

REIGN OF THE BEAST

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

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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

20. Peace and Harmony

Not only did Saull own the lease on Owen's London house,¹ but he was financially committed to Owen's grandiose projects. Holyoake grumbled that Owen was a "spendthrift when forwarding his own plans of human regeneration", so long as it was not his money.² What finally bankrupted the movement was not the atheist schism, but his practical (or impractical) plan for the Commencement of the Millennium, or "CM", as was carved over the entrance at Harmony Hall, the mansion at the centre of his new communitarian experiment at Tytherly, in Hampshire. Harmony looked from propagandist reports like a heavenly idyll. In fact, it was over-ambitious, mismanaged, and a crippling drain on resources. In short, the Millennium commenced and collapsed in about five years, taking the Central Board with it.

Millenarian optimism had provided the foundations, when the loyal Owenites took over the Tytherly estate on 1 October 1839, and re-started the calendar to mark the beginning of the new moral world. The branches supported it in cash and kind, and fifty-seven colonists settled in this new land. But things went awry from the first. Only nineteen remained by summer 1841—so few that local labourers had to be hired to gather in the harvest, draining the initial resources. Still, rich benefactors kept it afloat, and collections were taken nationwide, but the cash influx only caused more overstretch. Owen bumped up the number of colonists to 300.³ A palatial mansion was built to house them—Harmony Hall, as it came to be called—accentuating, said Holyoake, the dis-harmony that

1 *Reasoner* 15 (28 Sept. 1853): 208.

2 *Movement* 1 (11 May 1844): 170.

3 *NMW* 11 (1 Apr. 1843): 319; (23 June 1843): 433: the 300 were intended to include some at a revamped farm, Rose Hill.

came to prevail.⁴ Money was lavished on this three-story pile, which was designed by Joseph Hansom (of Hansom Cabs fame) and built in 1841–42, to contain lecture rooms, a library, and classrooms, besides the usual dining rooms, bedrooms, and so forth.

Outlying farms—including one about a mile away that we are interested in, Rose Hill—were purchased, resulting in a total holding of a thousand acres. All in all, by mid-1842, the millennial venture had cost £19,000 in old money. At first there was much good will. Radical printers such as Watson supported the venture, shipping off the latest reprints of the classics, Volney, Holbach and the like, as they came off the presses. Thus, in 1843, Godwin's *Political Justice* arrived in the same packet as *Alphabet of Geology* at Harmony, by now a sort of radical British Library depository commanding new works.⁵

Schools at Harmony were started. They projected 200 pupils and £750 revenue a year from this alone, which was wishful thinking.⁶ Geology was on the curriculum from the first, and calls went out to the branches from Harmony's Governor for rocks and fossils to stock the museum.⁷ One could feel the flush of excitement as the children marched, waving their tricolour flags, up to the local Dean Hill to see how the world's ancient history was revealed in the geological strata.⁸ But while geology might have been useful in subverting Genesis, so far as explaining soil types and agriculture (and there was increasing emphasis on this in lectures⁹) it was time wasted: Harmony farming was a flop. Not that they could not get a crop in—good yields on bad soil could be got with systematic manuring, and they did manage to fill three barns with

4 Holyoake 1875, 1: 306. The Harmony colony was also called "Queenwood", because the manor had once belonged to Queen Philippa in the 14th century: Garnett 1972, 166.

5 NMW 12 (12 Aug. 1843): 53. The library had nearly 1,400 books by 1844: Garnett 1972, 202.

6 Armytage 1961, 164–66; Garnett 1972, 166–96; Podmore 1907, 2: 543–52; Hardy 1979, 54; Frost 1880, 18. By mid-1843 they were up to sixty-one pupils, but only thirty-five were fee paying, the rest being the children of residents. The governess of the infant school was a Quaker, and some members attended the local parish church, which suggests more openness than among the London cadres.

