

REIGN OF THE BEAST

THE ATHEIST WORLD OF W. D. SAULL AND HIS MUSEUM OF EVOLUTION

ADRIAN DESMOND





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Cover illustration: A spoof of the “Devil’s Chaplain”, the Rev. Robert Taylor (left, on the podium). His patron, the atheist Richard Carlile, is seen on the right, landing a punch. The wine merchant W. D. Saull funded both men and grounded his evolutionary talks in their dissident sciences. Such pastiches reinforced the prejudices of pious readers, by depicting the moral rot caused by irreligion. The wall posters on the left advertize contraception manuals and licentious memoirs, and a lecture by “Miss Sharples”, Carlile’s common-law “wife”. Taylor’s character is being impugned by portraying the mayhem caused by his infidel oratory. Beyond the brawling and debauchery, thieves are shown in the audience (bottom right) and a dagger-wielding agitator (centre). In reality, Taylor’s congregations were respectable and attentive.

Etching, in the author’s possession, entitled “The Triumph of Free Discussion” (the motto of Carlile’s Fleet Street shop selling subversive prints). The caption reads, “A Sketch taken in the Westminster Cock Pit on Wednesday the 24th. of September 1834. Subject A Lecture by the Revd R. Taylor, A.B.M.R.C.S. ‘On the importance of Character.’”

Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

5. Perfectibility

The Whigs came into office in 1830, for the first time that century. This switch in political fortunes refocused minds—radical debates now raged over suffrage, the secret ballot, and annual parliaments in the run up to the Reform Act of 1832. These months saw renewed labour activism, the growth of political unions, and the rise of anti-capitalist alternatives. All of these served to expose deep divisions among Carlile’s fellow-travellers. While the emphasis had been on debunking Christianity and de-funding the clergy, Saull had stayed in line. But the new political imperatives were forcing his re-evaluation of allegiances.

Many of Carlile’s supporters, fired by these new concerns, drifted away. The poverty and powerlessness of the increasing numbers of urban workers meant that the radicals looked to ever more democratic solutions. But others—including Saull—while supporting this radical move, urgently began to seek co-operative alternatives to the capitalist economic system. Saull’s social interests as a City merchant and exponent of the new Cuvierian palaeontology of progress made co-operation and, ultimately, socialism an apposite choice. The root of both progressive palaeontology and politics lay in nature’s power, delegated from below, which pushed life ever upwards. This unaided climb, life pulling itself up by its own bootstraps, was a powerful democratic image. Push and power came from below, not from God’s fiat passed down via a priesthood. Some street activists already saw in the new palaeontology an inbuilt perfectibility principle. With Toulmin’s eternalism out of the way, this upwards ascent of life could provide a scientific rationale for the social doctrine of human perfectibility. Man was not depraved and fallen; as an animal he carried nature’s principle on through his social ascent. It legitimated the utopian drive towards the perfected man, a

socialist, while, dialectically, socialist belief in perfectibility reinforced the image of nature striving linearly ‘upwards’.¹

More than political exigencies were causing fallout. Personal ones, too, were forcing Saull’s re-orientation. His shift was made easier by his growing circumspection in the face of custodial threats. But Carlile’s behaviour pushed him further. Carlile’s star had waned through the late 1820s. By 1831, he was off the scene, in prison, and his shop was in a parlous state. In 1832, they were selling off stock cheap. A “wreck”, the spy called the business, as Carlile’s house in Fleet Street was let in a last desperate measure. There had always been grumblings about Carlile’s extravagance and brusqueness, too, with the spy reporting that “most of Taylor’s and Fitch’s friends” thought him “too Rash” and that he was no longer “respected”.²

But what ultimately cost Carlile so much support was “the way he treats his wife”.³ This came to a head in 1830. Carlile started an affair with a young evangelical-apostate Eliza Sharples, fresh from the mill town of Bolton.⁴ He moved her, pregnant, into his house and his long-suffering wife and children out. Jane, who had kept his shop open through thick and thin, and gone to prison for him, was booted out. This was too much for many: “moral delinquency”, Hetherington called it. He added a few years later, on looking back, that “nearly all your best friends were ashamed of you—they had entirely abandoned you”.⁵ Hetherington and Carlile now loathed one another. But then Hetherington was devoting himself fully to working-class agitation. The hounded editor of the illegal *Poor Man’s Guardian* (founded 1831),⁶ still republican of course, and as anti-clerical as ever, was emerging pre-eminently as a class warrior, something Carlile never was. Hetherington’s demands

1 Bowler 2021 on the interdependence of utopianism’s pre-determined social goal and a *linear* view of ‘evolution’.

2 HO 64/11, f. 85; HO 64/18, ff. 602, 736; *Cosmopolite* 1 (5 May 1832); 2 (26 Jan. 1833).

3 HO 64/11, f. 7.

4 HO 64/12 f. 38. The “Lady” is from Liverpool, the spy reported erroneously; she was from Bolton (Frow and Frow 1989, 38).

