

Robert Owen

Co-operative Memorial at Newtown

The Unveiling Ceremony on July 12th 1902

Address ... by Mr G J Holyoake

Published by
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AT NEWTOWN.**

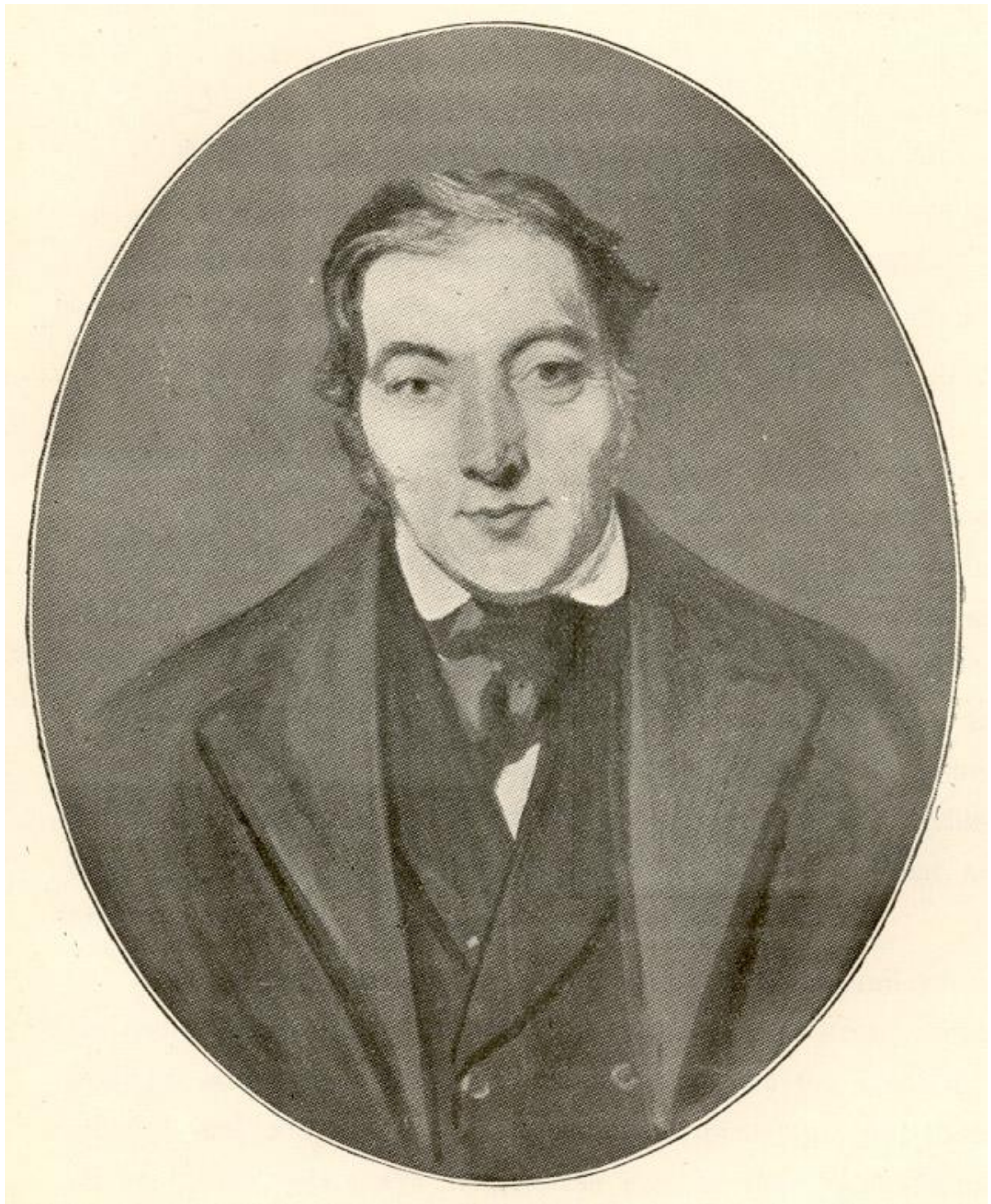
