

# Weavers of Dreams

Founders of the Modern  
Co-operative Movement



by David J. Thompson

150th Anniversary Edition

**Weavers of Dreams**

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**ROCHDALE**  
METROPOLITAN BOROUGH  
COUNCIL

The year 1994 is the 150th anniversary of the modern cooperative movement. We all take great pride in the efforts of the Rochdale Pioneers to start their co-op at 31 Toad Lane. In that small shop one of the world's most important ideas was born. The Rochdale Pioneers showed us how ordinary people working together could be powerful. Combining the resources of people, capital and commerce earned them respect in the marketplace. What is so interesting is that the cooperative idea, born here in our town, has been exported to every corner of the earth.

This book, by David Thompson, deserves to be read. David is a Lancashire lad and his love for the co-op and Lancashire shows through on every page. His book is a rich history of the Rochdale Pioneers and of our town. As I read it, I was struck by the important role Rochdale played in ushering in the Industrial Revolution. What an era of economic and societal change. I felt anew after reading this book that there is nothing more enduring than people working hard to solve their problems.

As the years have gone by, the Museum at Toad Lane has become a Mecca for visitors from throughout the world. More visitors want to see the little shop than any other spot in town. The Rochdale Town Council works closely with the Cooperative Union to ensure the future of the Pioneer's building and the surrounding conservation area. We will continue to provide our international co-op friends with a fine place to come home to.

As Mayor, I often greet co-op visitors who have come to see Rochdale for themselves. I know how much No.31 Toad Lane means to all of you. This book becomes part of the record of their efforts and a reminder of their achievements. I continue to be impressed by the different types of cooperatives that abound in the world. Cooperatives continue to unite people together and solve common problems. I am sure the Rochdale Pioneers would be proud of what continues to be done in their name.

Allow me to wish cooperators here in Britain and around the world a successful anniversary year. On behalf of the Rochdale Council, you will always be welcome in the town which gave birth to your movement.

*A Bagnall*

His Worship the Mayor of Rochdale  
Mayor's Parlour  
Town Hall  
Rochdale

February 1994



## FOREWORD

The story of the Rochdale Pioneers, and their role in laying the foundations for today's worldwide Co-operative Movement, has been told before in many ways. To mark the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, David Thompson has chosen the approach of a true believer—a committed community developer who sees Co-operation as a means for achieving the twin goals of progress and equity.

The economic and social conditions facing the working class people of Northern England during the first half of the nineteenth century are recorded vividly here, and leave no doubt that Co-operation emerged, as it usually does, as a collective response to keenly felt needs. These were primarily economic needs, but to a significant extent they were also social—a desire for basic education, for political rights, and for more equitable participation of women. The Rochdale Pioneers, as Co-operative leaders after them have done throughout the world, were concerned with both economic and social forms of justice. They sought to combine the development of a strong, economic enterprise with contributions towards social and political reform.

What is striking from this account, in fact, is the extent to which the British Co-operative movement of the 19th Century exercised a significant influence on the development of national policies in such areas as consumer standards, women's rights, and popular education. The Co-operative

Women's Guild is described as "Britain's pre-eminent women's organization," and its parliamentary successes were significant indeed.

Like the author himself, the early Co-operative leaders were strong idealists. It is not surprising, therefore, that the door of the Rochdale store was painted a bright green—the symbol of the earlier Chartist Movement which had inspired many of the Rochdale Pioneers. But whether Owenites, Chartists, or Christian Socialists, the early leaders also realized the need to emphasize common values which would unite rather than divide their members.

As is well known, the Rochdale Society was not the first Co-operative in Britain. But, for a variety of reasons, it has become the symbol for a movement which is today worldwide and multi-sectoral. In large part, this is due to the Pioneers' wise and judicious financial policies. They emphasized the importance of member contributions to capital—as much as 10 weeks' wages—so as to avoid the problems of undercapitalized Co-operatives whose fate they wished to avoid. In order to attract this capital, the Co-operative paid a fair market rate, ranging from 3.5 to 5 percent. Equally important was its codification of the practice of dividends on purchases—both to ensure sufficient reserves for the Co-operative and to reward the individual member for his patronage. The wisdom of such policies remains apparent 150 years later.

When modern readers attempt to understand the reason for the success of the first consumer Co-operative, it is important to remember that its attraction was based not on price, which was related to the market, but rather on the values of quality and honesty. The attraction of "pure food" and "honest weight," combined with financial statements that were open to all members, demonstrated that the Co-operative was truly an alternative form of business operating in the interests of its users/owners.

Another characteristic of the early Co-operative leaders in Britain was their understanding of the need for vertical integration, not only in order to attain economics of scale for their consumer operations, but also to extend the benefits of Co-operation into other areas—manufacturing, farming, fi-



nancial services, and education. The stories of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, the Co-operative Bank, the Co-operative Insurance Society, and the Co-operative Union have been told in detail elsewhere. For the purpose of this account, the important message is that attention to local matters—while essential—is not sufficient. Committed Co-operative leaders realize that their success ultimately depends upon a wider public understanding of co-operation, which in turn requires Co-operative action at both national and international levels.

This is certainly David Thompson's view, as attested by the attention which he pays to the efforts of the British Co-operative Movement to support both Co-operative education and housing. It is revealing that the Rochdale Society was allocating 10 percent of its profits to education (until the government's Registrar forced it to reduce this amount), and that it soon became "the foremost educational institute in Rochdale."

Today, some 150 years later, the concepts developed by the Rochdale Pioneers and their successors have spread around the world, joined and adapted by other philosophies and other cultures. The Co-operative model is today truly universal, but still reflects very much the values and principles which inspired the weavers of Rochdale. Their vision does indeed deserve to be celebrated in this anniversary year.

*—Bruce Thordarson  
Director-General  
International Co-operative Alliance  
Geneva, Switzerland*



## INTRODUCTION

By  
David J. Thompson

This book is being published in honor of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the modern Cooperative Movement in Rochdale, England, in 1844 and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the International Co-operative Alliance in London in 1895. Writing this history has given me great personal enjoyment, and I am happy to bring to fruition a book I have wanted to write for the past ten years.

Having been born in Blackpool, Lancashire, and emigrating to the United States at twenty years of age, my life has been shaped by two countries and two cultures. For the past twenty years I have been involved in building cooperatives in the United States. As a result, this book also celebrates the many threads of cooperation that exist between Britain and the United States. At this time, the United States has the most vigorous and diversified cooperatives of any country in the world. Nearly 100 million cooperators have taken the idea of cooperation and made it a thriving part of the economy.

During the course of developing new cooperatives in the United States, I have been constantly reminded of the critical role of history. In particular, I have often revisited the sensibilities of the Rochdale Pioneers as they created the first modern cooperative. Their philosophy and practice set in mo-

tion standards that apply today. The Rochdale Pioneers tapped into the twin virtues of community and commerce, which, when successfully combined, lead to progress toward an equitable environment for all. Without that harmony, the world is cast into the haves and the have-nots and an unceasing struggle for dominance.

What drives me to write this history is my commitment to the philosophy and practice of cooperation. I believe strongly that the cooperative idea is economics on a human scale. Our world cannot work effectively when gross economic inequality persists among people. Humans cannot live healthy lives without community and sharing. The principles of cooperation make more sense today than ever before. Self-help is more effective than philanthropy, less costly than welfare, and a practical choice for many people.

Yet cooperatives continue to be misunderstood. Many governments either want to control cooperatives or avoid supporting them. Despite their proven track record as grass roots democratic organizations, the cooperative form of enterprise is frequently neglected, all too often because it gives power to the powerless. It is interesting to note that cooperation is the only major economic philosophy that has never had an army or a police force. Moreover, co-op leaders in Europe in this century were killed or imprisoned, first by the Communists and then by the Fascists. Even today, co-op leaders are being attacked and tortured in Latin America and Asia—all because they want people to own and operate their own businesses, serve their communities, and meet their own human and economic needs. This book has been written to promote hope and faith in the cooperative idea.

As a book, *Weavers of Dreams* has a number of goals. The first is to paint a picture of Rochdale and Lancashire that describes the lives and times of the Pioneers and the events leading up to the opening of their cooperative store. I would like the reader to understand what barriers the Pioneers had to break down in order to achieve success.

The other shopkeepers sneeringly designated the co-op as the “weavers’ dream.” It is also important to see that the Pioneers kept their eyes on the prize, calmly developing their co-op stores and leadership skills while all about them the

world was in revolution. When reform finally came, the co-ops provided the leadership for the new democracy in Britain. Many of the newly-elected local officials forged their leadership skills at the co-op, making these co-ops the main training ground for modern democracy in Britain.

The second goal is to follow certain themes of cooperation which are just as critical today as they were in the 1840s—democratic control, the value of member education, the role and development of women, the search for unity and community, quality and purity of product, and the meaning of member capital, expansion, and cooperation among cooperatives.

The third goal of this book is to celebrate the success of the Pioneers. They showed the world that ordinary people working together and pooling their resources could achieve greatness. The co-ops were the first to successfully institutionalize national organizations to support local economic enterprises. The co-ops were a source of pride to the members. As the co-ops grew, they provided more services and took on more responsibilities. Time and time again, modern co-ops repeat past mistakes instead of learning from them. In every case, those co-ops that carefully follow the practical idealists from Rochdale have found success in their own time.

The fourth goal is to use the past to focus on the future. This year, 720 million people are using their co-ops to better their lives. More people than ever need to know how to build their cooperatives effectively to serve their needs. The successes created by the Pioneers and repeated by millions are the foundation for the future.