5 PMG, 1 Nov. 1834. 308; also 15 Nov. 1834. 326; 6 Dec. 1834. 347–49; Wiener 1983, 81, ch. 10; Keane 2006; Frow and Frow 1989, 36–38.

6 It was illegal because Hetherington refused to pay the government stamp duty (which was itself designed to wipe out the inflammatory street press): Wiener 1969; Hollis 1970. The PMG got everywhere; distributors even impishly left copies on the Duke of Bedford’s doorstep: HO 64/12, f. 165.

for workers' rights reflected the heated political rhetoric inside the Rotunda, Optimist, and other radical venues: full representation and fair wages to end poverty and oppression, which meant suffrage, the ballot, and abolition of property qualifications.⁷ None of these were Carlile's priorities.

They were, however, Saull's, who proved the point by taking on the treasurer's role in the Hetherington-inspired National Union of the Working Classes (the spy's main target for surveillance). Saull began dissociating himself from Carlile; in truth, their differences became irreconcilable as the reform crisis loomed. How he reacted to Carlile's "moral marriage" we do not know, although he was later to help Jane Carlile and her children.⁸ But, for Carlile himself, the cash was drying up. It now appeared as if the two men shared nothing but a disgust of Christianity.

While Saull backed the new political unions urging universal suffrage, Carlile called them "contemptibly devoid of intellect and useful purpose".⁹ For him, they were all resolution and no action. Carlile, the strident individualist, was moving in an opposite direction, playing the prima donna, sounding more and more the bourgeois liberal overlord, insisting that these "dastardly associations, contemptible, frivolous, paltry nothings" should stop posturing and build on *his* infidel framework.¹⁰ He accepted no need for any further reforming foundations

7 For Hetherington these were the prerequisites before schemes like co-operation could be considered, as he insisted time and again up to the passing of the Reform Bill: *PMG*, 14 Jan. 1832, 245–46; 28 Jan. 1832, 254; 2 Jun. 1832, 407; 1 Sept. 1832, 513; 8 Sept. 1832, 528; 22 Sept. 1832, 541; 22 Sept. 1832, 537; 29 Sept. 1832, 548; 29 Sept. 1832, 551; 3 Nov. 1832, 588; 1 Dec. 1832, 631. Among many incubators of Hetherington's emerging class consciousness might be considered the LMI, which both Hetherington and Saull attended (Flexner 2014). Here self-teaching groups formed, strengthening self-reliance, and management was divided into "working class" and "not of the working class", emphasising the distinction.

8 Saull never neglected Carlile's family, adding to funds to make sure they were provisioned later in life: *NS*, 22 Nov. 1851; *Reasoner* 12 (10 Dec. 1851): 64; (21 Apr. 1852): 367. In this he worked in conjunction with his closest friends (see Appendix 6). These included the apothecary Thomas Prout, another Carlile bankroller who sat with Saull in every political union; Dr Arthur Helsham; and the Paineite Edward Henman, who had also funded Carlile.

9 *Lion* 4 (9 Oct. 1829): 449–52; Belchem 1985, 198; Wiener 1983, 171.

10 *Prompter* 1 (3 Sept. 1831): 753; Wiener 1983, 172. Admitting that the more moderate National Political Union was the "best thing of the kind that had been attempted" was simply damning with faint praise: *Prompter* 1 (3 Sept. 1831): 754.

than his anti-Christianity, all else was hot air. As a result, he was expelled from the Radical Reform Association, while the Metropolitan Political Union members actually hissed the “comical blade” for his reactionary views before kicking him out.¹¹

As for London’s co-operative experiments favoured by Saull, Carlile took still graver exception. From the first, he branded them a “retrogression”, believing that, without competition, society would level all down to the “mediocre”. He saw co-operative efforts as stifling the “dynamic motives of human action”, leading to a “diminution in production”, in McCalman’s paraphrase. The more rejection Carlile suffered, the more aggrieved and opinionated he became as he built bulwarks against the trend. “I hate the co-operative system that would monotonously tie down the talent or utility of mankind, so as to make the ingenuity of the genius subservient to the dulness of the dolt”. Not for him the “new millenium” [*sic*], as he lashed all such schemes as “Utopian”.¹²