The Unveiling Ceremony

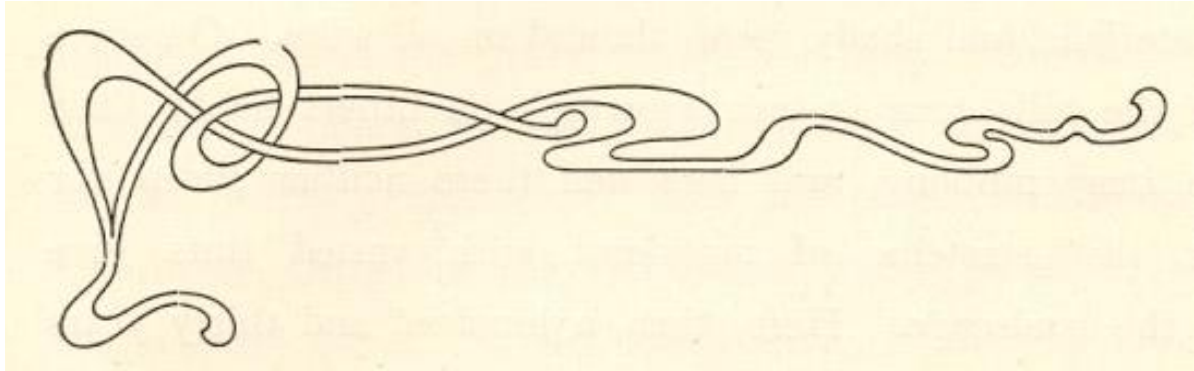
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ADDRESS . . .

By Mr. G. J. HOLYOAKE.

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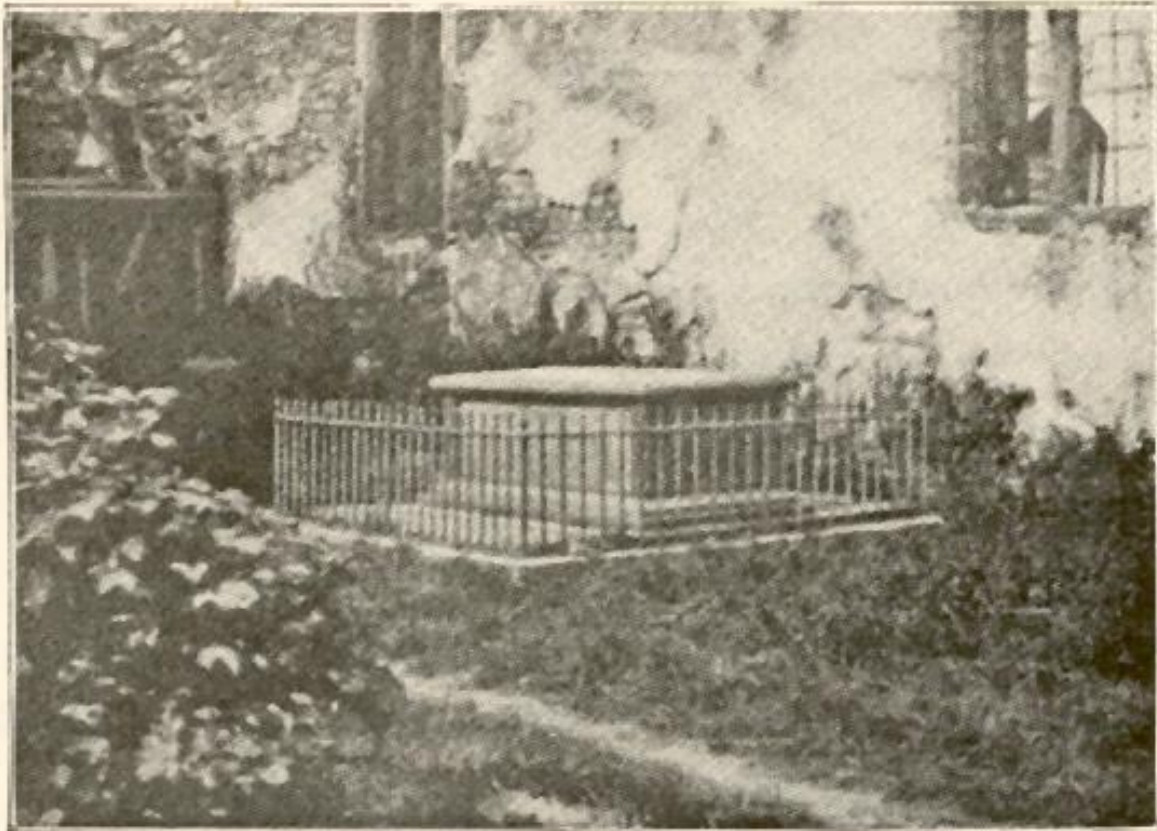