No writer of the history of the Rochdale Pioneers could pass up the opportunity to praise the work of George Jacob Holyoake's *The History of the Rochdale Pioneers*, and W. Henry Brown's *A Century of Co-operation in Rochdale*. Cooperative history is built upon their unforgettable writings. Two other books have been published in conjunction with the 150th anniversary of the founding of the modern Cooperative Movement—*Conflict & Co-operation: Rochdale and the Pioneering Spirit 1790-1844* by John Cole, a well-written, beautifully illustrated must for historians of the period, and *The People's Business* by Johnston Burchall which will be published at the Cooperative Congress in May. Burchall's other

writings display his love for the Cooperative Movement, and this new book will assuredly be a seminal and attractive addition to cooperative literature. Given that the Principles will be modified at the International Co-operative Alliance Congress in Manchester in 1995, any further writing on them at this time would be outdated upon publication.

There are other areas where the contributions of giants cover the subject so completely that I could never match their scholarship. I commend to the reader a number of companion books which complete the story of the founding of the modern Cooperative Movement at Rochdale. In the area of cooperative principles, Paul Lambert's *Studies in the Social Philosophy of Co-operation*, William P. Watkins' *Co-operative Principles, Today and Tomorrow*, and Sven Åke Böök's *Cooperative Values in a Changing World* are recommended reading. For a discussion of the role of consumer versus producer cooperatives and the role of the worker in consumer cooperatives, there is no better book than Philip Backstrom's *Christian Socialism and Co-operation in Victorian England*.

### Dedications

To my wife, Ann, for her love, unflagging support, partnership, and constant guidance on the path to completion of this book. To our daughter, Hatley Rose, our niece, Rayne, and our family around the globe for whom we build the future. To my parents, Una and Herbert Thompson, who taught my brother Philip and me to love Lancashire, to take responsibility for others, and to fight for those without rights. To Audrey Lippman for her constant support. To my cousins, Pat White and Vera Bond, for all of their help and hospitality while completing the research in Rochdale.

To those who by their example and commitment have personally inspired me on my own cooperative journey: Jerry Voorhis, Don Rothenberg, and Frank Sollars. To co-op educators, the co-op board members I have served with, my good colleagues at the National Cooperative Business Association, National Cooperative Bank, and the International Co-operative Alliance and to the staff of the Co-operative Union and the Pioneers' Museum. Finally, to my special co-op friends who dream the same dreams of a better world.

To my friends overseas, especially Messrs. Takamura, Ohya, and Kurimoto at the Japanese Consumers' Cooperative Union. To the dedicated cooperators and friends I have met throughout the world in China, Japan, Western and Central Europe, Russia, South Africa, Central and Latin America. Finally, the book is dedicated to the builders of the contemporary cooperative models throughout Japan, in the Basque region of Spain, and in the provinces of Quebec and Nova Scotia in Canada. Their commitment to institutionalizing development and building unified regional strategies gives us all hope and, more importantly, models. To all the cooperators whose daily life is committed to building a better world and better communities, I salute your efforts and urge you on to do as the Rochdale Pioneers—succeed in building cooperatives and hope!

I believe it is far easier to make history than to write about it. While I have done my best to accurately present the story of the Pioneers and their progress, the facts are not always agreed upon. When research findings have differed, I have made my own choices based upon my reading of the evidence. If any reader wishes to add to this evidence, comments are invited. The mistakes are my own and I welcome correction.

Finally, I wish to especially thank the following people whose supportive critique, keen eye, and historical scholarship were critical to development of the book: Doris Earnshaw, Roy Garratt, Dorothy Greene, Morrie Lippman, Robert Schildgen, Derek Shearer, Lloyd Wilkinson, and Ian Williamson. Ann Hoyt deserves particular credit for her thorough critique and valuable suggestions. Mahlon Lang and Bea Hoppes of the Center for Cooperatives and Marianne Post and staff of Repro Graphics at the University of California at Davis added invaluable support during the production process. Each person named has earned my gratitude for the time and talent contributed to this book.





## CHAPTER I



# Revolution Comes to Rochdale

*Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing  
because he could only do a little.*

— Edmund Burke

In 1844 events took place that heralded major economic change for the modern world. Three economic models, which have dominated the world economy for the past 150 years, took shape that year.

First, in 1844, the Joint Stock Act was passed by the British Parliament. This Act served as the key to the birth of modern capitalism by developing the basis for the modern stock corporation. Concurrently, Parliament passed the Bank Charter Act of 1844, which determined the constitution of the Bank of England and the role of a national bank in the economy. This Act completed the foundation of the nineteenth-century British banking and currency system. Therefore, at both a micro and a macro level, the structure of modern capitalism became an economic reality.

Second, in 1844, Karl Marx published *The German Ideology*, which developed the philosophical underpinnings of Communist thinking. It was the same year that Friedrich Engels, a German-born businessman and Chartist supporter then based in Manchester, wrote the classic, *Conditions of the Working Class in England*. The book came to the atten-

tion of Karl Marx, who then formed a lifelong association with Engels, beginning with the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. By then, Engels had left to visit Marx in Paris and remained on the Continent to participate in the revolution of 1848. This intellectual association in 1844 not only gave birth to the theory of modern Communism but, most importantly, seeded working-class activism on a worldwide basis. Of *The Communist Manifesto's* ten demands, six or seven are now law in most industrialized nations.

Third, twenty-eight working people founded the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society. A store was opened that offered only five items for sale, and though the shop lacked inventory, it was filled with hope. What they lacked in experience, the members made up with enthusiasm. From the mutual efforts of those humble workers grew an idea that today serves the needs of over 720 million members worldwide. The year 1844, therefore, represents the birth of the modern cooperative movement.

Rochdale, although historically a small town, holds an important role in the development of the Industrial Age of Britain. Astride the main road through the Pennine Hills leading between Lancashire and Yorkshire, Rochdale is situated at the entrance to Summit Pass. From time immemorial Celts, Vikings, Danes, and Romans were attracted to Summit Pass in northern England. It is one of only three low-level passes that lead through the Pennine Ridge, the hilly foreboding backbone of Britain. Portions of the old Roman road are still preserved as a public path through the pass. Traditionally, control of Summit Pass determined who controlled Northern England. The Pass connects the historically powerful counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire. This is the land of the War of the Roses, the struggle of the Red Rose of Lancashire against the White Rose of Yorkshire. Guarding the town is the Blackstone Edge, an abrupt hill looming over the important eastern entry into Rochdale. Running through the valley is the River Roch.

To enhance the growing trade coming through the Pass, the King granted Rochdale the right to hold a weekly market and annual fair in 1251. When Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, visited Rochdale in 1724 he found it "a good

market town, and of late much improved in the woolen manufacture." Unfortunately, Defoe had to go over Blackstone Edge and the Pennines in a snowstorm. He later wrote, "The Town is situated so remote, so out of the way, and so at the very foot of the mountains, that we may suppose it would be but little frequented."

John Wesley visited the town in 1749 and spoke at the Wesleyan Chapel on Toad Lane. To the seekers of heavenly salvation Wesley urged such earthly practices as "buying one of another—helping each other in business," and to "gain all they can, and to save all they can." The Methodists and the Rochdale Pioneers later mastered both practices.

The historian Fishwick commented in 1777, "This town is remarkable for its many wealthy merchants; it has a large woolen market, the merchants from Halifax, etc., repairing hither weekly; the neighborhood abounds in clothiers . . ." The domestic wool trade was Rochdale's main activity until the first steam powered cotton mill appeared in 1790.

### **Riots and Revolts**

However, world history was about to be turned upside down by the birth of the Industrial Revolution occurring across the southern Pennines. In the early 1700s, Rochdale was isolated, but by the early 1800s it was industrialized. Rochdale became one of the commercial centers for the growing woolen industry in Yorkshire and the cotton industry of Lancashire. The rushing streams of the Pennines brought cheap power to the busy mill towns of the bustling counties of Yorkshire and Lancashire. Rochdale was fortunate; it was equidistant between the mill towns along the Pennines and the cities of Liverpool and Manchester which shipped the processed cotton and wool cloth to the rest of the world. The town mirrored the vast changes occurring in the new industrial society.

In 1788 the first canal to connect Rochdale to the Yorkshire side was constructed. The canal obtained some of its water from the River Roch. By 1804, the 33-mile-long Rochdale Canal was open. It took ninety-two locks to get barges from one side of the Pennines to the other. Finally, there was a way to ship goods from the hills of South York-

shire and the mills of South East Lancashire to the warehouses of Manchester and the port of Liverpool. For Rochdale the Industrial Revolution had begun; in 1801 the population was 11,000.

On 8 October 1829, *The Rocket* of George Stephenson, the father of railways, established a rail speed of 29.1 m.p.h. on the Liverpool & Manchester Railway. In March 1841, Stephenson built his famous Summit railway tunnel one and a half miles through the Pennines near Rochdale. The trains now stopped in Rochdale on their way between Manchester and Leeds. Forty-one lives were lost in the two years of construction. The last barrier to industrial progress in the North had been removed. By canal, road, and railway, goods, people, and ideas poured between the three Northern capitals of Leeds, Liverpool, and Manchester. As a result, Rochdale became a magnet for the major movements of an era of industrial development, working-class activity, and commercial transportation.

A brief look at the early 1800s shows why the changing times and events of the Industrial Revolution allowed Rochdale to become the birthplace of modern cooperation. In 1801, Britain had only 9 million people, which by 1851 had doubled to 18 million. In that same period, Manchester, the emerging industrial capital of Britain, grew from 85,000 to 400,000 people. Manchester became known as the "cottonopolis" of the world. Today, two and a half million people live within ten miles of Manchester's City Hall, making it the largest city in the north of England. From its 1801 population of 11,000, Rochdale is now home to 205,200 people.