Carlile had never really advanced labour’s claims, now he rejected more revolutionary action. He was no less vehement against the trades’ unions and their “Tom-fool tricks”. He founded his *Gauntlet* (1833) to take on the unions, who blinded their adherents with “secrecy [*sic*] and nonsense”.¹³ Everything about Carlile now smacked of betrayal. The last straw for Saull’s radical friends was Carlile’s acceptance of the Whigs’ £10 household franchise as the basis of the Reform Bill, which would give democratic power to the middle classes while cutting out labour. The ‘base Whigs’ seemed to have got him. It was confirmed when, on top of endorsing a classic capitalist economy, he approved its Malthusian base, the ultimate horror. Unlike almost all ultra-radicals, he had accepted Thomas Malthus’s dictum that population outstripped food supply, making struggle, despair, and death the norm in the fight for resources. In this, he appalled Saull, and even Taylor berated Carlile’s “Anti-social”

11 Wiener 1983, 171–72; *PMG*, 1 Nov. 1834, 309.

12 *Lion* 1 (29 Feb. 1828): 258–62; McCalman 1975, 150.

13 *Gauntlet* 1 (1833): iii–iv. Even the anti-Owenite Trades’ Union journal, *The Agitator, and Political Anatomist* (Dec. 1831: 8, in HO 64/19, f. 138), criticized Carlile for demanding unions give up secrecy, without which their members could be picked off by the government.

views on this score.¹⁴ Saull said that Malthusians should “blush with conscious shame”. Such pessimism rested on ignorance of the earth’s true “productive powers” and a failure to appreciate that a proper technical education would push up productivity and put mankind on “the correct path of improvement”.¹⁵

Owenism, Geology, and the Social Millennium

For Saull, the bridge was burnt. He never wavered from Carlile’s anti-Creation and anti-clerical materialism, he simply carried it into the co-operative camp as he worked up his palaeontology. By late 1827, he was already a shareholder in the London Co-operative Trading Fund Association, which planned to buy or rent land on which labourers could make and sell goods at their full value (with no middle men).¹⁶ But, as with so many nominally-agrarian and co-operative goals of the London-based activists, it ended up promoting education and sending out speakers to local groups (“missionary work”, in Prothero’s words). Finally, as Malcolm Chase says, it reflected this “growing didactic function” by changing its name in 1829 to the equally ponderous “British Association for Promoting Co-operative Knowledge” (BAPCK).¹⁷ By 1831, this was the London lynchpin of some five hundred local co-operative societies and hosted a galaxy of activists—all now straddling the radical/co-operative line. The radical aspect was evident as they targeted the “rapacious aristocracy” for appropriating the land, turning labourers into “slaves” and “making their labour a marketable commodity”.¹⁸ Reclaiming the land remained the agrarian

14 *Lion* 1 (28 Mar. 1828): 372; Wiener 1983, 172. Huzel 2006 on the near unanimous detestation of Malthus in the post-Carlile pauper press and the widespread belief among radicals that social inequality was to blame for pauperism, not profligacy.

15 Saull 1853, vii. He would also shortly attack the Whigs’ Malthusian-inspired New Poor Law and the workhouses. Hale (2014), focussing on later Victorian times, rightly emphasizes the politically-constitutive dimension of antagonistic radical anti-Malthusian and capitalist Malthusian attitudes to the study of human origins and the ordering of society.

16 *London Co-operative Trading Fund Association meeting of the shareholders held...11th Dec.1827* (1827), 3pp.

17 Chase 1998, 148–51; Prothero 1979, 243. Its activists included many Saull associates: William Lovett, James Watson (the former Carlile shopworker), George Petrie, John Cleave, and Henry Hetherington. Claeys 2002, 175–82.

18 Chase 1988, 150.

goal, but it was soon overtaken by more ambitious urban concerns. And many of these were to become central to the later movement—indeed the blueprint for Saull’s agenda—including establishing schools, dispatching missionaries, and opening halls for “lecturing on co-operation and the sciences.”¹⁹

Much of this—the sciences and schooling—was dear to Saull’s heart. He backed the BAPCK, which, in 1831, would take up the fight against the government clampdown on the unstamped press and Hetherington’s jailing for publishing the *Poor Man’s Guardian*.²⁰ ‘Associations’ for advancing causes were in the air at the time. The British Association for the Advancement of Science held its first meeting this summer (1831). And Saull was on the working committee of the co-operative “Association for Removing the Causes of Ignorance” (founded 1831). He guaranteed £20 yearly for seven years to this particular institution, which was dedicated to buying land and starting an infant school based on rational lines and instigating programmes for educating the “unemployed and uneducated”, women and men alike.²¹ This was another grand scheme that was better in the planning than the execution. In truth, hardly a radical/co-operative society or rational/educational scheme passed by that Saull did not support.