INTRODUCTION.

(Reprinted from the Co-operative News of July 19th, 1902).

SATURDAY, July 12th, 1902, will live long in the memory of the inhabitants of Newtown. Seldom, if ever, have they witnessed such a ceremony as was enacted on that day, and seldom has the quiet peaceful town been awakened to such enthusiasm. Forty-four years ago, in the little churchyard by the river side, the remains of Robert Owen were laid to rest. On Saturday last, the co-operators of the United Kingdom did honour to the memory of the founder of their movement by the unveiling of a monument over his grave, under the shadow of what are now but the grey ruins of the sacred edifice.

Nestling cosily in the Severn Valley, some fifteen miles from the source of the river, Newtown, with its one main street, viewed from the surrounding hills, looks little more than the smallest of villages, and one wonders where its 7,000 inhabitants put themselves. Some years ago it was the seat of the Welsh flannel trade, but the craze for cheapness has well-nigh crushed the trade out of existence, and the few mills in the vicinity now manufacture tweeds, dress goods, and shawls. The scenery in the district is characteristic of the Principality. Rippling brooks, rugged waterfalls, and shady glens abound on all sides. On some, portion of the hills corn is seen growing; on others hardy little sheep are busy nibbling, and here and there neither sheep nor corn, but vast stretches of moorland, with varied tints, give colour to the landscape. Here, then, a hundred and thirty years ago, Robert Owen, the social philosopher was born; here forty-four years ago he was laid to rest, and here on Saturday, July 12th, 1902, co-operators from all parts of the country met to honour his memory. The house where Owen was born is now a stationer's shop, and the hotel in which he died is but a few doors removed from it. The stone over his grave in the old churchyard was a very plain structure, and the spot presented a very desolate and deserted appearance. Now all is changed, and henceforth Wales will have something worthy of the man to remind her of one of her noblest sons.