However, all this change did not happen without conflict. Hundreds of thousands of people were on the move looking for work. A rural nation was transformed almost overnight into an urban society. Power looms were replacing the hand looms. The factory owners were consolidating production, and the weavers in their cottages were losing it. Conditions were ripe for revolt. Unemployment, near starvation, the poorhouse, disease and epidemics, child labor—all these were the lot of working people. The machinery went ever faster, the pay was never enough, the price of everything

went up, and food was always too expensive. As a later chapter will show, these were the worst of times. England was often on the edge of an explosion.

In 1807, a massive petition from Lancashire weavers was presented to Parliament, asking for minimum wages and protesting wage reductions. The petition was rejected, and this action soon was followed by a strike. For two days, ten to fifteen thousand weavers gathered on St. George's Field, Manchester. The demonstrations ended with the killing of one man and the wounding of several others by troops.

In Rochdale, in 1808, the courthouse was burnt to the ground by rioters during the weavers' strike, which became known as the "Shuttle Gathering." The government sent one thousand soldiers of the Halifax Volunteers to be stationed in Rochdale to quell disturbances. They were followed by regular troops who were stationed there until 1846, housed for many of those years in barracks on Toad Lane.

Next followed the Luddite riots of 1811 and 1812. The Luddites, named after Ned Ludd, organized in Nottinghamshire, followed by South Yorkshire and then Lancashire. The Luddites were out to destroy the gig mills and wide knitting frames that threatened their future. All across the cloth manufacturing areas of the Midlands and northern England, workers rose up to smash the machinery. Twelve thousand soldiers were dispatched to put down the riots—more troops than Wellington had under his command when he defeated France in the Peninsula War. By 1813, fourteen rioters were hung and the Luddites disbanded.

The Reverend Patrick Brontë was then living in Hartshead, Yorkshire, in an area where cottage industry was giving way to factories. His recounting of the Luddite Riots to his children led Charlotte Brontë to write *Shirley*, her classic novel about industrial unrest in the North. The Brontës chronicled a great deal of life in the lonely Pennines, especially that around the bleak town of Haworth and the surrounding moors. The literate minds of the sisters made much of their surroundings. The best of the Brontës' writings occurred in the 1840s and 1850s, during the formative years of the Rochdale Pioneers.

In March of 1817, the radical leader Samuel Bamford

spoke to a large crowd in Rochdale. The meeting is regarded by local historian John Cole as “the first political reform meeting in the country.” Political reform was the topic, one of great interest to an audience without any political power. In 1819, two weeks before the infamous Peterloo, a crowd of thirteen thousand gathered in Rochdale to petition for reform. Tom Collier, uncle of John Collier, one of the original Rochdale Pioneers, addressed the assembly. Tom Collier was the son of John Collier, creator of the great Lancashire dialect character “Tim Bobbin.”

### **Peterloo**

Later that year, on August 16, 1819, eighty thousand people—one of the largest crowds in British history to that date—demonstrated at St. Peter’s Field in Manchester. The crowd represented 8 percent of Lancashire’s population. They gathered to petition for the repeal of the Corn Laws and for the Reform Bill. Samuel Bamford led the contingent from Rochdale and Middleton to Manchester. Bamford wrote, “Our whole column with the Rochdale people would probably consist of 6,000.” The banner carried high by Bamford and the Rochdale followers is the only one surviving from the Peterloo demonstration. On one side is the motto “Liberty and Fraternity”; on the other, “Unity is Strength.” (It is displayed at the People’s History Museum in Manchester.)

Bamford’s account of that fateful day is still the most widely known. One reviewer, J. J. Bagley, comments that Bamford’s fast-moving narrative carries the reader along so well that he senses the initial expectation and excitement of the Middleton men and women, falls in step with the drum beats, hears the cheering as procession passes through Blackley, Harpurhey, Colleyhurst, and the Irish district of Newton, and feels the rising tension as the Middleton contingent is absorbed into an ever increasing flow of people moving resolutely towards the meeting. By the time Bamford and his followers reach St. Peter’s Field itself, the reader has become one of the demonstrators.

During an attempt to arrest the Peterloo leaders, confusion and panic erupted. The 15th Hussars, who had served at Waterloo, were ordered to charge the crowd, shooting broke

out, eight people were killed and four hundred sent to the hospital, mostly as a result of stampeding horses. Two people from the Rochdale contingent were injured. Unfortunately for Bamford, he was arrested on charges of high treason along with nine others. They were taken to Lancaster Gaol and put on trial in March 1820. The leaders were found guilty, and Bamford was sentenced to one year in prison.

From that day on, because of the Hussars, the incident at Manchester has been referred to as Peterloo, a parody on Waterloo. It was the Duke of Wellington's victory at Waterloo in 1815 that had put an end to Napoleon, but the glories of a foreign victory were tied forever to the gloom of a domestic defeat. Peterloo was to make Manchester a center of continual dissent for many decades. The Manchester Free Trade Hall was purposely built on the site of Peterloo to permanently enshrine free speech in England. As a result of Peterloo, the liberal *Manchester Guardian* (now *The Guardian*) was founded two years later. At Peterloo the reformer voices of the industrial North began their demand for a different England.

### Labour Begins to Organize

The Combination Acts of 1824 allowed workers to "combine" together to improve wages, but for nothing else. In 1834, a group of farmworkers in Dorset organized a union and were tried for administering illegal oaths. They had adopted their oath directly from the one used by the Rochdale handloom weavers to organize their union. The farmworkers were found guilty and transported to Australia. (In 1788, after England lost the American Revolution, it began shipping its convicts to Australia.) Known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs, their case and its severe sentences served to dampen open organization of workers for many years. It was not until 1868 that the Trades Union Congress dared to hold its first national meeting and Manchester was the chosen location.

In 1826 there occurred one of the most dramatic upheavals in the history of the cotton industry. Following in the footsteps of the Luddites, the Lancashire handloom weavers rioted across central and eastern Lancashire. During the month of April, bands of handloom weavers roamed from vil-

lage to village destroying the new power looms. In four dramatic days, they destroyed eleven hundred power looms. Lancashire was seething with resentment against the new machines which were to put a generation out of work. Thousands took part in the spontaneous demonstrations, and thousands more cheered them on. However, the weavers, armed in most instances only with sticks and stones, were no match for the troops rushed to the scene. The rebellion died in the village of Chatterton along with the six weavers shot by the soldiers, who also left scores of wounded. Ten people were transported to Australia for life, and thirty others received jail terms.

The 1826 riots were to have a tremendous impact upon a young doctor in Manchester, James Phillip Kay. Born in Rochdale in 1804, he had gained direct knowledge of the effects of poverty. He determined that what was needed was not repression, but education about conduct and political economy. In 1833, he left a career in medicine to become one of the founding fathers of the English public education system and to make many lasting contributions to the people of Lancashire.

Another strike in 1829, the second "Shuttle Gathering," was put down by the local garrison and resulted in ten deaths, several prison sentences, and the deportation of Thomas Kershaw, one of the strike leaders. That same year, Feargus O'Connor addressed a political gathering at the Old Theatre on Toad Lane. O'Connor was the owner of the weekly Chartist paper, *The Northern Star*, which at its peak had a circulation of 30,000 and cost four and a half pence. He was the self-styled champion of the unshorn chins, blistered hands and fustian jackets. People would gather at each other's houses to share in the cost of the paper and the news it brought them. O'Connor was a perennial favorite of the town, and the town traditionally a great audience for radicals and reformers. G. D. H. Cole, the labor historian, wrote, "Rochdale was next only to Manchester and Leeds as a center of working-class activity in the first half of the 18th century."

### **Reform is Too Little and Too Late**

The Reform Bill was passed by Parliament in 1832. That



August two thousand people paraded victoriously through the streets of Rochdale. However, the patina of political reform covered up, for a moment, the paucity of power for working people. The Reform Act was a misnomer that manipulated the public's yearning for political participation. The Act failed to provide basic freedoms to the working class, and it once again denied them the vote. The Act had been expected to bring about many changes. It was instead a blow to the burgeoning democratic elements in society.

For example, out of Rochdale's population of twenty thousand people, John Fenton was elected the area's Member of Parliament (M.P.) with only 277 votes. He beat James Taylor, the Unitarian minister of what soon would be called the Co-op Chapel. Due to property and gender restrictions, only 632 votes total were cast for the three competing candidates, out of a population of 28,000. The Reform Act of 1832 increased the voting population of Britain only from 440,000 to 725,000. As a result, reform efforts turned again from political reform to industrial and economic organizing.

John Fielden, a nearby mill owner and M.P., wrote to John Cobden on November 16, 1833, "I am persuaded we are on the eve of important changes; the working people will not long submit to the chains with which they are enthralled; cooperative societies, trade unions, etc., exist in almost every manufacturing town and village . . ."

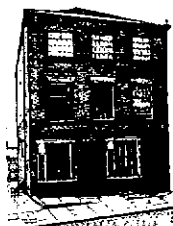
In 1833, factory inspections were introduced to England, and in 1834 slavery ended in British colonies. For a few years there was a slight respite from political action. By the end of the decade, however, political activity began heating up again. Resentment had been growing against the Corn Laws. Passed in Parliament in 1815 by the landowning aristocrats, the Corn Laws prohibited the importation of corn below a set price. The result guaranteed high profits for the lords and high prices of bread for the people. In October of 1838, the Anti-Corn Law Association was formed. On November 7 of that year, the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor was back in Rochdale. He led a torchlight procession and spoke at a Chartist demonstration attended by two thousand people.

For two decades (1830 to 1850), the independent handloom weavers hung on in the villages of Lancashire.

They followed the Chartists in the 1830s, and then hoped for changes in the 1832 Reform Act. It was not until the 1850s that the weavers understood that the state would not be of any assistance to their plight. They adopted the practice of cooperation and the status of a joint stock company. The weavers pooled their resources and united in an effort to develop village factories. Through their worker-owned companies, they created work and paid themselves wages. In 1830, a group of handloom weavers formed the Rochdale Society, but there is little evidence of its progress. The story of the cooperative weavers is still hidden from history.