Co-operators had taken matters into their own hands to start collective endeavours through the late 1820s. Their paternal inspiration might have come from the philanthropist Robert Owen, but he was away in America at the time, and the speed of events took him by surprise. Owen was a man of humble origin, enormous energy, and good people-management skills. He was known mainly for his model village and innovative school at his New Lanark mill, which had drawn worldwide interest. He was back in London in 1830, when the spy tipped off the Home Office that Saull was “one of his best friends and supporters”.²² Owen encouraged many of the co-operative schemes (and was eventually honoured as the ‘social father’), even though he was radically outflanked by the young guns. Every bit the cultural determinist, he made social and cultural

19 *The Co-Operative Miscellany; or, Magazine of Useful Knowledge* 1 (Feb. 1830): 25–26.

20 *British Co-operator* 1 (5 Aug. 1830); *PMG*, 30 July 1831, 30–31; *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register* 73 (27 Aug. 1831): 562–65.

21 *Morning Post*, 21 Dec. 1831, 1; *Radical Reformer*, 24 Dec. 1831, in HO 64/18, f. 706; *PMG*, 25 Dec. 1831; *Examiner*, Dec. 1831, 826, 831; 22 Jan. 1832; *MC*, 18 Jan. 1832.

22 HO 64/11, f. 238.

conditions the nurturing agent: change the home environment, and a child's moral and ethical growth can be steered. Saull applied this *mutatis mutandis* to ancient history. Taking his cue from Phillips, Saull accepted that a change in the ecological conditions brought about by planetary movement could direct the change of species. Owen's environmental necessitarianism might have been a sticking point for critics, from Carlileans to Owen's Christian fellow-travellers,²³ but it never was for Saull. It simply sharpened his approach to the development of life.

Owen, with his unshakable faith in human perfectibility, became Saull's icon. Indeed, many idolized Owen at the moment, excepting of course Carlile, who thought him a "fame-seeking opinionate" who "far exceeds all other fanatics".²⁴ When Saull and Owen first made contact we do not know, but it was before Owen left for America. While Owen was away, Saull sent him a copy of his stinging *Letter to the Vicar* in 1828.²⁵ With Owen's homecoming, philanthropist and financier began working together. Owen's "New Religion", the subject of his February 1831 lectures in town, was the old religion that "all Religion was in error and that the only one necessary was that of Nature which caused Man and all other animals to act in all they did because it could not do otherwise".²⁶ So said the undercover agent, reporting to the police. Nothing would have struck Saull more than that Owen hit the ground running in London with an anti-religious message. Published by Saull's co-conspirator John Brooks as *The New Religion; or, Religion Founded on the Immutable Laws of the Universe* (1830), Owen's talks demanded that, as any first step to social change, the religious warping of the infant mind must cease. As John Hedley Brooke has said, such secular religion was pursued with all the fervour of the sacred,²⁷ and the rapture was evident in Owen and Saull.

Since character was shaped by circumstance, all delusional input must be removed. Religious dogmas, often held by hypocrites or imposed for socially-controlling motives, were harmful to the moral

23 For example, the Freethinking Christian and anti-priestcraft Owenite T. Simmons Mackintosh ([1840]), who was in later years to lecture in tandem with Saull.

24 Wiener 1983, 24.

25 W. D. Saull to Robert Owen, n.d., ROC/18/6/1, Co-Operative Heritage Trust Archive, Manchester.

26 HO 64/11, f. 237; Robert Owen [1830].

27 J. H. Brooke 1991, 205.

development. It is hardly surprising that Saull immediately gravitated to Owen, these were to be his guiding precepts for life. And, of course, Saull immediately put his finances at Owen's disposal. The spy now targeted a new venue, Albion Hall. This stood behind Albion Chapel, a "pleasing", domed building on the corner of London Wall and Moorgate. It had been erected at huge cost by the infidels' nemesis, the Rev. Alexander Fletcher. For some years, the hall had been the home of the City of London Literary and Scientific Institution, which trained the merchants' sons and bankers' clerks, while the Cecilian Society practised its sacred music there every Tuesday evening.²⁸ The surveillance records show that, by February 1831, Saull had acquired it for Owen's lectures:

