

**The Utopian Prince**  
**Robert Owen and the Search for Millennium**  
**Floyd H. Duncan**  
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## Chapter 1

### Relief Has Come

The Honourable Robert Dale Owen sat silently inside the stagecoach as it made its way through the crisp November night. Although the weather was bitter cold, the night was clear, without a cloud in the sky. The moon was near full and as the light streamed through the trees and into the coach, the shadows danced over the occupants, revealing their futile attempts to stay warm. The stagecoach was fully enclosed and had glass windows, but it was not airtight and the cold wind blowing through the cracks added to the misery of those inside. The outside passengers, hunkered behind either the driver or the baggage, waged an even more futile battle against both wind and cold.

Owen pulled the heavy wool blankets tight around his neck, but he could not keep out the cold. On the seat facing him, a heavysset mother with three small children pulled them close to her, pooling their body heat in a vain attempt to keep them warm. He thought of his father—the benevolent Robert Owen of New Lanark. As his mind wandered back to those happy childhood days with his father and other members of his family at Braxfield House, the cold became more tolerable. A slight smile came to his face, and he offered the mother and her children one of his blankets. She graciously accepted. The children snuggled even closer.

His father's longtime friend and companion, James Rigby, sat next to him. Wrapped in a neck-scarf and covered from head to foot with blankets, only his nose protruded. His heavy breathing projected a fine mist that quickly dissipated into the air.

The two men had been riding the *Shrewsbury Wonder* for more than fourteen hours, having departed London from the Bull and Mouth Inn at 6:30 a.m. They made a twenty minute stop for breakfast at Redbourn, a thirty-five minute stop for dinner at Birmingham, and two brief (five minutes each) rest stops to conduct "necessary business." Although the horses were changed every ten miles or so, the occupants were not allowed a stretch break—the entire stop usually lasting less than a minute. The distance from London to Shrewsbury was 158 miles, and the trip was scheduled to last fifteen and three-quarters hours. They were now less than twenty miles from Shrewsbury.

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James Rigby had been a constant companion to the elder Mr. Owen for the past five years. Rigby was one of the original delegates to the Builders Union and a faithful missionary of Robert Owen for over twenty-five years. He served as governor of Queenwood between two separate administrations of Robert Owen—the first lasting three months; the second, three years. Queenwood, located near East Tytherly, Hampshire, was one of the last abortive attempts at community living. It ended in financial disaster in 1845.

Although Owen's influence among the ruling class and the elite of English society had waned considerably from his early years as the manager of New Lanark Mills, he remained the undisputed leader of the socialist movement, up until the collapse of Queenwood. Later, he became the titular head of the ethical/rational societies into which Owenism had evolved. For Rigby, although his situation was no sinecure,

service at the side of Robert Owen in his final days was a distinct honour.

Two days earlier, the father's physician sent Rigby to London to fetch the younger Owen when it became apparent the aging sire was near death. Active to the end, the old man had cheated death in Liverpool a few weeks earlier when he insisted on attending a meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science to deliver a final message to mankind: *The Human Race Governed without Punishment*.

"This, I believe," he wrote Rigby, "will be my last effort, and I intend it to be the crowning one."

When they reached Liverpool, the old man's energies were sapped and Rigby immediately put him to bed. Owen, determined to make an appearance, insisted that Rigby help him get dressed, an operation that took more than two hours. At the meeting place, four policemen carried the frail old gentleman to the platform. His longtime friend and admirer, Lord Brougham (Lord Chancellor of England from 1830 to 1834), led Owen to the podium and introduced him. One of his dedicated disciples, George Holyoake, later wrote, "Then Mr. Owen, in his grand manner, proclaimed his ancient message of science, competence, and goodwill to the world."

Owen was not able to complete his message, and Lord Brougham, fearful for the old man's life, terminated the speech at the first opportunity. Clapping his hands and inviting applause from the audience, Lord Brougham proclaimed, "Capital, very good, can't be better Mr. Owen! That will do!" Turning to Rigby, he said in an undertone, "Rigby, convey the old gentleman to his bed."

For the next two weeks, Owen remained in his bed at the Victoria Hotel, and miraculously, he revived from this near brush with death. After he had regained his strength, he awoke one morning and said, "Rigby, pack up. It's time to go."

"Go where, sir . . . to London?"

“No, no, to Newtown. I want to lay my bones in my native place.”