7 NMW 9 (1 May 1841): 282; (29 May 1841): 332; 11 (6 May 1843): 360; (13 May 1843): 368; (20 May 1843): 376.

8 NMW 12 (22 July 1843): 32.

9 NMW 4 (16 June 1838) 265–6; 6 (11 July 1839): 608; 11 (30 Oct. 1842): 147; 12 (11 Nov. 1843): 156–57.

wheat in 1844.¹⁰ It was more that skilled industrial workers expecting a paradise had no experience of the land. Productivity was impaired because few understood the basics of spade culture.¹¹

The merchant Saull might have been a metropolitan backer, with huge business interests, yet he never lost faith in community and commonality, even if at a rather theoretical level. He reiterated it at a John Street farewell to another loyal Owenite, the *New Moral World's* former editor G. A. Fleming, about to take over as Governor of Harmony:

The institution of individual property had been found to war against the best and highest interests of humanity; it was the origin of inequality, selfishness, poverty, strife, and all the accompanying vices of such a state of things. The economy of the new system was based on the doctrine of commonalty of property, and it would aim at making each individual habitually act upon the maxim of "all for each, and each for all" (cheers). The results of this system would be that the strong would support the weak, instead of crushing them as at present; it would establish over the world universal brotherhood, and reconcile the interests and the inclinations of each (cheers).¹²

Great hopes were vested in Harmony, making it a place of pilgrimage. The views were so delightful, said a visiting socialist, that "I have seen no spot that reminds me so much of the promised land".¹³ The sylvan setting was about as far a cry as one could get from the press cacophony and police raids spreading from Holywell Street to London's socialist halls. Thus it was to this safe New Jerusalem that Saull now contemplated leaving his geology museum.¹⁴ His connection went deep, financially at least. The deposit on the neighbouring Rose Hill estate, with its mansion and farm, had been put down by Owen as an agent for the Rational Society in May 1842.¹⁵ The mansion was to be his new home. It was

10 *NMW* 13 (17 Aug. 1844): 61.

11 Garnett 1972, 169–171, 180, 197–200; Cole [1944], 34; cf. Hardy 1979, 56, for an upbeat assessment of the farms.

12 *NMW* 13 (11 Jan. 1845): 229. George Fleming was more interested in geologists exposing the exploitation of women as young as eight in the Lancashire mines, where they were used to heave coal waggons away from the hewn seams: *Union* 1 (1 Apr. 1842): 44.

13 *NMW* 12 (7 Oct. 1843): 119. These rosy reports of "happiness and concord" disguised the financial mess and carping: Bray 1841, 2: 609.

14 Holyoake 1906, 1: 190.

15 *NMW* 11 (23 July 1842): 26; (3 Sept. 1842): 81.

also, given Owen's insistence on wealthy patronage for the movement, to lodge grander visitors who wished to inspect the experiment but who might find Harmony too basic. This was to be Owen's showcase, therefore he wanted the garden and farm cultivated to "a high degree of perfection" to impress the socialites—hardly a priority for Harmony's productive classes.¹⁶ What these elite supporters eventually found was "a very comfortable family residence",

placed on a gentle eminence, in the midst of tastefully-disposed grounds, and commanding panoramic views of great extent and beauty. It is approached from the high turnpike road by a carriage drive with two entrance lodges, together with several park-like enclosures of arable and pasture land, interspersed with ornamental belts of plantation, and studded with timber, the whole lying in a ring fence, and containing sixty-two acres.¹⁷

To get Rose Hill to that salubrious state would cost £2,500. And Owen would need £10,000 for fitting out Harmony, stocking the farms, building the schools and so forth, money which the Rational Society could ill afford in 1842.¹⁸ Owen's idea was actually for Board members to build their own houses at Rose Hill. "The estate itself was beautifully situated for that purpose ... and occupying a gentle elevation, it would be both a healthy and agreeable site." There was no shortage of vision at this point. It meant more fund-raising by the branches.¹⁹ A salt-of-the-earth socialist staying at Harmony wandered over and gave a more realistic view of Rose Hill. "The gateway and lodge give us palpable signs of neglect: the place must have been uncared for during many months." But even he saw it

passing into such hands, as will restore its former beauty, and under Providence, make it another Paradise. The mansion is not large, but

16 NMW 11 (6 Aug. 1842): 44. A Governor, the Unitarian iron merchant and teetotaler John Finch, put it bluntly: "As the diet of the members ... is plain and homely, perhaps our wealthy friends would find themselves more at home, by boarding at Rose Hill during their stay." Here they could be accommodated "very genteelly" (NMW 12 [13 Apr. 1844]: 335). 'Coarse' was how the workers described their food, and they criticized the culinary delights of Rose Hill: Garnett 1972, 183, 200.