This place was originally built for a School to Albion Chapel, but Saul [sic] has become a Leasee and the Society of Co-operatives of whom he is one of the strongest have had it made higher and have altered it as a Lecture Room, or a Concert room having also had a small Organ built there for that purpose.²⁹

This was the start of Saull's lifelong financial commitment to Owenism. This very transaction, in fact, was the template for a succession of acquisitions to house Owenite lectures and social festivals, hence the obligatory organ. Seventy turned up to hear Owen's inaugural speech, "but many left before it was over disgusted", reported the spy, smugly. Yet, a hundred were there in subsequent weeks, with Saull in the audience.³⁰

Many were now moving over to Owen's party or splitting their loyalties between the co-operators and radical unions. One could see it in the Optimist Chapel. It was still delivering blistering broadsides against Christianity in 1831, but increasingly the talk was Owenism. For example, another intelligence target, the Thames dockworker, leader of the shipwrights' union and erstwhile Cato Street conspirator John Gast, was reported lecturing here in the Spring. He was not seen so much

28 LMR 2 (24 Sept. 1825): 362; *Register of Arts and Journal of Patent Inventions* ns 2 (10 Mar. 1828) 45; Cruchley [1831], 141; Shepherd 1827, 170.

29 HO 64/11, f. 237.

30 HO 64/11, ff. 204, 237, 238. For a flyer announcing these talks on the "New Religion of the Science of Society" at Albion Hall see f. 216. These venues rarely lasted long, this one persisted for three months. Owen on 7 April 1831 started at a new chapel near Brunswick Square: HO 64/11, f. 249.

among the “political parties” these days, the spy reported, “having joined the Co-operative Society on Owens Plan and is chiefly among those who meet here [at the Optimist] and in the [Owenite] Tea Parties of Men and Women who now and then meet about London.”³¹ So Saull was only one among many activists gravitating to Owen, or splitting their time between co-operators and the working-class unions.

Whatever the crossover to co-operation, the activists remained radical, in that they still agitated against the aristocracy, the state church, and government oppression. Oppression took many forms. For example, the fourpenny newspaper stamp duty was designed to gag the street presses and put them out of business. Hence any paper with a penny cover price was illegal, because it had not paid the duty and passed it on. The beleaguered printers, led by Hetherington, became a *cause célèbre* on the street. The ‘liberty’ of the press, one unencumbered by taxes, was, like trial by jury, hailed by all radicals as a guarantor of British freedom³²—and the hand-cranked press in the commoner’s hand was now heralded as the saviour of a corrupt society. The way the law was selectively applied proved it was targeting the agitators. The “soporific” *Penny Magazine* was left alone because it was “harmless”, whereas the “obnoxious” rags pedalling blasphemy and sedition were singled out.³³ The activists cleverly branded it a “Tax on Knowledge”, and the catchphrase caught on. Opposition to it became a rallying point as editors stuck to a penny and went to prison. Not merely editors, mostly it was the street sellers who were picked up with tricolour placards and bundles of the *Poor Man’s Guardian*. Over a couple of years, possibly 200 were given three months’ detention (despite pleas that they were *lending* papers for unlimited periods at a penny a piece!).³⁴ A “Victim’s Fund” was set up, with Saull as Treasurer, and subscriptions poured in to Saull’s

31 HO 64/11 f.209; Prothero 1979, 259–61. Gale Jones was another crossing the floor. On his sympathy for Owen: Claeys 2002, 64.

32 Epstein 1994, 62ff.

33 *Church Examiner, and Ecclesiastical Record*, 15 Sept. 1832, in HO 64/18, f. 384; “soporific”: *The Thief*, 5 May 1832, in HO 64/18, f. 568.

34 *Republican* (Hetherington), 13 Aug. 1831, 5. Hollis 1970, vii, reports that from 1830 to 1836 740 men, women and children went to prison for selling the ‘unstamped’. Hetherington was caught by the Bow Street runners and jailed in 1831, and again in 1832 (Barker [1938], 15).

wine depot.³⁵ No matter whether Saull had his co-operative BAPCK or radical NUWC hat on, he collected funds for the jailed vendors.³⁶ The pot paid out 5s a week to those incarcerated, a good going rate which explains the mock heroics in court of otherwise destitute sellers. One defiant vendor retorted to a magistrate: "imprisonment, I care nothing about it, as long as I am supported by the 'National Union.'" The fund also supported their wives and encouraged new sellers despite the mass arrests. Of course, "citizen Saull" chipped in, putting guineas into the pot where others put in pennies.³⁷

