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Robert Owen II

Lead: Beginning in 1800, Welsh social reformer and industrialist, Robert Owen, tried to improve the lives of his Scottish mill workers. It was a great success that led to a great failure at the same time.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Entrepreneur, radical philosopher, educator, and visionary Robert Owen made a fortune in the cotton industry. Owen believed that improved living and working conditions for his employees would

bring them out of poverty and increase their overall productivity and his profits. This directly refuted the classical economists, particularly David Ricardo, whose so-called “iron law of wages,” asserted that raising wages did no good. If you raise pay and improve shop and living conditions, workers get optimistic and just have more children, which means more workers and less money to pay them. Wages just go back down.

At first workers in the New Lanark mills in Scotland were suspicious of Owen, and his partners were worried about their investment. Owen, though, was determined to improve conditions. He built new houses for his workers, opened a

school (even for very young children) at a time when working class children did not attend school. He emphasized character development and saw value in music and art.

Though his mills prospered significantly and made him a fortune, his ideas were too radical for his generation. Parliament did pass the Factory Act of 1819 - in which children could not work until they were 9 years old and then only for 12 hours a day. It was a start, but far less than Owen had in mind.

The success of the New Lanark mills brought Owen international fame as did his book, *New View of Society* which outlined his utopian

vision of a social order based on “villages of cooperation” - 800 to 2,500 members who collectively owned property and shared responsibility for agriculture and industry. Owens tried out his ideas in America. He financed a community based on his concepts, but the experiment at New Harmony, Indiana was a failure. Robert Owens continued to write and lecture until his death in 1858. His ideas influenced international cooperative movements, labor unions and socialism.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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<http://robert-owen.midwales.com/rowen/index.html>

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