In the midst of the sea of change sweeping Britain occurred one of the milestones of the century. On June 26, 1837, the young Queen Victoria was crowned. It was a national holiday with great rejoicing in Rochdale, the nation, and the empire. The growth of the cooperative movement would parallel the immense changes associated with the Victorian Era. When Queen Victoria died in 1901, the sixty-third year of her reign, Britain's population had grown from 25 million to 40 million. The urbanization of Britain and the height of the British Empire occurred during her lifetime. On Coronation Day in 1837 she ascended to the throne amidst great ceremony. Amongst the poor workers of the North there was a pause to celebrate the glory of Britain. It was also a time to recognize that much more had to be done to better their lives. The next day they went back to work and to building their co-ops, unions, and friendly societies.

## Chapter 2



# ROBERT OWEN SETS THE STAGE FOR COOPERATION

*If we cannot reconcile all opinions let us  
endeavour to unite all hearts.*

— *New Harmony Gazette*

**R**obert Owen (1771-1858) emerged in the early 1800s as the most important influence on the early cooperative movement. Owen's impact on British history is covered in hundreds of books, and he deserves far more study than can be given here. His roles as writer, speaker, philanthropist, factory reformer, educator, social reformer, and trade unionist were unsurpassed for someone of his day. In 1821, Owen first coined the term "cooperative society" in his magazine *The Economist*. *The Economist* (1821-1822) was devoted to Owenism and cooperation, a rather different perspective than today's *Economist* which was founded in 1843. Owen's motto of "Each for One and One for All" has been adopted by many organizations throughout the world, especially in Japan, where Owen and Owenism has a strong following.

Owen's initial influence grew out of his management of the mill town of New Lanark in Scotland. He had married the daughter of David Dale, a mill owner. Soon Owen took on management of the enterprise and built it into the largest cotton-spinning factory in Europe. Owen introduced a number of reforms into the factory, the community, and education.

His writings about society and about the need for new communities was to make him a celebrated figure in industrial Britain.

Owen had a commitment to bettering the life of the factory worker. He proved it through provision of housing with windows and fresh-air ventilation, healthy prepared food, education for all ages on-site at the mill, and good working conditions for all, especially young people. The resulting boost in productivity enabled him to have one of the most profitable mills in Europe. Leaders came from all over the world to see New Lanark and to marvel at Owen's success. From 1814 to 1824 there were 20,000 visitors to New Lanark. Today, New Lanark is one of Scotland's top tourist attractions with over 100,000 visitors annually and 400,000 annually expected by the year 2000. Owing to his success, Owen was invited to provide testimony on New Lanark to a committee of the House of Commons in 1816. His book, *A New View of Society*, published in 1817, was a best seller of its day and became one of the seminal books on community planning and industry. Recognizing its importance, John Stuart Mill, the philosopher, voluntarily corrected the book prior to publication.

For centuries, philosophers have set forth Utopian ideas. *Utopia* is the Greek word for nowhere, and it is generally used to describe a perfect place not yet found anywhere on Earth. Almost every Utopian community promotes a sense of equality and democracy, and resources and power are shared by all the citizens. It was not until the nineteenth century that this philosophy was put into practice. The work of Owen in Britain and the United States and that of Cabet, Fourier, Godin, and Saint-Simon in France, set the stage for community-building. From their writings and work, model communities emerged which affected the lives of real people. The organization of work, community, education, and health were all studied. The questions of who should own, who should profit, and who should decide were on the table. People everywhere in the rapidly industrializing nations of Europe were struggling for democratic control of their workplaces, their communities, and their nations.

In his work to build New Lanark as a model industrial

community, Owen needed other people's capital, since he was not a rich man. Owen took on a number of partners to finance New Lanark's growth and social programs. One of them, William Allen, a leading Quaker industrialist, in effect initiated the concept of socially responsible investing. To support Owen's community experiment, Allen and the partners agreed to provide capital at a limited return on investment, then set at 5 percent. Allen and others funded a number of colonies during the nineteenth century. The colonies required two elements: the support of a philanthropist and means to make the poor self-supporting. Owen's economic and social success was the subject of great discussion throughout the land, and it led to important parliamentary changes in industrial reform.

At New Lanark, Owen formed a company store that ploughed the profits back into the community. It was one of the few company stores not to take advantage of its customers. The store, along with most of the New Lanark Community, is now restored to its original splendor after a 10 million pound expenditure. A visit there will impress anyone with Owen's achievements. He cared for his workers more than anyone in Europe, and still made the greatest profit.

Owen's immense ability to capture the ear of leaders in Britain, France, and America lent credibility to his ideas. During the 1820s, Owen gave two separate addresses on his views of a new social system in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. Attending on both occasions were the presidents—Adams and Monroe—their Cabinets, the Supreme Court, and both houses of Congress. In America, Owen is best known for his creation of the Utopian community at New Harmony, Indiana. From 1824 to 1829, the one thousand member community had tremendous impact upon the Utopian movement of the United States.

Owen was responsible for the first wave of British cooperatives, which lasted from 1830 to 1835. The goal of the Owenite co-ops was to finance communities in which the inhabitants could build a new society. Dr. William King of Brighton was one of those influenced by Robert Owen. Dr. King was befriended and sponsored in his efforts by Lady Byron, the divorced wife of Lord Byron, the poet, who became

a patron of Dr. King's cooperative efforts. In 1822, Lady Byron contributed the sizable sum of five pounds to the Cooperative Congress in Liverpool to sponsor an exhibition of goods being produced by cooperatives. Lord Byron was the last Lord of Rochdale, having sold his manorial rights in the 1830s. Unfortunately, Lord Byron preferred to use his legacy to promote revolution in Greece rather than reform in Rochdale.

King started a cooperative store in Brighton, but more importantly published *The Co-operator* (1828-1830). The paper had a wide circulation throughout Britain and a correspondingly large influence. James Smithies, one of the Pioneers, had a bound copy which he and the other Pioneers studied and discussed in depth. Many of the Rochdale Pioneers' themes were borrowed from Dr. King's writings.

One of Dr. King's disciples, William Bryan, a former secretary of the Brighton Cooperative Benevolent Fund Society, emigrated to America. He started the first co-op store in America in New York City in 1829 and maintained correspondence with his peers in Brighton, even though he had left under a cloud of suspicion about a portion of the co-op's assets. Bryan offered to sponsor the young sons and daughters of cooperators in Brighton to come to the New World to repay his debt of gratitude to the members. The membership of the new co-op never exceeded forty, and by 1830 the co-op had died without ceremony.

In 1830, sixty weavers formed the "Rochdale Friendly Cooperative Society." Many were affected by Owen's communitarian teachings, and they added those elements to their principles and practices. They had a small library of thirty-two books and sent a delegate, William Harrison, to the Birmingham Cooperative Congress of 1831. There were now hundreds of co-ops in Britain who sent delegates to the national congresses. In the same year, *The Manchester Guardian* reported that seven thousand people, one-third of the woolen weavers in Rochdale, were out of work. That year, the co-op's members had collected 108 pounds and were employing ten members. The members were "earning and learning" as they developed their co-op.

In 1833, the Society formed a co-op store at 15 Toad Lane,

which, though popular for a while, lasted only two years. They decided to divide the profits on capital invested. The rent for the house was six pounds a year. The small front room served as the shop, and the manager lived in the remainder of the house. The co-op felt compelled to keep extending credit to the members to compete with other shops. Being a membership co-op, they never felt that they could charge higher prices to cover the bad debts. Eventually the co-op could not cover its losses. Because it had not registered under the Friendly Societies Act, neither could the co-op legally sue the debtors in court. Charles Howarth, James Standring, and John Aspden were members of the co-op at 15 Toad Lane. Later they used the experience to develop the successful model created by the Pioneers.

Throughout Britain, Owenites started hundreds of co-op stores like the one in Rochdale. Many of them failed for the same reasons as 15 Toad Lane. Merging idealism with economic reality is a dogged task. Owen looked on these attempts at business with caution. Visiting Carlisle in 1836, he found ". . . to my surprise six or seven cooperative societies in different parts of the town, doing well, so they think. It is however high time to put an end to the notion very prevalent in the public mind that this is the social system which we contemplate or that it will form any part or arrangement in the New Moral World." William Lovett, who accompanied him on the journey, added, "But when he (Owen) found that great numbers among them were disposed to entertain many of his views he regarded them with more favour." Although there were some Owenite co-ops still in existence when the Rochdale co-op came into existence, they soon merged into the newer and more successful movement.

A small group of Rochdale reformers maintained their affiliation with the Owenite movement. They formed Branch no. 24 of the Rational Society, and in April of 1838 they acquired the use of an annex of the Weavers Arms, naming it the New Social Institute. In those days, pubs were the focal point of organized community life. Pubs gave birth to the friendly, sick, and burial societies that nourished the working class through hard times. The Weavers Arms was the birthplace and first headquarters of the Rochdale Pioneers, and it

became a regular meeting place for the activists of the day.

Charles Howarth wrote to Owen on December 9, 1839 inviting him to speak in Rochdale, suggesting that "... they had been struggling to gain the support of public opinion," and that "... if you can come we are confident many of the middle and higher classes would attend to hear you." Howarth reminded Owen "... of the pledge you have so long been under to visit this town and it is most desirable for many reasons you do so. The public are continually inquiring when will Robert Owen the founder of your new system come to Rochdale. Hoping you will take this our request into your consideration and, by acceding to it you will very much oblige your admirers and followers in Rochdale and, in particular, your disciple Charles Howarth secretary." There is no record of Owen having replied. However, Robertson believes Owen spoke in Rochdale during the early part of the decade.

