds of the population. Turning men and women into “labouring animals” was hardly God’s plan for humankind. Throughout history, Combe observed, certain individuals have glimpsed a more natural state in which justice and benevolence could reign. Plato’s *Republic* was perhaps the first example of such a utopia, others had been envisioned by leaders of religious sects, such as George Rapp of the Harmonites in Indiana. More recently, Owen had drawn on the social sciences in his efforts to engineer the same end. Blessed with favorable conditions and a strong leadership that ensured complete solidarity to religious principles, the Harmonites had enjoyed great prosperity and the delights of life governed by the moral and rational faculties. Owen’s scheme proved less successful. By opening his doors to all who professed his principles he admitted men and women who were constitutionally incapable of acting “in accordance with the dictates of the moral sentiments and intellect (Owen, 1841, app 7: 7).” The same was true of Abram’s experiment. Without “efficient direction or superintendence . . . and no habitual supremacy of the moral and intellectual powers . . . to animate [operatives] with a love of the public good . . . the result was melancholy and speedy.” (Owen 1841, app 1:9) Combe reiterated this conclusion in his private correspondence. “The great error in Orbiston” he told William, “has been the putting the cart before the horse (Gibbon 1878, 1:206).” “To produce union and cooperation there must be harmony of principle,” and this demanded “highly enlightened and moralized” individuals (Gibbon 1878, 1:206).” A person of “great and commanding mind, who is thoroughly persuaded of its truth he,” could hold individuals together by strong religious enthusiasm, but this was not Abram’s nature. (Gibbon 1878, 1:206). There was a great difference

between feeling in favor of union and co-operation, and intellectually understanding the principles of human nature and perceiving how to suit external circumstances to its wants. I have considered our late lamented brother Abram, and the founder of Orbiston more in the first condition than the last. In short, as reason and benevolence were to form the bonds of union, the establishment should have been delayed until, by education or by books, a sufficient number of individuals had been prepared -- by the ascendancy of

these principles in their minds – for carrying their principles into practical effect (Gibbon 1878, 1:206).

“A higher, purer, and happier state of society” was possible if, as “the success of Mr. Rapp” demonstrated “the animal propensities [could] be controlled by the strength of moral and religious principle (Owen 1841, app 1:10).” Owen agreed, pointing to the success of 15 other communities in North America that had banished private property. Combe was more circumspect. Before submitting to “poetical fancies” on the basis of “this almost solitary example,” he suggested a careful examination of human nature to determine “whether such capacities were “laying dormant within us (Owen, 1841, app 1:10).” His conclusion was less optimistic. Men and women would advance to this moral end, but it would take generations lived in accord with the laws of inheritance and exercise. Nonetheless, it was to Owen’s disciplinary pedagogy, suitably infused with phrenological theory and his brother’s practical Christianity that Combe and his co-worker, James Simpson, turned in the effort to promote this happy state. Together with Samuel Wilderspin, Thomas Wyse, William Rathbone, and other members of the prestigious Central Society, Combe and Simpson spearheaded the national campaign for infant schooling and a secular system of national education that swept the country in the decade after the debacle at Orbiston. But that is another story (Tomlinson 2001).

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