17 In the words of the subsequent sales brochure: *Reasoner* 21 (21 Sept. 1856): 96.

18 NMW 11 (24 Dec. 1842): 208, (7 Jan. 1843): 223–24; (24 June 1843): 433.

19 NMW 11 (21 Jan. 1843): 240–41.

somewhat tastefully built, we enter the open door, pass from room to room ... we ascend the stairs, and thence to the flat roof, heavy with sheet-lead. The prospect on this hilly eminence, is most extensive and picturesque.²⁰

This “delightful villa” at Rose Hill was fitted out by April 1843 and advertised in the *New Moral World* as a “Boarding Establishment.” There was never any doubt that it was for Owen’s “genteeler” parties who wished a comfortable view of the new community.²¹ The Central Board re-located to Harmony Hall at the same time.²² The optimism was unbounded. And it ranged widely: from thoughts of a vineyard, which would have been a cut above turnips, to a fully-fledged industrial college on-site, the first in a rapidly industrializing Britain—a 500-place technical school that would have been within the means of the trades.²³

But the whole venture was proving a bottomless money pit. The Central Board continually needed to raise funds, and it looked to Saull’s largesse in 1843. It mortgaged the Rose Hill estate to him on 9 October. He paid £2,900 (over a quarter of a million pounds in today’s money) and took possession of the deeds. By that time, the board was cutting down its options and cancelled further plans to upgrade the estate, preferring to lease it on 6 November 1843 to a sympathizer, Thomas Marchant. Arrangements would remain: boarders would be accommodated, and the Central Board, and the Rational Society could retake possession at any point.²⁴

Saull was to own this “elegant and commodious Mansion”²⁵ through thick and thin for the rest of his life. But Owen’s residence there lasted for little more than a year. The annual socialist congresses were held

20 *NMW* 11 (28 Jan. 1843): 245.

21 *NMW* 11 (22 Apr. 1843): 346; (29 Apr. 1843): 353, 356; (6 May 1843): 364.

22 *NMW* 12 (1 July 1843): 4.

23 *NMW* 11 (3 June 1843): 400; (10 June 1843): 416; 12 (29 July 1843): 36; (9 Sept. 1843): 82; (13 Apr. 1844): 335; Garnett 1972, 196. An industrial college, let alone a large one and meeting socialist objectives and benefiting the working classes, was much needed given the state’s laissez-faire attitude to education and the Anglican universities’ disregard for technology. Even University College London only managed to get professors of engineering established in the 1840s (Bellot 1929, 266).

24 Royle 1998, 213 n. 16, 235; *Reasoner* 21 (12 Oct. 1856): 115. In *Reasoner* 22 (29 Mar. 1857): 50, the late Saull’s Trustees date the indenture of mortgage for Rose Hill as 28 December 1843. See also *NMW* 12 (25 May 1844): 378.

25 *NMW* 12 (4 May 1844): 359.

in Harmony from 1842 to the end, 1846, and they spent most of their time anguishing over its problems. Those were becoming legion. It was not the pilfering, presumably by the “stray ruffians” hired to work the land.²⁶ Something much more systemic was at fault. There had been a massive overspend on Harmony Hall, which in Holyoake’s view was a “monument of ill-timed magnificence”. Nothing was wanting “but utility, convenience, and economy”.²⁷ A cash crisis had brought the project to its knees, and Saull, as an auditor of the Rational Society, must have been more worried than most.²⁸

Building work was suspended in July 1842, and retrenchment called for. Cutbacks in the kitchen led almost to “a workhouse level of diet”. Owen resigned, and Finch became governor. Building was re-started, but no lessons had been learned, judging by Harmony’s “miniature railway for transporting meals from the kitchen”. In 1843, Owen again resumed control. But Harmony continued to drain funds, and his extravagance led to dissensions in the branches. There was palpable anger at his failure to keep within budget.²⁹ Bills were not paid, “and credit was the agreeable but insidious canker-worm which ate up” the dream.³⁰ The branches were growing cynical, and appeals to them had diminishing results, which led to more cutbacks.

Then came perhaps the most short-sighted of all the decisions. The 1844 Congress dismissed the social missionaries, saving some thousands of pounds a year, on the principle that this community should come first in the new moral world, not contentious debate in the old. That resulted in the branches themselves losing local support, and they began shrinking. The cash flow became critical. By 1844, Harmony had £30,000 liabilities, and the Rational Society was approaching bankruptcy. That year, building work cost £3000, ten times the revenue from the branches. Not even parsimony could save it now, as colonists shed their broad-cloth uniforms and returned to the old immoral world. The school principal resigned on losing his salary and was replaced by an unpaid inmate.

26 Holyoake 1906, 1: 193. Thomas Cooper 1885, 118–20; *Movement 1* (13 Nov. 1844): 417; Cole 1944, 34.

27 *Movement 1* (6 Nov. 1844): 409.