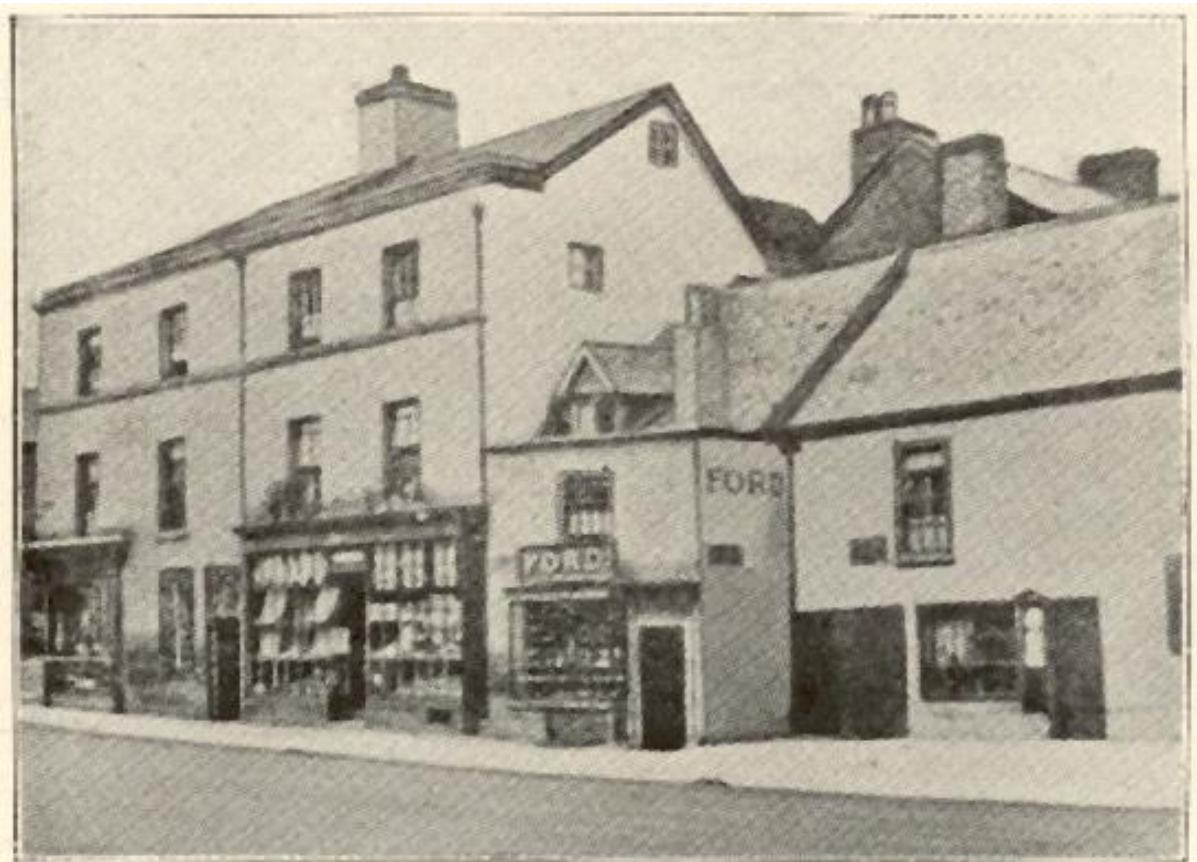
THE OLD TOMBSTONE OF ROBERT OWEN IN NEWTOWN CHURCHYARD.

The ceremony in the churchyard was an impressive one. Gathered round the grave, under the trees, were not only representative co-operators from all parts of the country, but hundreds of the people of Newtown, from the oldest inhabitant who remembered Owen, to the youngsters who "gazed in wonder as the wonder grew." Conspicuous amongst all was the venerable and picturesque figure of Mr. G. J. Holyoake, Owen's only surviving friend and co-worker. Mr. Holyoake looked younger, and spoke in a clearer voice than ever, and his address was a fine, eloquent tribute to his "old master." The weather was everything that could be desired for an open-air ceremony, the heat of the sun being tempered by a cooling breeze.

THE UNVEILING CEREMONY.

The unveiling ceremony was held at half-past two o'clock. Thanks to the kindness of Sir Pryce and Lady Pryce-Jones, a quantity of lovely cut flowers was sent from the Dolerw gardens to decorate the grave, and these were tastefully arranged by the gardener (Mr. Shute) inside the memorial. Mr. Shillito (chairman of the Owen Memorial Committee) presided, and was supported on the platform by Mr. and Mrs. Holyoake, Mr. and Mrs. Holyoake-Marsh, Mr. E. O. Greening (London), Mr. Murphy (New Lanark, representing 'Scotland), Mr. J. C. Gray, Mr. A. Deans (Woolwich), Mr.