A number of Rochdale residents were involved in the last fling of Owenism, which succeeded in starting a series of communities throughout Britain. From 1840 to 1845, the Queenwood Community in Hampshire became the focus of Owen's efforts. By 1843, however, the Owenite branch in Rochdale had run out of steam, abandoned their meeting place, sold the furniture, and dissolved the branch. By 1845, Queenwood collapsed, and with it, the Owenite era. John Bent, one of the Pioneers, lost fifteen pounds in the community scheme. Among the Rochdale Pioneers receiving some of their money back from the Queenwood failure were James Smithies, George Healey, John Garside, William Mallalieu, and John Collier. Alexander Campbell, later one of the founders of the Scottish Cooperative Wholesale Society, was jailed for his debt incurred through his participation in the Owenite Orbiston Community in Scotland.

Owen left for America on August 23, 1844, only days after the first official meeting of the Pioneers, and stayed in the United States almost continuously until the summer of 1846. He was not, therefore, a witness to the events unfolding in Rochdale. Owen was seventy-three when the Pioneers opened their store, and seventy-six by the time he learned of its existence. He showed little interest in this second wave of co-op shops initiated by the success of Rochdale. Their suc-



cess as retail enterprises meant little to him unless their ultimate and only goal was creating community.

### **Rochdale Almost Arrived in America**

On December 29, 1849, James Daly, the Rochdale Pioneers' original secretary, died of cholera on board the *S.S. Transit* bound for America and was buried at sea. A native of Northern Ireland, he meticulously maintained the minute books of the society throughout the early years. Daly was a mathematician, musician, and prominent member of the Oddfellows Society, and he played an active role in getting the co-op going. As a joiner, he built the first set of shelves for the store. However, working, volunteering, and feeding a family of eight children in the "hungry forties" had been exhausting for the Daly family.

Daly, his wife (who died of cholera a few days later), and his children were on their way to Texas to start life again in the New World. Co-op members and Oddfellows had raised the money to send Daly to America.

There is no trace of where they were headed, although Texas was then the Mecca for many Owenites discouraged by the failure of the Queenwood Community. In his visit to America, Owen had favored the then quasi-independent Texas as a home for Utopian colonies. Mexico was also encouraging Utopian colonies. Owen discussed colonies in America with a French Utopian named Etienne Cabet during Cabet's exile in England (1834-39) and again on September 9, 1847, in London. After that meeting, Cabet decided to create a Utopia named Icaria in Texas. An advance guard of sixty-nine people departed for Texas on February 3, 1848. Several days later the French Revolution broke out.

While it is not known where James Daly was headed, he was bringing his talents to the New World to enrich the Utopian movement. America was full of opportunities for a practical idealist such as he. Blessed with meticulous note-taking and commitment, he was on his way toward making a difference. What a pity it is that this Rochdale founder perished before making his mark in the New World.

### Owen's Contribution

To celebrate Owen's eightieth birthday in 1851, a public meeting was held at the John Street Institution in London. Owen exhorted the audience of nearly one thousand to direct their united efforts to "well educate, well employ, well place and cordially unite the human race." In the audience was Karl Marx, then living in London. Marx later wrote to Engels, "In spite of fixed ideas the old man was ironical and lovable." Both Marx and Engels were interested in the educational reforms initiated by Owen at New Lanark. In the 1870s Engels recounted that all social movements, all real advances in England in the interests of the working class were associated with Owen's name.

Owen's influence on the era was unquestionable. Whatever their political hue, activists were required to have an opinion on Owen's ideas. A few years before publication of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) was in contact with Owen. Their common concern about the ills of the industrial city engendered discussion. Were it not for the dramatic changes occurring in Europe, Lambert shows, there is evidence to suggest that Engels might have established an Owenite Colony in Germany in 1845.

Owen died in 1858, days after returning to his birthplace of Newtown in Wales. To commemorate his contribution to the cooperative movement, the Cooperative Union lovingly restored his grave in 1902. George Jacob Holyoake, the devoted Owenite who became the greatest missionary for cooperatives, was the main speaker at the graveside ceremony. Annually, hundreds of thousands of people from all around the world still make pilgrimages to Newtown, Wales; New Lanark, Scotland; and New Harmony, Indiana, to honor the work of Robert Owen.

## Chapter 3



# CHARTISM—People on the MARCH

*There is nothing more difficult to take in hand,  
more perilous to conduct,  
or more uncertain in its success,  
than to take the lead in the introduction  
of a new order of things.*

—Machiavelli

**T**he Chartist movement, although it was a political reform movement paralleled much of the same as Owenism. After the failure of the Reform Act of 1832 to extend democratic rights to all, the People's Charter became the focus for working-class political activity. The Charter was drawn up by William Lovett, a companion of Owen and an activist with the London Co-operative Society from 1832 to 1834. The Charter called for a number of items, including secret ballot, universal adult male suffrage, and no property qualifications for members of parliament.

One eyewitness, R. G. Gammage, had this memory of the numerous Chartist demonstrations:

The processions were frequently of immense length sometimes containing as many as fifty thousand people; and along the whole line there blazed a stream of light, illuminating the lofty sky, like the

reflection of a large city in general conflagration. The meetings themselves were of a still more terrifying character. The very appearance of such a vast number of blazing torches only seemed more effectually to inflame the minds of speakers and hearers.

On Whit Monday in May of 1839, it was estimated that 200,000 people gathered to hear Chartist speakers at Peep Green in Lancashire. "Sell thy garment and buy a sword," proclaimed the Padigham banner.

The Charter presented to Parliament in London on July 12, 1839, was rejected by 235 votes to 46. James Taylor, a preacher from Rochdale's Unitarian Chapel (the Co-op Chapel), was a delegate to the Chartist Convention in London and voiced the town's support of the charter. Three days later, the Chartist Convention voted to call a general strike to begin on August 12 and last for what they called a "sacred month." Chartist meetings were held all across Britain to debate the virtues of a general strike. The Chartist leaders were placed under surveillance.

One such meeting was held in Rochdale in early August. Three months earlier, the Chartist paper, *Northern Star*, reported:

Chartists still continue to purchase arms in the towns and neighborhood. There is a village not far from Rochdale which contains 55 adult males, 45 of whom have each a rifle, and many of them pikes besides. The Chartists have commenced a run on the savings banks in Rochdale, which still continue at an amazing extent, they will have nothing but gold.

The fear of the Chartist movement among the growing middle class was evident. Although initiated to gain popular rights, the Chartist crowd often seemed on the verge of becoming a mob. Thomas Carlyle, the historian, had tried to awaken Britain's rulers to the arrogant mistakes of the French aristocracy. He wrote his *French Revolution* in 1837 to show how the French ruling class was unable to save itself by granting needed reforms to its people. In 1839, he wrote *Chartism* to urge the English ruling class to give the masses

wise leadership and restore prosperity and tranquillity. In 1847 Carlyle came to Rochdale and visited John Bright, the Quaker activist, mill owner, and Member of Parliament. There they talked of the impact of Chartism and the popularity of *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell's new novel about Chartism.

By August 1839, the Chartists remained undecided about holding a general strike, and speakers at meetings around the country voiced uncertainty about the next action. Feargus O'Connor, the firebrand Chartist leader, spoke again in Rochdale in 1840, and was jailed after a speech at a Chartist demonstration. In 1842, after a terrible winter of hunger and unemployment, 15,000 weavers descended on Rochdale and stopped the mills for several days. The Charter was presented to Parliament again in 1842 and again rejected. There were widespread Chartist riots fueled by the frustration of a powerless working class.

In the introduction to the Everyman edition of *Mary Barton*, Margaret Lane wrote:

The novel with a social problem theme was a new and revolutionary development in the eighteen forties; yet Mrs. Gaskell seemed to have no misgivings. The character of John Barton, the hand loom weaver, a man of integrity and intelligence, early trade unionist and convinced Chartist, who in the struggle for justice is driven to commit murder took hold of the imagination from the start.

After the second defeat of the Charter, there appeared only two avenues open for further action. Either the Chartists could fashion an alliance with the middle class, which seemed impossible, or they could organize land colonies to create the two-pound minimum value of land ownership that gave male landowners the vote. In 1845, Feargus O'Connor split from the main Chartist movement and embarked on the latter course by establishing the Chartist Cooperative Land Society. His thrust for developing the Chartist colonies was to create a new and separate society and to gain the vote for colony members through their ownership of land.

**Elizabeth Gaskell**

No British novelist captured the Chartist era as well as Elizabeth Gaskell. She moved to Manchester in 1832, where she married an activist Unitarian minister. As a result, she was an everyday witness to the poverty of the times. Her novel *Mary Barton*, written in 1844, was the story of life in Manchester during the Chartist era. Elizabeth Gaskell had visited Rochdale to talk with the people about their demands for a new standard of life. She included in her book a poem by Samuel Bamford, who led the Rochdale contingent to Peterloo. Gaskell was attracted to the work of the Christian Socialists and their idea of worker cooperatives.

**Chartism and the Pioneers**

Since the north of England was the stronghold of the movement, many of the Pioneers had participated in Chartist activity. In 1834, O'Connor had been a popular candidate for M.P. of Oldham, the neighboring town to Rochdale. In Rochdale there was an active Chartist branch, and Sharman Crawford, the M.P., was pro-Chartist. Abraham Greenwood, who joined the Pioneers in 1846, was the Secretary of the Rochdale Chartist Association at age eighteen. Greenwood told *The Rochdale Observer* in an interview in 1900, "It started with the Chartists . . . It really was a social movement with the idea of bettering the conditions of the people." John Holt was treasurer for a time. David Brooks, John Kershaw, James Maden, James Manock, and John Scowcroft were all active Chartists.