After considerable effort, the pair traveled first to Shrewsbury, then to Newtown to visit his childhood home. When they crossed the border into Wales, the old man raised himself in the carriage and gave a cheer. His spirits revived as he gazed upon the beauty and grandeur of the Welsh countryside. The ancient mountains lay before them like glorious monuments to nature, with tall trees waving their branches in welcome. It reminded Owen of those happy days of his brief childhood, wiling away the hours under their cool shade. These resplendent scenes flashed before him in a curious kaleidoscope, interspersed with images from his long and eventful life. In those brief moments, his mind’s eye gave him glimpses of the past that had been lost since youth. It was the first time he had seen his native land in more than seventy years.

Within a few miles of Newtown, they came upon a beautiful estate Owen remembered from his childhood. “Rigby,” said the old man excitedly, “drive up to the gate and ask if Dr. Johns is at home.”

Although Dr. Johns was much older than Owen, it did not occur to him that the doctor might be deceased. In fact, Dr. Johns had been dead for twenty years, and the servant girl who answered the door was astonished at Rigby’s enquiry.

“Would you care to speak with Mrs. Graham?” asked the servant. “She is Dr. Johns’ daughter.”

“No, please,” answered Rigby, begging the young girl’s indulgence while he went to the carriage to tell Owen of this unexpected turn of events.

“Tell her Robert Owen is here,” he instructed.

When the doctor’s daughter heard the name, she went immediately to the carriage. Upon seeing the state of the kindly gentleman, she summoned two servants to help him

into the house. Once he removed several outer garments and was seated comfortably in a large, overstuffed chair by the fire, Mrs. Graham asked, "Now, Mr. Owen, you are once more in your own country, among old habits and customs. What shall I get for you?"

"Thank you," he said in a feeble voice. "I would like to have some flummery." She smiled and conveyed his request to the young servant girl who was puzzled by these strange events. Flummery is a food prepared from oat flour and eaten with milk. It is a favourite meal of Welsh children, the equivalent of oatmeal porridge eaten by the Scotch.

After a pleasant visit with his old friend's daughter, Owen and Rigby proceeded to Newtown, which had changed considerably in the seven decades since he left. With the growth of the woolen industry, the town had exploded to more than six thousand inhabitants who now crowded onto Bryn Bank with houses and other structures. Owen was disappointed to see this idyllic place of his youth so altered by industrialization. After a brief carriage tour, they arrived at the Bear's Head Hotel. For some strange reason, Owen registered himself as Mr. Oliver and had Rigby register as Mr. Friday.

The next day as they were preparing to leave, Owen asked Rigby to drive two doors down from the hotel to the house of his birth. He instructed Rigby to go into the shop that now occupied the front of the house and buy two quires of the best notepaper. "And Rigby," he added, "ask if this is the house where Robert Owen was born."

Mr. David Thomas—stationer, bookseller, and printer—was the shop's proprietor. He was aware of the former occupant and took great pride in showing Rigby the room where Robert Owen was born. As Rigby turned to leave, Thomas saw the elderly gentleman in the carriage. When Rigby would not answer directly that the man was indeed Mr. Owen, Thomas' curiosity was piqued. Thomas insisted on

delivering the paper personally, and as he handed it through the carriage window, Owen, without speaking, took his hand and shook it warmly.

Owen and Rigby traveled to Shrewsbury and then on to Liverpool. Several days later, Owen came upon the idea of returning to Newtown. He wrote David Thomas, offering that if a public meeting could be summoned, he would be happy to proclaim an important message to the inhabitants of the town. Three weeks passed before Thomas replied. Not only would he summon the meeting, but he would be honoured to have Mr. Owen as a houseguest. Owen and Rigby again traveled to Newtown, but when they arrived, Owen became quite enfeebled. Rather than burden Mr. Thomas, Rigby checked them into the Bear's Head Hotel. The next day, after a visit by the town physician, Rigby was dispatched to London to find the younger Owen.

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The cold did not penetrate as deeply it had before. As Robert Dale thought of his father, he was proud to be the son of a famous industrialist who also happened to be one of the most widely known and highly respected humanitarians of his day. The old man had lived an incredible life, and the lives of an untold number of his fellow creatures had been enriched because of him. Perhaps the woman and children riding with them were somehow the beneficiaries of his father's tireless efforts on behalf of the human race.