28 *Report of the Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Congress of the Rational Society*, 1843, 208; NMW 12 (8 June 1844): 401.

29 Garnett 1972, 191–98.

30 Holyoake 1906, 1: 192–93.

The Halls of Science had taken the brunt, haemorrhaging cash, and the result was disastrous. They began to be sold in the slump. Liverpool's became a Concert Hall, and Huddersfield's was put up for sale in June 1844: the Methodists tried to buy it, if only out of poetic justice, before it passed to the Unitarians and eventually the Baptists.³¹ Oldham's was let to teachers, and even the iconic Manchester Hall of Science would shortly become the City Music Hall. Onto its "black, dusty look of desertion"³² was written the epitaph of the movement.

Harmony, the pilgrim's shrine, had lost its mystique, and the messiah his holy aura. Withering branch criticism of Owen's paternal arrogance and profligacy led to his withdrawing completely from Harmony in 1844, and, on 8 August, as he prepared to leave for America, the remaining Harmony schoolchildren trooped over to Rose Hill to say goodbye.³³ The children themselves departed shortly after.

Saull did his best. In May 1845, he dropped the interest on Rose Hill to help out Marchant and the Rational Society.³⁴ But the utopian experiment was finished. The Society decided to cut its losses and wind up the project in August 1845. Even then, the squabbling over how to proceed persisted. One branch wanted the estate disposed of quickly, the debts cleared, and "the proceeds [to] be invested in the National Funds in the names of W. D. Saul [*sic*], Esq., W. Pare, Esq., and Mr. Whittaker [John Street Institution], to be applied to cooperative purposes for the benefit of the subscribers to the funds of the late Society."³⁵ Even that was a tall order.

31 A. Brooke, "Huddersfield Hall of Science"; Garnett 1972, 199–202.

32 *Reasoner* 5 (12 July 1848): 107; (19 July 1848): 121.

33 *NMW* 13 (17 Aug. 1844): 61.

34 In 1845 Saull cut the interest from 5% to 3% of the money advanced, and released the Rational Society from all liability to the remaining 2%: *NMW* 13 (24 May 1845): 386; *Reasoner* 21 (21 Sept. 1856): 96. Of Saull's few surviving letters concerning Owen, most from this time centre on Rose Hill. W. D. Saull to Robert Owen, 16 Aug. 1845 (letter 1379), requests Owen's signature on an insurance policy. While the estate being conveyanced back to Saull is discussed in W. H. Ashurst (Owen's solicitor) to Robert Owen, 6 Oct. 1851 (letter 1955), 11 Nov. 1851 (letter 1973), all in The National Co-Operative Archive, Robert Owen collection, Manchester. From Christmas 1853 Saull re-let Rose Hill to Marchant for a term of twenty-one years, at a rent of £105 5s. per annum. The estate was worth £3,000 at the time of Saull's death: *Reasoner* 21 (21 Sept. 1856): 96.

35 *Reasoner* 1 (24 June 1846): 60; *Report of the Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Congress of the Rational Society*, 1843, 208; *NMW* 12 (8 June 1844): 401.

The final collapse saw tawdry infighting, as Finch and the trustees in 1846 evicted the governor from Harmony Hall (literally, onto the road). Since the Congress had been called, it had to be improvised in a tent, and ultimately it finished up in Saull's mansion, Rose Hill.³⁶ That was the last Owenite Congress. The trustees did pay off many debts. As the printing presses and type went,³⁷ so did the *New Moral World*, its last issue being on 23 August 1845. They tried to sell Harmony Hall as a lunatic asylum, which must have seemed appropriate to many. But it was soon disposed of more fittingly, to become Britain's first applied science school, Queenwood College. Small shareholders were never compensated, bigger investors were bankrupted, and those who had sold their houses and donated everything lost more than faith. There could have been no sorrier end of the Owenite saga.³⁸

36 Podmore 1907, 575–76; Holyoake 1906, 1: 193; *Reasoner* 1 (8 July 1846): 82.

37 *NMW* 13 (23 Aug. 1845): 497.

38 Armytage 1961, 166–7; Holyoake 1906, 1: 193–95. As a vocational college, Queenwood would employ practical and laboratory work as well as theoretical science, in order to turn out “scientifically-trained farmers and engineering apprentices”, not a bad educational outcome from an Owenite perspective. W. H. Brock 1996, xvii: 7; Barton 2018, 69. Here London's future leaders of science, including the physicist John Tyndall and chemist Edward Frankland, would teach in the late 1840s and 1850s, men who would go on themselves to shake religious orthodoxy.