Owen's return from America had reinforced the flagging message of man's moral and physical perfectibility. His "New Religion" and "New State of Society" rammed home the point as he took to Saull's Albion stage. Only a change in "circumstances" could "produce a superior physical, mental, and moral character", and this required a new secular and scientific schooling for children, whose plastic minds provided the substrate. Man was "no more a free or responsible agent" than any other creature.³⁸ He was the product of his environment: tweak that, and he could be moulded and perfected. A messianic belief in adaptability swept the Owenite communities. In this secular theology of deism and religion of nature, "Science was the new providence, education was to be the redeemer of mankind; for by understanding and controlling circumstances, man could shape the human clay."³⁹ As Stedman Jones says, Owen's "historically unencumbered language" inspired huge numbers, "clearing the ground for a belief in natural and universal equality, human perfectibility, the malleability of social and political institutions".⁴⁰

35 For the opening subscription lists, see *PMG*, 6 Aug. 1831; *Republican* (Hetherington), 20 Aug. 1831, p. 8; thereafter Saull's name (with Lovett as his assistant) appeared in every subscription list published in the *PMG*, *Political Register*, *Republican*, *Radical*, or *Cosmopolite*. Hollis 1970, esp. 194–202; Wiener 1969, 89, 203.

36 *PMG*, 16 July 1831, for Saull on the NUWC committee on subscriptions; *PMG*, 30 July 1831, for both Saull's BAPCK and NUWC subscription work. Hollis 1970, and Wiener 1969, on the radical 'war of the unstamped', and Hewitt 2014 on the wider effects of the stamp duty, paper excise tax, and advertising tax on the newspaper industry.

37 *Republican* (Hetherington), 13 Aug. 1831, 5. Saull's guineas: *PMG*, 17 Sept. 1831.

38 Robert Owen 1830, 45, 60.

39 Royle 1974, 23.

40 G. S. Jones 1983, 126–27.

'Malleability' was a key concept. Saull's Optimist comrade Pierre Baume even announced in messianic eugenical fashion that he intended to leave trustees his wealth "in order to encourage experiments on PERFECTIBILITY, which have been tried succesfully [*sic*] upon almost every kind of vegetables and animals, except upon the HUMAN SPECIES; to find out whether we may or not form characters of an extraordinary superiority above every one now in existence!"⁴¹

But fellow travellers often fell out over priorities—many radicals argued that political and economic equality was a prerequisite to social regeneration. Some, just over the fence, in the NUWC, got so fed up with the talk that they "despised those who wrapt themselves in the perfectibility" jargon.⁴² Few doubted that humans could be improved, but the population had to be "morally and politically free" before the experiment could begin.⁴³ Others would struggle with Malthus's attack on such optimism—his belief that stress was inevitable given population growth, despite Owen's counter argument that man could produce more than he could consume. One young surveyor with a passion for wild life, the future 'Darwinian' evolutionist Alfred Russel Wallace, whose "first love" was Robert Owen, would shortly wrestle with these contradictions.⁴⁴

This search for Heaven on earth inevitably affronted religious sensibilities. It was the damnable dream of the "licentious, or the profligate", in short, the proud, who "would concede to no higher tribunal" and would deny "the necessary infirmities of our fallen nature."⁴⁵ And at least one geological don at the exclusive Anglican seminary of Cambridge University, the Rev. Adam Sedgwick, hysterically saw it raise the spectre of the French Revolutionary Terror. Genuine fear was struck into some hearts by Robert Owen's "*moral fanatics*" spreading their pernicious panaceas about earthly perfection: "no human system can bring the rebellious faculties of man under the law of obedience; and ... no external change of government whatsoever can make him

41 *Lion* 3 (27 Mar. 1829): 396; Baume 1829, 4.

42 *PMG*, 18 Feb. 1832.