As the faint moonlight streamed through the windows, Robert Dale's thoughts drifted to the flurry of activities of his father's last few years. Although Robert Owen was world-renowned for his ideas on factory reform, education, social organization, and the formation of character, he had become largely ineffectual since his return from America in 1847. Owen's influence with the ruling class began to wane in 1817 after his unfortunate City of London Tavern speech. A decade later, when he returned to England following the

failed experiment in communal living at New Harmony, Indiana, he had all but lost this audience. Strangely enough, his influence among the English working class had just begun, but following the collapse at Queenwood, only the true believers remained faithful.

Owen's meager existence was supported by a modest income of £360 per year, the interest on an imaginary debt contrived by his sons in 1844. He continued to write and speak on his ideas for reorganizing society according to the principles he had espoused all his life, and those who knew him well were still captivated by his warmth and magnetic personality. Children were as attracted to him in his last years as they were at New Lanark forty years earlier. His dedicated followers still hailed him as a visionary, but men of influence avoided him and ignored his correspondence.

Robert Owen was often described as a bore in his later years. "A gentle bore," according to Harriet Martineau, "in regard to his dogmas and expectations; always palpably right in his descriptions of human misery; always thinking he had proved a thing when he had asserted it in the force of his own convictions; and always really meaning something more rational than he had actually expressed." She also described him as "always gentlemanly and courteous; always on the most enduring terms with his children." And his grandchildren thought Robert Dale, as he remembered the many happy hours his own children and those of his brothers and sister spent with their grandfather during his visit to America.

The uneasy rhythm of the coach gliding through the night was interrupted as they descended a slight incline into a low-lying ravine that had been flooded by rain. Heavy traffic on the Holyhead Road had taken its toll on the otherwise sturdy macadam surface, and as the deep ruts froze with falling temperatures, the road became a hazard for man and beast. The children were awakened by a sudden jolt that tore

them from their mother's breast. The young boy landed on Rigby, and the woman and two girls were thrown at Owen's feet, half on the floorboard and half on their seat. Rigby let out a loud burst to the driver to slow down, which he obligingly did.

Robert Dale had not seen his father for more than five years, when, six weeks earlier, he was summoned from Paris because the old man appeared to be on death's doorstep. When he arrived at his father's residence at Park Farm in Sevenoaks, the aged sire had revived considerably. After a brief visit, Robert Dale proceeded to London and thence to Edinburgh, where his presence was required in connection with newly appointed duties as trustee of his grandfather's estate. When Rigby reached him in London yesterday, he instinctively knew his father would not recover this time.

As the coach continued toward its destination, Robert Dale's thoughts turned inward. His life in America had been mellifluous, and he had taken little time to think of the father who inspired him to dedicate his life to the betterment of mankind. He had experienced an interesting political career, having served two terms in the House of Representatives before being turned out of office in one of the most bizarre and stunning political upsets in Indiana history. As he campaigned for a third term, overconfidence robbed him of his political acumen, and he failed to take his opposition seriously.

Owen had achieved national prominence in Congress. His proudest achievement was in connection with establishing the Smithsonian Institution. He was forced to abandon the project before it was finished because of disagreements with Joseph Henry, the Secretary of the Institution, whom Owen had supported for his position.

Owen's service for the last five years as *charge d'affaires* to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies at Naples had been well worth the pain and anguish of his public life. His work in

Naples was highly regarded by the State Department, and he was one of the most popular representatives with the Neapolitans. Although he was a low-ranking diplomat, Naples was a welcomed respite that allowed him to be near his wife and children, who were on an extended continental tour that would provide educational opportunities not available in New Harmony, Indiana.

During his first year in Naples, Owen lived as a bachelor but made frequent visits to his family in Stuttgart and Nice. As the end of his tour drew near, he had absorbed everything Naples had to offer. In his final dispatch to the State Department, he wrote, "No one who has resided for several years in this, one of the most beautiful regions of the civilized world, can leave it without regret, a regret tempered in my case by the prospect of returning, once more, to a country of liberty and progress."

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As the coach approached the last stage to change horses, the blast from the guard's horn aroused the weary occupants.

"How much longer do you think it is, Rigby?" asked Owen.

Looking at his watch in the moonlight, Rigby answered, "This should be Haygate we're coming to. From there, it'll be another hour to Shrewsbury."