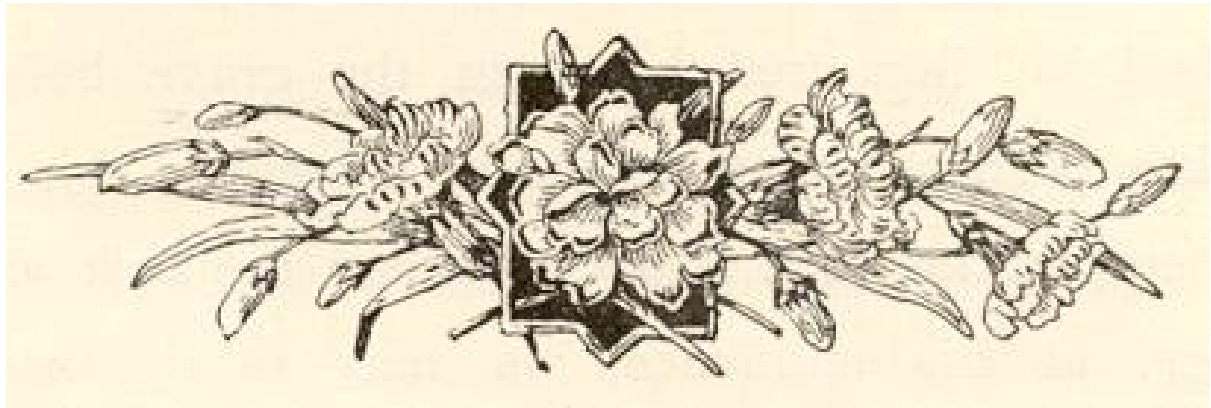
R. Halstead (Leicester), Mr. C. Vaughan (Plymouth), Mr. G. Woodhouse (Derby), Mr. R. Warne (Gloucester), Mr. J. Price (Blaina), Mr. Albert Toft, R.A.M. (sculptor of the Owen Memorial), Mr. D. Randell (ex-M.P. for West Glamorgan), Sir Pryce Pryce-Jones, Colonel Pryce-Jones, M.P., Mr. Hugh Lewis (High Sheriff of Montgomeryshire), Mr. Edward Powell (solicitor), Rev. Canon Williams, Mr. Edward Jones (chairman of the Urban Council), Mr. H. Fisher (president, Newtown Society), Mr. F. C. Evans (manager, Newtown Society), and Mr. W. Jenkins (secretary, Newtown Society).

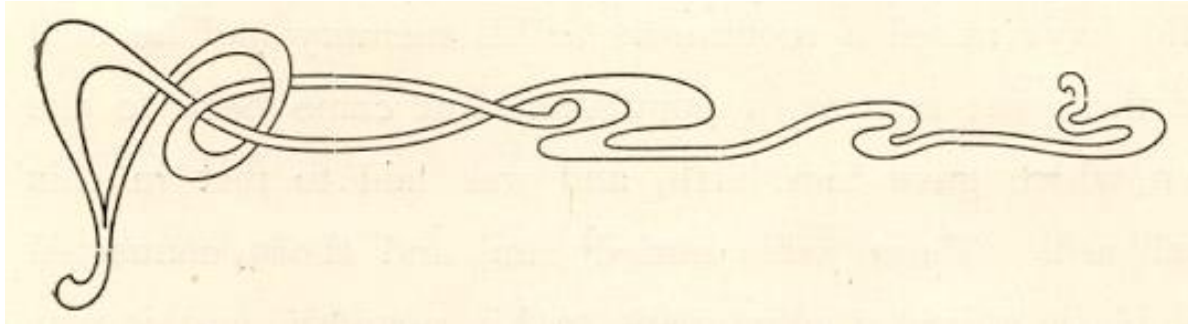


HOUSE WHERE ROBERT OWEN WAS BORN.

The Chairman said they were assembled there that beautiful afternoon to honour a distinguished Welshman, who was placed in his grave forty-four years ago. The work that he did during his long lifetime had found an echo in one way - in the organisation of the co-operative movement in connection with the working classes, not only in England and Wales, but throughout the United Kingdom and in every civilised nation of the globe. Success had attended the great principles and policies which Owen wished to inculcate long after he had passed away. And after his great work he came back to die. Owen loved the Welsh people and the place of his birth. He had no desire to spend his remaining days among those of wealth and resource, who would have raised a monument to his memory had he died in one of the great centres of

population, but came back to the little town which gave him birth, and was laid to rest in this old churchyard. Those who buried him, and those connected with this place, raised a monument to his memory, and it was well said of him that his grave was "too cold and damp for a soul so warm and true." The co-operators had now improved that memorial, and their work he would now call upon Mr. Holyoake to unveil.





MR. G. J. HOLYOAKE'S ADDRESS.

MR. G. J. HOLYOAKE said:- We come not "to bury Caesar" - but to praise him. It is now recorded in historic pages, that "Robert Owen was the most conspicuous figure in the early part of the last century." ["Robert Owen" by Leslie Stephen, National Dictionary of Biography] We are here at the commencement of another century to make the first commemoration that national gratitude has accorded him.