43 Detrosier 1831.

44 G. Jones 2002, 74, 86–95; J. R. Moore 1997; Durant 1979, 35; R. Smith 1972, 191–96.

45 Rennell 1819, 25.

even approach toward a state of moral perfection—an idle dream of false philosophy ... and directly opposed to the word of God."⁴⁶

The reaction shows how frightening a reinvigorated perfectibilist faith could seem. Nor did it need another Cambridge ordinand reviewing for the Tory *Quarterly* to point out where such nonsense must end:

Dr. Darwin, indeed, carried the hypothesis still farther—for it was a favourite part of his creed that man, when he first sprang by chance into being, was an oyster, and nothing more; and that by time alone, (a lapse of some chiliads or myriads of ages, for he has not given his chronology very particularly,) and the perfectibility of his ostraceous nature, he became first an amphibious, and then a terrestrial animal!⁴⁷

That shaft was aimed at the pirates' favourite, William Lawrence. In his street-saturating *Lectures on Man*, he saw both the individual *and* the human species being perfected.⁴⁸ Man might be unique in his moral perfectibility, but there were no species limitations to the concept. The prospect was opening up of the improvement of all life—the spectrum from the oyster to the infant. Just as a child's mind was malleable, so, as Baume pointed out, domestic breeds were equally pliable. Saull's client, the Rev. Robert Taylor, portrayed it as a case of releasing latent potential. This was the "purpose of nature", he had announced at the Areopagus, and nature's effort "to evolve and bring forth the moral capabilities of man, may be traced from the very first origination of animal life".⁴⁹ Taylor, perhaps in talking to Saull, had crossed the line. In an Owenite world where circumstances shaped development, uncontrolled by a capricious deity, a certain symmetry prevailed. The "immutable laws of nature" applied to all; therefore man, being an animal, "is equally subjected to these laws with all earthly animal and vegetable existences".⁵⁰ And, while humans were "generated by nature" and could be *regenerated* by a social and economic realigning with the "immutable laws of nature", it was short step to regenerating species into more perfect or 'higher'

46 Sedgwick 1833, 76–77. This was the Sedgwick who just as vehemently damned books on transmutation as a "paradise of fools": Adam Sedgwick to Richard Owen, 30 March (no year), British Museum (Natural History), Owen Collection, 23: f. 298; Desmond 1982, 189.

47 [D'Oyly] 1819, 14.

48 Lawrence 1822, 202.

49 *Lion* 4 (9 Oct. 1829), 462.

50 Robert Owen 1830, 152.

forms as ecological conditions changed. Improving circumstances could lead to improved species: Nature could act like a super-Owenite. If impediments had only to be removed to achieve human advancement, perhaps through prehistory ecological impediments had been removed for the species in each era to be improved.⁵¹

Some wealthy, well-read co-operators were already flirting with dangerous ideas. If removing impediments was the way to social change, then obstacles to women's education should be the first to go. It was the pre-eminent call co-operators had learned from the emancipist William Thompson. His Mary Wollstonecraft-homaging *Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other half, Men, to Retain them in Political, and thence in Civil and Domestic, Slavery* (1825) was aimed squarely at the "backsliding" utilitarian James Mill, who shockingly saw women's interests represented by their husbands and fathers. An improving Cork estate-owner—so improving that he was dubbed the "Red Republican"—Thompson was the movement's foremost anti-capitalist theorist. His *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth* (1824) was a staple in radical libraries (including the NUWC's).⁵² He disputed that capital should flow to the middle classes, giving them the leisure to indulge in intellectual activities. With labour fairly rewarded, mechanics would invade the scientific realm and give it new objectives and class allegiances. Mechanics' institutions, he urged, should be run by the workers themselves, and they should be equally open to women.⁵³ For Saull, with his emphasis on artisan education, this would have had a sweet sound. Thompson's work would have been well known to Saull, perhaps even the man himself. For when the wealthy philanthropist died in 1833, and his will leaving £10,000 to the co-operators was contested by relatives, Saull was part of the committee set up to back the executors.⁵⁴

51 Robert Owen 1830, 89, 245. The *NMW* (1 [31 Jan. 1835]: 110) was still stressing "primitive man, generated by nature".

52 Pankhurst 1991, 57, 145.

53 W. Thompson 1826a, 46–47; 1824, x–xvi, 274–76.

54 *People's Conservative (Destructive)* 1 (28 Dec. 1833): 380. Saull and Anna Wheeler were among those deputed to raise fighting funds to settle it in the courts. But Thompson's writings on the despotism of marriage—which the relatives read into their testimony to suggest that the bequest was to further an immoral onslaught on the sacrament—did not dispose the Irish court to the co-operator's case: Pankhurst 1991, 130–36.