Another Chartist who was a good friend to the Rochdale Pioneers was Thomas Livesy. Born in 1815, he was a contemporary of most of the Pioneers. He led many struggles at the local level to better the conditions of working people, especially those which extended the vote or local control. His favorite tactic was to organize public meetings around the issues of the day and use the lively working-class crowd to pressure the local M.P.s to be as radical as their nonvoting constituents. Livesy became a police commissioner in 1839, a position similar to a city council member today. James Standing, a Unitarian and a Pioneer at both the no. 15 and no. 31 Toad Lane co-ops, was also a commissioner. In 1840,

Livesey was elected to the Board of Guardians and became leader of the group opposed to the Poor Laws. As Livesey pursued working-class demands, he frequently clashed with John Bright who urged middle-class moderation.

From 1841 to 1843, Livesey was an active member of the group that was discussing development of a new Cooperative. In an 1841 article in *The Rochdale Spectator* about the history of the co-op, Ambrose Tomlinson, an active Chartist and cooperator, describes how the members began collecting money for their newest endeavor. By February 7, 1843, they had entrusted to Alderman Livesey the sum of over eight pounds. He agreed to hold the shares in trust for the co-op group, which preceded the Pioneers.

Later, in the 1901 *Rochdale Household Almanac*, Tomlinson stated, "Co-operation originated not from a weavers' strike but from the old Chartist Movement. The Chartists had begun to hold meetings in a room at the corner of Penn Street. At these meetings Co-operation was talked about. The secretary was Thomas Livesey . . . They were discussing Co-operation in 1841, and in 1842 some of the members began to pay three pennies per week in order to accumulate funds in connection with a Cooperative scheme. . . After a while there was a quarrel, the Co-operators in the Society seceded and some of them were amongst the members of the Pioneers' Cooperative Society."

In the 1850s, Livesey became one of the Arbitrators for the Pioneers, a position signifying great trust and respect. When he died, he was given the greatest funeral that Rochdale had ever seen.

In 1848, Samuel Ashworth, one of the Pioneers, was still listed as an owner of two acres in a Chartist colony, along with a Mr. Edmund Kershaw (a Pioneer surname) and Mr. B. Sleddaw, both of Rochdale. Both Miles and Samuel Ashworth went to live in Charterville for a time, but Sam returned to Rochdale after six months. O'Connor made them converts during his visit to Rochdale in 1843. Many of the Pioneers crowded into the Old Theatre on Toad Lane to hear O'Connor speak about better living on the land in Chartist colonies. Meanwhile, William Cooper continued practicing gardening at home in preparation for life at the colony. Fortunately, he

resisted life on the land and stayed to become one of the great co-op stalwarts.

O'Connor always found a great audience waiting for him in Rochdale. On August 2, 1846, O'Connor and Ernest Jones (later to be a great co-op leader and writer) addressed ten thousand people on Blackstone Edge. It was a natural amphitheatre for their adulation. The foreboding Pennine moor overlooking Rochdale was covered in Chartist supporters.

### **Chartism's Final Hour**

The Corn Laws, which drove up the price of bread by taxing imported grain, were repealed in 1846. Workers finally found themselves taken seriously. Many Chartists stood for Parliament in the elections of 1847 and won. Among the winners was Feargus O'Connor, who stood for Nottingham in the Midlands. With the French Revolution of 1848, feelings rose high again: a new Chartist convention was summoned, a new petition was prepared. Once again, however, there were the old obstacles of diverse aims and insufficient organization, not to count the very capable spies planted by the government. Kennington Common in South London was the site of the Chartist rally. The people of London gathered anxiously awaiting word. Would the Chartists choose to rally or revolt? Was the year of European revolution to spread to Britain? Would the capital be in flames before the night was over? A nation stood on edge wondering whether the revolts occurring in 1848 in most European capitals would be repeated in London.

In the end, pouring rain dampened the crowd's spirits and the massed soldiers sobered their minds. Even Samuel Bamford, the old time Radical, was drafted as a constable and sent to Kennington Common to help maintain order. Charles Kingsley and F. D. Maurice, both ordained ministers, rushed to London to try to head off revolution. Kingsley immediately drafted a placard which was posted all over London. He counseled the Chartists to "be wise, and then you must be free, for you will be fit to be free." He wrote home on Monday, April 10 "... All is right as yet. Large crowds, but no one expects any row, as the Chartists will not face



Westminster Bridge . . . and are going to send up only the legal number of delegates to the House (of Commons)." The Charter was presented and subsequently rejected. The deed had been done, the day was over. As the Chartists trudged home in defeat, London breathed a sigh of relief.

The year 1848 signaled the end of an epoch. Europe stood at a precipice and nearly jumped. New forms of struggle replaced the old. Both worker and industrialist advanced in sophistication and retreated from raw power and armed struggle. Combat moved to other fields. The Chartists had had their day. Others were now getting ready to take their place.

While O'Connor attracted thousands of people to support the Chartist colonies, the idea had many financial flaws, and by the late 1840s it had failed. In 1851 the Chartist land scheme was wound up by Act of Parliament. It left in its wake thousands of working people who had placed their dreams and their money in O'Connor's hands. Bravely, Sharman Crawford sat on the Parliamentary Committee that took control over the mess. It took seventy years to untangle the ownership of land in the five colonies established under the Chartist land scheme. To O'Connor's credit, almost all of the buildings erected are lived in today.

Although its supporters were disappointed in the failure of Chartism, the movement towards democracy forged on. Many Chartists provided important leadership in the growing cooperative movement. In 1852, co-op leaders in London initiated a series of lectures to educate the interested public about their plans. Several prominent reformists addressed the meetings, including Bronterre O'Brien, regarded as the ablest leader of Chartism. Twenty years previously, O'Brien, like O'Connor, a fiery Irish speaker, had addressed the Second Cooperative Congress of 1832. Throughout his life, O'Brien supported the ideas of Owen and economic democracy. He believed that the most rapid change in society would only come about through extending the vote to everyone.

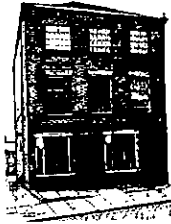
In his 1850 novel, *Alton Locke*, Charles Kingsley writes about the life of a tailor who becomes a Chartist. Locke is asked, "So you are a Chartist still?" Locke replies,

If by a Chartist you mean one who fancies that a change in mere political circumstances will bring about a millennium, I am no longer one. That dream is gone—with others. But if to be a Chartist is to love my brothers with every faculty of my soul—to wish to live and die struggling for their rights, endeavoring to make them, not electors merely, but fit to be electors, senators, kings and priests to God and to his Christ—if that be the Chartism of the future, then am I sevenfold a Chartist.

By 1850, an era of revolutionary protest had run its course. The effort had been costly for the thousands of British working class people who had been imprisoned, fired, intimidated, or attacked. From 1801 to 1835, 472 convict ships sailed to Australia. *The Fatal Shore* by R. Hughes tells the story of the convicts' lives after arriving at the other end of the world. Many were transported for life rather than hanged in England for political or protest crimes.

In 1890, an "Old Chartists" gathering took place in Rochdale and was attended by thirty of the townspeople. The participants reminded each other of the stirring times Chartism had created in the 1840s. Because of their struggle, Britain's power structure had been changed forever. The aristocracy had been replaced by the new captains of industry, the conservatives by the liberals, and a new progressive force had appeared. After a long and hard struggle, ordinary people who organized brought modern-day freedoms to the people of Britain.

## Chapter 4



# These Were the Worst of Times

*Revolts grow from the anger of people;  
movements grow out of their hopes.*

—*Jack Bailey*

*British Cooperative Movement*

*How little can the rich man know  
Of what the poor man feels,  
When Want, like some dark demon foe,  
Nearer and nearer steals!*

*He never tramp'd the weary round,  
A stroke of work to gain,  
And sicken'd at the dreaded sound  
Telling him 'twas in vain.*

*Foot sore, heart sore, he never came  
Back through the winter's wind,  
To a dark cellar, there no flame,  
No light, no food to find.*

*He never saw his darlings lie  
Shivering, the grass their bed;  
He never heard that maddening cry,  
"Daddy a bit of bread!"*

—*Manchester song of the early 1800s*

In 1839, half of all funerals in London were for children under ten years of age.

Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate, visited Manchester in 1808 and was horrified not just by the poverty. He was shown round one mill by the owner, who pointed proudly to the youngest of his work-force.

“You see these children sir,” said he, “they get their bread almost as soon as they can walk about, and by the time they are seven or eight years old bring in money. There is no idleness amongst us; they come at five in the morning, we allow them half an hour for breakfast and an hour for dinner; they leave work at six and another set relieves them for the night; the wheels never stand still.” Southey did not argue with his host. “I listened without contradicting him for who would lift up his voice against Diana at Ephesus?”

At some manufactories [sic], married men having families, are working six full days, and four nights, till nine and ten o'clock, for seven, eight, and eleven shillings a week. The very highest wages, of the swiftest men at such manufactories, are never more than thirteen shillings a week, for fifteen or sixteen hours a day, of intense labor.

Lads, from sixteen to twenty years of age, are working fifteen hours a day, for two shillings, half a crown and three shillings a week. Females from sixteen to twenty years of age, are earning two to three shillings a week; the hours of labor being from twelve to fifteen hours per day.

—*The Co-operator*  
Vol. 2, June 1828

Robertson described life in Rochdale in the late 1830s to early 1840s:

The working class of Rochdale at this period were

very poor, and their chief purchases were meal and coarse flour. Four years previous to this date (1836) 180 beasts were killed weekly in the parish of Rochdale, and in 1841 the number was reduced to 65 or 70. Good joints were difficult to sell, and customers bought a pennyworth or two pennyworth of suet, or bits of steak. Drs. T. H. Wardleworth, Robert Barker, George Morris, and Walter Dunlop (local medical gentlemen and owner of 31 Toad Lane), gave it as their opinion that, owing to the high price of food, and the want of employment, the labouring classes in Rochdale at that time were suffering great and increasing privations; that great numbers were unable to obtain wholesome food in sufficient quantity to maintain them in health; and that they were predisposed to disease, and rendered unable to resist its attacks; that many cases of appalling distress and suffering came almost daily under their notice. They added that the population were in a much worse position then than they were five or six years before, and that for three years past their condition had been gradually sinking, and that they never knew them in so bad a state at any former period.