Being the last of the "Social Missionaries" appointed in 1841 to advocate Mr. Owen's famous "New Views of Society"; and being the only survivor of his disciples, who forty-four years ago laid his honoured bones in the grave before us, the distinction has been accorded to me of unveiling this Memorial. As the contemporaries of a public man are the best witnesses of his influence, or his eminence, we may recall that Southey described him as "one of the three great moral forces" of his day. There is rarity in that praise, for there are still a hundred men of force to one of "moral" force.

Do we meet here to crown the career of a man unremarkable in the kingdom of thought, or without the genius of success? It is for us to answer these questions. It is said by parrot-minded critics that Owen was "a man of one idea," whereas he was a man of more ideas than any public man England knew in his day. He shared and befriended every new conception of moment and promise, in science, in education, and government. His mind was hospitable to all projects of progress; and he himself contributed more original ideas for the conduct of public affairs than any other thinker of his generation. It was not the opulence of his philanthropy but the versatility of his ideas and interests which led members of our Royal Family to preside at public meetings for him, brought monarchs to his table, and gave him the friendship of statesmen, of men of science and philosophy, throughout Europe and America. No other man ever knew so many contemporaries of renown.

Because some of his projects were so far reaching that they required a century to mature them, onlookers who expected them to be perfected at once, say he "failed in whatever he proposed." While the truth is he succeeded in more things than any public man ever undertook. If he made more promises than he fulfilled, he fulfilled more than any other public man ever made. Thus, he was not a man of "one idea"

but of many. Nor did his projects fail. The only social Community for which he was responsible was that of New Harmony, in Indiana; which broke up through his too great trust in uneducated humanity - a fault which only the generous commit. The communities of Motherwell and Orbiston, of Manea, Fen, and Queenwood in Hampshire were all undertaken without his authority, and despite his warning of the adequacy of the means for success. They failed, as he predicted they would. Critics, skilled in coming to conclusions without knowing the facts, impute these failures to him.

The Labour Exchange was not Mr. Owen's idea, but he adopted it, and by doing so made it so successful that it was killed by the cupidity of those who coveted its profits. He maintained - when nobody believed it - that employers who did most for the welfare of their workpeople, would be the greatest gainers. Owen did so, and made a fortune by it. Was not that success?

A co-operative store was a mere detail of his factory management. Now they over-run the world. Have they not succeeded? We assembled here can answer for that.

He bought - and worked up the first bale of cotton imported into England, thus practically founding the foreign cotton trade. Will anyone say that has not answered?

He was the first to advocate that eight hours a day in the workshop was best for industrial efficiency. The best employers in the land are now of that opinion. He did not fail there.

Who can tell the horrors of industry which children suffered in factories at the beginning of the last century? Were not the Factory Acts acts of mercy? The country owed them to Robert Owen's inspiration. They saved the whole race of workers from physical deterioration. Were these Acts failures? Millions of children have passed through factories since Owen's day, who if they knew it (and their parents, too), have reason to bless his name.

He was the first who looked with practical intent into the kingdom of the unborn. He saw that posterity - the silent but inevitable master of us all - if left untrained may efface the triumphs, or dishonour, or destroy the great traditions of our race. He put infant schools into the mind of the world. Have they been failures?



THE MEDALLION PORTRAIT OF OWEN AT THE
BACK OF THE MONUMENT.

He, when it seemed impossible to anyone else, proposed national education for which now all the sects contend. Has that proposal been a failure? In 1871, when the centenary of Owen's birth came round, we asked Prof. Huxley to take the chair. He wrote, in the midst of the struggle for the School Board's Bill, saying: "It is my duty to take part in the attempt which the country is now making to carry into effect some of Robert Owen's most ardently-cherished schemes. I think that everyone who is compelled to look closely into the problem of popular education, must be led to Owen's conclusions that the infants' school is, so to speak, the key of the position. Robert Owen," Huxley says, "discerned this great fact, and had the courage and patience to work out his theory into a practical reality. That" (Huxley declares) "is his claim - if he had no other - to the enduring gratitude of the people."



THE BRONZE PLAQUE, SYMBOLICAL OF THE LIFE OF OWEN.