When it came to women's education, Thompson's arguments were intriguing. Perfecting the species relied on unblocking potential, particularly that of the oppressed sex, women.⁵⁵ Not only that, but any positive gain had to be passed on through the generations. It had to be cumulative. The cosmopolitan Thompson was well travelled and au fait with French thought. He had digested Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's "valuable" *Histoire Naturelle des Animaux sans Vertèbres* (7 tomes, 1815–1822). Thompson never mentioned that this book, by the professor of "insects and worms" (or invertebrates, in Lamarck's later neologism) at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, advocated the transformism of the living chains of life.⁵⁶ Thompson, rather, was interested in Lamarck's laws of inheritance—that characters acquired in life were passed on, by some irreversible process. Without such an inheritance, Lamarck believed (and Thompson quoted him in the *Co-operative Magazine*), "nature would never have been able to diversify animals as it has done, and to establish amongst them a progression". The crux for Thompson was that transmission to the offspring was only possible if "*the changes acquired are common to the two sexes*". There he had it: the justification for co-education—"if the females do not partake of every improvement equally with the males" the effort would be futile: "all our labors at improvement, as concerns the progression of the race, will be rendered abortive". Denying the downtrodden women schooling led to a lose-lose scenario: mothers could not pass on any improvements, nor, being uneducated, could they train their children.⁵⁷ Sauls shared all these views; equal education, for him, became a mantra, and, tacitly, he adopted a 'social Lamarckian' outlook. Still, even such a tangential mention of the 'evolutionist' Lamarck in co-operative literature was rare, and he seems only to have been exploited for social ends.

It was obvious with the rise of co-operation and Owen's return to London why Toulmin's eternal nature was a dead letter. It had negated any directional, progressive trend, and with it any hope of society advancing to Utopia. For Toulmin, like other Enlightenment

55 B. Taylor 1983, 24–27, 68–69.

56 For the correct interpretation of Lamarck's transformism before Charles Lyell's re-imagining, see Hodge 1971, Sloan 1997, and Corsi 1988, on Lamarck's cultural context.

57 W. Thompson 1826b, 250, 253, 254.

philosophers, the masses were an “unmoveable and unimproveable threat”.⁵⁸ But the “masses” now had their champions in the articulate class warriors of the NUWC, nature added its fossil backing to the calls for progress, and Saull sat astride the new Cuvierian geology while praising Owen’s faith in perfectibility.

While ‘Cuvier’ was just a name to infidels, who twisted his views alarmingly to fit their own needs, he was actually well known to the elite philanthropists. In 1818, Georges Cuvier, accumulating posts alarmingly, and now mooted as Minister of State, had visited Britain to study British administration and scientific bodies. Owen, famed for his New Lanark school and community, hosted Cuvier, his wife, and step-daughter and returned to Paris with them on a specially-dispatched French frigate. Although Owen could not speak a word of French, the Genevan savant and diplomat Charles Pictet, who had himself studied Owen’s New Lanark methods, acted as his companion and interpreter, as Saull would do later. Cuvier and Owen shared a carriage to Paris, where, for six weeks, Owen was introduced to all the leading lights, including the biogeographer Alexander von Humboldt and Pierre-Simon Laplace, known for his nebular hypothesis of solar system development. Owen’s own self-aggrandizing account in his *Life* has him sitting “in the celebrated French Academy, of which my constant friend, Cuvier, was secretary”.⁵⁹

But how infidels and Saull’s Owenites interpreted Cuvier’s fossil geology was highly contentious. Some saw life on earth as a self-propelling, endless climb, and controversially claimed that it was “proved by the researches of Cuvier”. Moreover, life was “directed towards some *end* or *final purpose*”. The “exalted generative powers of the earth” had ushered in a succession of creatures treading a path towards the production of man. Cuvier’s fossil progression was the proof of perfectibility. The earth’s final “effort” was an “imperfect attempt towards the production of a class of rational beings.” Still imperfect, mankind had a way to go as social regeneration succeeded

58 R. S. Porter 1978a, 445.

59 Robert Owen 1857, 1:166–70; R. D. Owen 1874, 121–22; Outram 1984, 103, on the Ministry offering. Owen’s Christian acolyte John Minter Morgan, author of the Owenite allegory *Revolt of the Bees* (1826), was another who hosted Cuvier. This was probably in 1830. At the time, Cuvier was on his second visit to London, just as the July Revolution broke out: Morgan 1834, 1: 127–28.

physical generation. But the height of mechanical millennialism was reached by one letter writer, tipping his hat to Mackey's *Mythological Astronomy*. The obliquity of the earth's axis, he suggested, had yet to tilt so much that upended conditions would usher the planet to "the acme of its perfectibility".⁶⁰

Such was the political and millennial maelstrom in which Saull was developing his geology. And by this point he was an ace away from stretching 'perfectibility' to its limit, in a way that even some socialists found horrifying.

60 *Lion* 1 (6 June 1828): 731–34.