After a quick change of horses, the coachman snapped the reins and disappeared into the darkness, confident he would reach Shrewsbury by 10:30 p.m. Owen and Rigby would have approximately five hours to rest before catching the mail coach to Newtown, and barring any unforeseen circumstances, they should arrive just after daybreak on the 16th. Owen pondered whether his father would last until then.

After an interminably long ride, they arrived at the Lion Inn and were greeted warmly by the innkeeper, Jerry Taylor, a man known to everyone who traveled in and around

Shrewsbury. When he spotted Rigby, Taylor's face lit up with a broad smile. "James Rigby, good to see you again. How's the old gentleman?"

"Don't know," answered Rigby, "We're on our way to Newtown to see him." Rigby then took Robert Dale by the arm and introduced him to Jerry Taylor. "Mr. Owen, this is Jerry Taylor; Jerry, this is Mr. Robert Dale Owen, Mr. Owen's eldest son. He's just finished his duties as the American ambassador to Italy. He—"

"The *charge* at Naples," interrupted Owen, as he extended his hand, "not an ambassador—only a lowly bureaucrat. Good to meet you, sir."

Taylor pumped Owen's hand with a firm grip, "Jerry Taylor at your service, sir. It's a real pleasure to meet you, a real pleasure. I'm sorry to hear about your father, and if there's anything you need, just call on me. I'll do whatever you ask."

"We appreciate your hospitality, Mr. Taylor. What we need most right now is hot food and a place by the fire."

Taylor took the cue and manoeuvred them to a large table with padded chairs near the open hearth. After summoning a waiter to take their orders, he added, "My friend, James Rigby, and your father stayed with me a couple of times over the last several weeks. Your father is a great man, Mr. Owen."

The Lion Inn, like so many inns along heavily traveled routes, was open day and night. The cook had prepared hot stew for the weary travelers, and they were served within minutes. Since it would be more than four hours before the mail coach departed, Rigby took advantage of his friendship with Taylor, who provided them a room in which to rest.

The mail coach arrived promptly at 3:15 a.m., and although they were rested and ready to travel, they were unprepared for what greeted them at the departure gate. There were no places inside the coach—they had no choice

but to endure the bitter cold and biting wind riding high atop the bounding coach for the next thirty-two miles.

The mail coach pulled into Newtown within minutes of its scheduled arrival. Rigby escorted the younger Owen across the street to the Bear's Head Hotel, an unpretentious building with a façade measuring no more than 50 to 60 feet in width. Except for a small sign hanging over the front door, it looked more like a residence than a hotel. The guest rooms extended to the rear on three levels for about 200 feet, split by a long courtyard along the centre. The rooms opened onto a narrow, covered gallery.

As they entered the lobby, Rigby sighted Dr. William Slyman making his way to the dining room. Rigby caught his attention, and as the doctor approached them, Owen asked, "How is he? Is he still alive?"

"He's still holding on, but I don't give him much chance to last through the day. A man his age shouldn't be traipsing about the countryside this time of year." The doctor paused, then added. "You go on up. I'm going to eat breakfast now. You come on back and join me after you've seen him. Mrs. Lewis is with your father now. She stays with him when I'm not here."

Owen nodded, "Thank you, doctor. Which room?"

"He's in the first room on the left at the top of the stairs. Room 14."

When Robert Dale entered the room, he saw the old man resting uneasily, propped up by several large pillows. He was breathing heavily in short, choppy breaths. A matronly woman in a rocking chair watched his every move. Owen introduced himself and thanked her for looking after his father. "You join the doctor for breakfast. I'll stay with him for awhile."

As Owen watched his father in the warm candlelight, he was struck by the dignity of the old man's appearance, even at eighty-seven and apparently on his deathbed. His father

had never been considered handsome, and some even thought him ugly. His profile was regal and aristocratic, although there was no nobility on his side of the family. His hair was a bit longer than he wore it for most of his life, with sideburns extending to the lower part of the ears. In his younger days, his hair was dark brown, but now it was silver white.

The elder Mr. Owen had a large nose, whose slight incline continued along his forehead. A strong chin gave his profile its regal appearance, but the frontal view was less dramatic. His long nose was situated between eyes too wide for a narrow face, and his thin lips and small mouth were slightly out of balance with the nose. The chin that appeared strong in profile was too narrow, which added to the impression of a nose too large for its surroundings. In his youth, he had a boyish, almost feminine look that made him appear younger than his years. The son looked at himself in the mirror and was struck by how closely he resembled his father.