In the 1840s, people had to pay twenty-four to thirty-six pennies per week for two rooms. Deduct that from the average wage of 120 pennies per week for a 60-hour work week.

James Standring was the Secretary of the Rochdale Ten Hours Committee, and he and Charles Howarth often went to London to testify on behalf of the Ten Hour legislation. Howarth was sent to London by the cotton operatives to meet M.P.s and to watch the progress of the Factory Act. The Act, which limited working hours to a ten-hour day, was passed by Parliament in 1847, and Howarth was there to see it passed.

Engels followed the Ten Hours' Bill closely.

Let us take some of the statements of a speech with which Lord Ashley introduced the Ten Hours' Bill, 15 March 1844, into the House of Commons. Here he gives some data as to the sex and age of the opera-

tives, not yet refuted by the manufacturers, whose statements, as quoted above, cover moreover only a part of the manufacturing industry of England. Of 419,560 factory operatives of the British Empire in 1839, 192,887, or nearly half, were under eighteen years of age, and 242,296 of the female sex, of whom 112,192 were less than eighteen years old. There remain, therefore, 80,695 male operatives under eighteen years, and 96,569 adult male operatives, or not one full quarter of the whole number. In the cotton factories, 56 1/4 per cent; in the woolen mills, 69 1/2 per cent; in the silk mills, 70 1/2 per cent; in the flax-spinning mills, 70 1/2 per cent of all operatives are of the female sex. These numbers suffice to prove the crowding out of adult males. But you have only to go into the nearest mill to see the fact confirmed. Hence follows of necessity that inversion of the existing social order which, being forced upon them, has the most ruinous consequences for the workers. The employment of women at once breaks up the family; for when the wife spends twelve or thirteen hours every day in the mill, and the husband works the same length of time there or elsewhere, what becomes of the children? They grow up like wild weeds; they are put out to nurse for a shilling or eighteenpence a week, and how they are treated may be imagined. Hence the accidents to which little children fall victims multiply in the factory districts to a terrible extent. The lists of the Coroner of Manchester showed for nine months: 69 deaths from burning, 56 from drowning, 23 from falling, 77 from other causes, or a total of 225 deaths from accidents, while in non-manufacturing Liverpool during twelve months there were but 146 fatal accidents.

Sharman Crawford, the Rochdale M.P., said that of the people who lived in Rochdale in 1841, "136 people lived on six pennies per week, 200 on ten pennies, 855 on eighteen pennies, 1,500 on not more than twenty-two pennies. One-eighth of the population lived on less than fifteen pennies a week."

A comparison with the conditions of today highlights the conditions of the 1840s. In 1980, 1.8 percent of all male deaths and 1.4 percent of all female deaths were children under five years of age. In the 1840s, 40 percent of all male deaths and 41 percent of all female deaths were children under five years of age. For women who reached the age of twenty-five, 46 percent died before they reached the age of forty-five. In 1980, the corresponding figure was 2 percent. In only 4 percent of all cases did women in the 1840s reach the age of seventy-five, whereas in 1980 the figure was 60 percent. In 1840, the average life expectancy of a Manchester laborer was seventeen, whereas a Rutland landowner could expect to live to fifty-two.

Once again, Engels paints a bleak picture of conditions in 1844.

The great mortality among children of the working class, and especially among those of the factory operatives, is proof enough of the unwholesome conditions under which they pass their first years. These influences are at work, of course, among the children who survive, but not quite so powerfully as upon those who succumb. The result in the most favourable case is a tendency to disease, or some check in development, and consequent less than normal vigour of the constitution. A nine-year-old child of a factory operative that has grown up in want, privation, and changing conditions, in cold and damp, with insufficient clothing and unwholesome dwellings, is far from having the working strength of a child brought up under healthier conditions. At nine years of age it is sent into the mill to work 6 1/2 hours (formerly 8, earlier still, 12 to 14, even 16 hours) daily, until the thirteenth year; then twelve hours until the eighteenth year.

It was not until 1833 that the first Factory Act made it illegal to employ children under nine, or for women and those under eighteen to work more than twelve hours per day. Sixty years were to pass before another act dealt with health and safety at work.

In her report to the Cooperative Congress of 1892, which was held in Rochdale, Beatrice Potter presented some findings that she derived from the Parliamentary Reports of 1870. The children of Rochdale were not able to receive a fair start in life because their mothers all too often went to work in the mill while their children were still in the cradle. At ten years old, the Rochdale child was one and a half inches shorter and five pounds lighter than the average British school child, and was three and a half inches shorter and weighed eleven pounds less than the average. Rochdale children entered the factory at ten instead of the standard age of twelve.

### **Free Trade, Corn Laws, and the Right to Vote**

The road to political and economic reform took many turns, but its beginnings were associated with the Industrial Revolution and the growing demands of the working class. The combination of high food costs due to the Napoleonic Wars and the effect of the protectionist Corn Laws, the abuse of the factory system, and the squalid living conditions necessitated reform. As you can see, Rochdale was in the thick of things.

Emigration was one of the few options for those seeking economic security and freedom. It is estimated that between 1770 and 1890 eleven million people crossed the Atlantic from Great Britain to the United States. Many left Rochdale for every corner of the world. In the United States, a woolen manufacturing center grew up in central Massachusetts. Some of the mill owners and many of the mill workers came from Rochdale and brought their skills to the New World. Founded in 1869, the village is the only place in the United States bearing the name Rochdale.

The origins of many of the cooperatives in the United States are tied to the presence of immigrant cooperators from Britain who brought their Owenite, Chartist, reformist, and cooperative practices from the Old World to the New World — they simply swapped continents.

Richard Cobden, a great radical leader and father of the "Free Trade Movement," was M.P. for Rochdale in 1859. It was Cobden's idea in 1850 to create Freehold Land Societies



to gain people the right to vote. The society would buy freehold land and split up the ownership into parcels just large enough to give the new owner the right to vote. The Rochdale Freehold Land Society, founded in the same year and led by the Quaker John Bright, added five hundred new voters, almost doubling the electorate. Bright helped raise ten thousand pounds to buy twenty-four acres of land, which was then divided into five hundred lots. Each owner gained the right to vote.

From 1838 to 1846 Cobden fought unsuccessfully to repeal the Corn Laws and adopt policies of free trade that would give British workers and consumers access to food and products from abroad without protectionist taxes. Protectionist laws added taxes that doubled or tripled the real cost of many foods. Prior to the reintroduction of income tax in 1842, taxes, customs, and duties on food provided half of total tax revenue for Britain.

John Bright led the Rochdale branch of the Free Trade Movement, and in 1840 he obtained 9,750 names on a petition to repeal the Corn Laws. The petition presented to Parliament from Rochdale was 170 feet long. In December of 1842, Cobden and Bright both spoke at a rally of the Anti-Corn Law League at the Old Theatre on Toad Lane. The rally raised spirits and, more importantly, the grand sum of 1,700 pounds for the League's funds.

A Lancashire mill owner and M.P., Sir Robert Peel, abandoned his support for the Corn Laws in 1841 and carried the repeal laws in 1846. The Irish Famine caused by the failure of the potato crop in 1845 and bad harvests in Britain set the stage for repeal. Peel first became Prime Minister for a few months in 1834, and then again from 1841 to 1846. Repeal of the Corn Laws split the Conservative Party.

As leader of the repeal movement, Peel and his followers joined with the Whigs to form the embryonic Liberal Party. The new grouping was committed to free trade, religious tolerance, and Irish Home Rule. Together they brought about a series of major reforms of the British political and economic system. Peel was twenty-one when he first entered Parliament. He is remembered often as the father of the modern London police force. To this day, the slang for the English po-

lice is “bobbies” or “peelers.” Sir Robert’s life is commemorated by a stained glass window lighting the grand staircase of the Rochdale Town Hall.

### Dickens’ Christmas Carol—A Prelude to the Pioneers

Charles Dickens probably drew the best literary picture of how life was lived in the 1840s. His great novel *A Christmas Carol*, was published on December 19, 1843, a year — almost to the day — before Toad Lane opened its doors. Is there anyone who cannot immediately conjure up a picture of Bob Cratchit, Tiny Tim, Ebenezer Scrooge, and the ghost of Silas Marley? The other side of England that Dickens depicted in *A Christmas Carol* accurately describes Rochdale’s Christmas of 1844. Dickens wrote the book in six weeks. The book set the stage for Dickens’ secular humanistic theme to become the model holiday celebration in the English-speaking world. Dickens saw everyone as part of the same family. Harmony and unity were two of his most important themes, and, through them, the world could have a happy ending.

A visit to Manchester was a major inspiration for *A Christmas Carol*. In the summer of 1843 Dickens journeyed to the north of England. There he made a speech at the Manchester Athenaeum, a local institution dedicated to providing working men with an education. In his speech Dickens declared that ignorance itself was “the most prolific parent of misery and crime.” He then urged that employers and employees come together and share “a mutual duty and responsibility.” One week later on his return to London, Dickens began to develop the idea for *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens was thirty-one when he wrote *A Christmas Carol*. By that age he had become the most popular author in the English-speaking world.

The book thrust him onto the world’s stage. However, his own life had colored the story. His father had been thrown into debtor’s prison, and, at the age of ten, Dickens had been put to work in a crumbling warehouse by the Thames earning eighty cents a week. Dickens later wrote, “No words can express the secret agony of my soul . . . of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart . . .”