Huxley knew that Owen was not a sentimental, speculative, or barren reformer. He was for submitting every plan to experiment, before advising it. He carried no dagger in his mouth, as many reformers have done. He cared for no cause that reason could not win. There never was a more cautious innovator, a more practical dreamer, or a more reasoning revolutionist.

Whatever he commended he supported with his purse. It was this that won for him confidence and trust, given to no compeer of his time. When 80,000 working men marched from Copenhagen Fields to petition the Government to release the Dorchester labourers, it was Mr. Owen they asked to go with them at their head.

It was he who first taught the people the then strange truth that Causation was the law of nature and of mind, and unless we looked for the cause of an evil, we might never know the remedy. Every man of sense in Church and State acts on this truth now, but so few knew it in Owen's day that he was accused of unsettling the morality of the world. It was the fertility and newness of his suggestions, as a man of affairs, that gave him renown, and his influence extends to us. This memorial before us would itself grow old, were we to stay to describe all the ideas the world has accepted from Owen. I will name but one more, and that the greatest.

He saw, as no man before him did, that environment is the maker of men. Aristotle, whose praise is in all our Universities, said "Character is Destiny." But how can character be made? The only national way known in Owen's day was by prayer and precept. Owen said there were material means, largely unused, conducive to human improvement. Browning's prayer was - "Make no more giants, God; but elevate the race at once." This was Owen's aim, as far as human means might do it. Great change can only be effected by unity. But

Union without knowledge is useless;
Knowledge without union is powerless.



THE UNVEILING CEREMONY.

Then what is the right knowledge? Owen said it consisted in knowing that people came into the world without any intention of doing it; and often with limited capacities, and with disadvantages of person, and with instinctive tendencies which impel them against their will, and which disqualifications they did not give themselves. He was the first philosopher who changed repugnance into compassion, and taught us to treat defects of others with sympathy instead of contempt, and to remedy their deficiency, as far as we can, by creating for them amending conditions.

Dislike dies in the heart of those who understand this, and the spirit of unity arises. Thus instructed good-will becomes the hand-maid of co-operation, and co-operation is the only available power of industry. Since error arises more from ignorance of facts than from defect of goodness, the reformer with education at command knows no despair of the betterment of men. This was the angerless philosophy of Owen, which inspired him with a forbearance that never failed him, and gave him that regnant manner which charmed all who met him. We shall see what his doctrine of environment has done for society, if we notice what it began to do in his day, and what it has done since.

Men perished by battle, by tempest, by pestilence, Faith might comfort, but it did not save them. In every town, nests of pestilence co-existed with the churches, who were concerned alone with worship. Disease was unchecked by devotion. Then Owen asked, "Might not safety come by improved material condition?" As the prayer of hope brought no reply, as the scream of agony, if heard, was unanswered, as the priest, with the holiest intent, brought no deliverance, it seemed prudent to try the philosopher and the physician.

Then Corn Laws were repealed, because prayers fed nobody. Then parks were multiplied because fresh air was found to be a condition of health. Alleys and courts, were begun to be abolished-since deadly diseases were bred there. Streets were widened, that towns might be ventilated. Hours of labour were shortened, since exhaustion means liability to epidemic contagion. Recreation was encouraged, as change and rest mean life and strength. Temperance - thought of as self-denial - was found to be a necessity, as excess of any kind in diet, or labour, or pleasure means premature death. Those who took dwellings began to look, not only to drainage and ventilation, but to the ways of their near neighbours, as the most pious family may poison the air you breathe unless they have sanitary habits.

Thus, thanks to the doctrine of national environment which Owen was the first to preach - Knowledge is greater; Life is longer; Health is surer; Disease is limited; Towns are sweeter; Hours of labour are shorter; Men are stronger; Women are fairer; Children are happier; Industry is held in more honour, and is better rewarded; Co-operation carries wholesome food and increased income into a million homes where they were unknown before, and has brought us nearer and nearer to that state of society which Owen strove to create - in which it shall be impossible for men to be depraved or poor. Thus we justify ourselves for erecting this Memorial to his memory, which I am about to unveil.