No one who truly knew Mr. Owen thought of him as ugly. First impressions aside, his warm smile could melt the harshest critic. To the thousands of people who worked under his management in the factories, especially those at New Lanark, Robert Owen was a saint—a man whose presence transcended physical appearance. To them, Robert Owen was a handsome man.

As Rigby entered the room, the old man stirred. His breathing lost its rhythm, and he coughed several times. Recognizing his eldest son, he raised his hand and motioned for him to come near. Grasping his arm, he pulled Robert Dale to his breast, clinging to him for several minutes, with tears streaming down his cheeks. When he spotted his old friend Rigby, he brushed back the tears, regained his composure, and greeted him warmly. He held Rigby's hand

as firmly as his diminished state would allow and thanked him for bringing his son.

Rigby, Mrs. Lewis, and Robert Dale took turns sitting with him throughout the day and into the night. Although near death, he was unable—more likely unwilling—to recognize the fact. Alternating between sleep and consciousness, he talked about his plans for the future and made arrangements with David Thomas to address a public meeting. It never occurred to him that death might intervene.

The Reverend John Edwards, Rector of Newtown, came to visit Owen several times throughout morning, but on each occasion found him asleep. As he entered the Bear's Head Hotel shortly after 3:00 p.m., he spotted Robert Dale coming down the stairs. "How's the old gentleman coming along?" asked the rector. "Is he awake now?"

"Good afternoon, reverend. He's quite awake now, and I'm sure he would be delighted to see you." Robert pointed him to the stairs and continued to speak as they walked together. "We told him you were here earlier, and he was quite excited." Pausing momentarily, Robert added, "He wants to talk about his plan for a series of public meetings and for reorganizing education." The rector's nod of resignation assured Owen that he could be counted on to pacify his father by listening to his plans. Owen was unaware that the rector had heard these same plans several times on previous visits.

When they entered the room, the father greeted them warmly and began telling the rector of his plans for the town meetings. He asked the rector to obtain co-operation of the magistrates and other authorities. After a few minutes the old man, tiring from the strain, fell silent. Seizing the moment, the rector offered, "Mr. Owen, would you like me to administer the sacraments." Owen's kindly eyes answered for him as he nodded his assent. The Rector produced the

elements from a small case and bade Robert Dale and Mrs. Lewis to join them in communion, which they did.

As the rector was leaving, Robert asked him, "Were you aware my father wants to be buried next to his parents in the churchyard?"

"Yes, I am, Mr. Owen. He mentioned it to me earlier—as did Rigby." He hesitated. "You know I can only allow a Christian burial?"

"Yes, I understand," said Robert. "Thank you."

"Good day, Mr. Owen. Call me if there is anything I can do."

"Yes, I will. Thank you for everything."

Dr. Slyman checked in throughout the day and kept Robert and Rigby posted as to his whereabouts. The father rested comfortably for most of the night, but Robert Dale found sleep, even rest, to be elusive. He knew the end was near, and although the old man had little time left, time passed slowly. By morning, Robert Dale was more exhausted than when he arrived. He arose early and went to breakfast before seeing his father. As he sat in the dining room, Rigby appeared at the door and summoned him.

Anticipating the question, Rigby said, "He's all right. He awoke and asked for you."

When Robert Dale entered the room, his father was asleep. His pillows were fluffed, the curtains were drawn open, and the warm morning sun gave the room an air of spring. Although it was near freezing outside, the sun was especially bright for this time of year. Owen sat by his father's bedside, clutching the old man's hand. His father's grip tightened as he regained consciousness, only to relax as he slipped into restful slumber. He awoke coughing several times, but for the most part he showed little pain. The years weighed heavily on him, and his periods of consciousness grew briefer and less frequent.

At 7:32 a.m., just as the light through the window was reaching its peak, the old man opened his eyes. He grasped Robert Dale's hand one last time and gave him a faint smile. Without waiting to be asked, he answered, "Very easy and comfortable." He rested quietly for several more minutes, then opened his eyes again, smiled one final time, and uttered his last words, "Relief has come." His breathing became slower and slower. He clung to life, comfortably, for the next twenty minutes. Robert Dale, holding his hand, could scarcely tell the moment when he no longer breathed. Finally, his weak grip relaxed, ever so slightly, and he slipped away. . .

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