

Topic Page: [Owen, Robert \(1771 – 1858\)](#)

Summary Article: **Owen, Robert**

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1771–1858, British social reformer and socialist, pioneer in the cooperative movement. The son of a saddler, he had little formal education but was a zealous reader. At the age of 10 he began working in the textile business and by 1794 had become a successful cotton manufacturer in Manchester.

In 1800, Owen moved to New Lanark, Scotland, where he had bought, with others, the mills of David Dale (whose daughter he married). There he reconstructed the community into a model industrial town with good housing and sanitation, nonprofit stores, schools, and excellent working conditions. Mill profits increased. The New Lanark experiment became famous in England and abroad, and Owen's ideas spread. He instigated the reform that resulted in the passage of the Factory Act of 1819—a watered down version of his proposals, but still a landmark in social reform. He also proposed the formation of self-sufficient cooperative agricultural-industrial communities. One such community, called New Harmony, was established (1825) in Indiana but failed after numerous disagreements among its members.

Professing a disbelief in religion (1817) and calling for the transformation of society rather than its reform (1820), Owen gradually lost much of his former upper-class support but was embraced by the working classes. After his return (1829) from the United States he became involved in the trade union movement and advocated the merging of unions with cooperative societies. Soon, however, the government took repressive action, and many workers responded by proclaiming the need for class struggle. Believing in the peaceful reordering of society, Owen ended his association with trade unionism and spent the last 25 years of his life writing and lecturing on his beliefs on education, marriage, and religion. Throughout his life Owen based his social programs on the idea that individual character is molded by environment and can be improved in a society based upon cooperation. Chief among his extensive writings are *New View of Society; or, Essays on the Formation of Character* (3 vol., 1813–14), *Report to the County of Lanark* (1821), and his autobiography (1857–58, repr. 1970).

See biographies by F. Podmore (1907, repr. 1971), G. D. H. Cole (3d ed. 1966), R. H. Harvey (1949), and M. I. Cole (1953, repr. 1969); studies by A. Morton (1962); J. Butts, ed. (1971), and R. G. Garnett (1973).

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