On the eve of a revolutionary era which peaked in 1848, Dickens' message was that hearts had to change if society was to change. Dickens' philosophy would soon be challenged by another author. In 1849, Karl Marx moved to the same London neighborhood as Dickens. While Marx appreciated Dickens' literary skills, he was convinced that society would only change with the rise of the working class. As Marx said, "Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways, but the point however is to change it." Change without revolution was almost impossible for Marx to imagine. The two authors took different paths and had different dreams for a better world.



## Chapter 5



# The Night the Light Was Lit!

The Weavers Open  
THEIR STORE AT LAST

*And the humble cooperative weavers of Rochdale, by saving two pennies when they had none to spare, and holding together when others separated, until they had made their store pay, set an example which created for the working-classes a new future.*

— **George Jacob Holyoake**

The store first opened from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. on Saturday evening, December 21, the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. Darkness arrives by 5 p.m. in this part of northern Europe—along with temperatures in the low thirties. The damp, foggy night air would bring a chill to anyone's bones. It was St. Thomas' Day, the saint also known as "Doubting Thomas." Under the old Gregorian calendar, adopted less than a hundred years earlier, December 21 was Christmas Day. Could the evening have been any more symbolic for the start of the modern cooperative movement?

James Smithies took down the shutters from the windows for the first time, and without fanfare the co-op was open. The honor of selling the first item was bestowed upon nineteen-year-old Samuel Ashworth. He was so nervous and inexperienced that, after seeing him struggle to wrap the pound or so of sugar in paper, the first customer decided to

carry the sugar home in her apron.

The loyal members stood inside the shop huddled together for warmth and companionship. They shuffled their wooden clogs on the cold flagstone floor, watching their breath float across the candlelight. The windows were covered in damp, so no one could see outside. The sound of clogs clattering along the cobbled streets was their only guide to the arrival of a customer. All too often the sound of those clogs rushed past the store and disappeared into the distance like a passing train. Yet a few brave and loyal souls ventured through the door, and their humble purchases helped make history. Spirit furnished the members' capital, hope provided their inventory, hearts nurtured community, while their minds focused on their future.

Holyoake described the presence of the "doffers" at the door on opening night. The "doffers" were the young factory boys who loved to bring mischief wherever they gathered. "On the night when the store was opened, the 'doffers' came out strong in Tbad Lane peeping with ridiculous impertinence round the corners, ventilating their opinion at the top of their voices, or standing before the door, inspecting with pertinacious insolence, the scanty arrangement of butter and oatmeal—at length they disclaimed in chorus, "Aye! the owd weavers shop is opened at last."

In Rochdale, the Pioneers could not afford to philosophize. They had mouths to feed, work to do, and money to raise. In Rochdale the almost barren shop opened four days before the Christmas of 1844. Here, looking at the empty shelves, the Pioneers were searching for change more real than Dickens' warm feelings and less horrific than Marx's revolution. Hopefully, the happy response of Tiny Tim to the troubled world around him would also uplift the spirits of the Pioneers: "God bless us every one."

### **The Pioneers Prepare**

The Pioneers began operations in the front room with sixteen pounds, eleven shillings and eleven pennies left to spend on inventory after paying for some improvements. David Brooks was the first purchaser appointed by the society. He made eighty-four to ninety-six pennies a day at his

regular job, but frequently left to earn three pennies per hour working for the co-op. Brooks purchased twenty-five pounds of butter, fifty-six pounds of sugar, six sacks of flour, and one sack of oatmeal for the Pioneers' opening night. The store opened with five items for sale: sugar, flour, oatmeal, butter, and tallow candles. The board meeting held on December 12 had approved the first four items.

However, the Pioneers were forced to buy two dozen tallow candles on opening night because the gas company refused to supply gas for the lights. The Pioneers soon realized that they could buy candles cheaper by purchasing in bulk and selling what they did not use. Samuel Ashworth, the son of the first president, was appointed salesman, and Thomas Cooper was named cashier to open the store and serve as shopman. If the store did not show a surplus in the first three months, they agreed to take nothing for their service. However, if it was able to pay a dividend, they were to receive three pennies per hour, which amounted to nine pennies per night. The salary of a permanent night shopman was to be set at fifty-four pennies per week.

In the beginning the shop opened only two nights per week from 8 to 10 p.m. In March of 1845, the store hours were set for Monday 4 to 9 p.m., Wednesday 7 to 9 p.m., Thursday 8 to 10 p.m., Friday 7 to 9 p.m., and Saturday 1 to 11 p.m. In April of 1851 the store began operating during the day. When the weavers and their families turned up on December 21, 1844, they found the door had been painted the same shade of green used by the Chartists. The co-op's storekeepers wore sleeve bands of the same color. The Pioneers may have given up on any hopes of Chartist success, but they would not so easily give up Chartist symbols. It was probably Miles Ashworth, a Chartist supporter, who painted the door. In 1993 the door was repainted again in Chartist Green in preparation for the co-op's 150th anniversary.

In Britain there was a long sequence of cooperative efforts aimed toward relieving the suffering imposed by the Industrial Revolution. One of the earliest occurred in 1760, when a group of workers opened their own corn mills at Chatham and Woolwich. Later, in 1797, another worker-owned mill opened in Hull. In 1816 the Sheerness Economi-

cal Society established its own bakery. These early efforts all focused on lowering the cost of bread, the main food staple, through production activities. Consumers were not able to grow wheat, nor were they in a position to mill the flour or mass bake the bread to reduce cost. For centuries in Europe there was a direct correlation between the price of bread and the outbreak of revolts.

Up in Scotland, the Fenwick Weavers opened a store in 1769, the Govan Victualling Society was founded in 1777, and the Lennoxton Cooperative Society was formed in 1812. The last co-op is credited with operating on a system of paying a dividend on purchases. Alexander Campbell, the Scottish Owenite, claims to have developed the concept before Charles Howarth. A similar co-op in England called the Oldham Cooperative Supply Company opened in 1795. Each one of these retail cooperatives was focused on local relief and not on developing an alternative economic system or Utopian community.

It is more than a mere historical note to mention that the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1844 was in place when the Rochdale Pioneers were looking at registering. This new act and related subsequent legislation are seen as one of the foundations of modern capitalism. These acts introduced the concept of legal liability, which meant that investors were at risk in a corporation only to the extent of their investment. Prior to the act, investors in companies were personally liable for all the debts of the corporation. Up until then, only the very rich could afford to form corporations. This act created opportunity for small firms and investment possibilities for the growing middle class. The foundation for modern co-operation, communism, and capitalism was established in the same year.

In 1843 there was a great strike by the flannel weavers of Rochdale. The strike failed, causing great distress throughout the town, and the weavers began to look for other ways to better their lives. John Kershaw, one of the original Pioneers recounted:

In the summer of 1843, Rochdale was placarded, announcing a discussion on "The best means of obtain-



ing the People's Charter." I attended that discussion; so did Charles Howarth, James Smithies and James Daly. It was there I first heard the principles of the Pioneers announced. Charles Howarth taking the lead, was well supported by Smithies, Daly and others. Mr. Howarth showed, as I thought very clearly that it was the only lever by which the working-class could permanently improve their social and political condition. His scheme and its details were so well studied out, and clear that it commanded assent. It was said at this meeting that a cooperative society had been in existence in Rochdale not more than two years before, and that it had gone down. Howarth at once showed us the reason why. He seemed thoroughly acquainted with the cause, and was well prepared with a new principle which would keep continually infusing new life into the movement.

The debates were usually held in the Rochdale Temperance or Chartist Room on Sunday afternoons. At a later meeting, held at the Weavers Arms during Christmas of 1843, John Kershaw asked Howarth how long it would take to get the land and workshops under the control of the workers if they each invested three pennies a week and allowed all the profits to accumulate to the cooperative so it could grow. At the next meeting Howarth presented a paper showing that working men would become their own employees in fifteen years if they invested in the co-op, gave their loyalty to the store, and did not take profit.

Robertson recounts the next steps of the Pioneers:

Again and again was discussed the advisability of starting a cooperative store, where goods could be sold free from adulteration and at reasonable prices, and by some then unsettled means, the profit, after paying all expenses, to be distributed amongst the members. At times their enthusiasm rose very high, and their faith in the scheme was very strong; but sometimes their spirits were depressed, especially when they remembered how the former store had failed, many of the promoters losing a considerable

sum of money. Charles Howarth, James Smithies, William Co-oper, and James Daly, who were blessed with buoyant spirits, could not be frightened from the path by such gloomy forebodings, and Charles Howarth continually pointed out that the shoal on which the first store had been wrecked was the credit system, while in their projected plan this danger was to be avoided by supplying goods for ready money only. Night after night the undertaking was considered, and even on Sabbath afternoons they sat round the cosy fireplace of Mr. Smithies' dwelling, and pondered over the poverty of the present and the hopes of the future. They knew that hundreds in their midst were steeped in misery; that the wealthy class, who found them poor, would keep them so; that "blessed was he that considereth the poor;" and it was their ambition to devise some method to remedy the mournful state of domestic life. Although their means were small, their views were of a colossal description . . .

At length they decided to put their plans into practice as an experiment, for practical knowledge is much superior to theoretical, and to this end they bought a bag of meal at a wholesale warehouse, and divided it amongst themselves at cost price. By this means they procured this wholesome article of food at a very reduced price, and were tempted to buy a sack of potatoes, which was shared out in a like manner, and they were much benefited.

George Jacob Holyoake, a leading Owenite, reformist voice, and writer, had spoken about the issues of the day at a meeting in Rochdale in 1843. Later, Holyoake would become the leading chronicler of the success of the Rochdale Pioneers and cooperation in Britain and would travel throughout Europe and the United States actively promoting cooperatives.

The co-op held its first official meeting on Sunday, August 11, 1844. There were nine people in attendance. Elected as President was Miles Ashworth; Secretary, James Daly; and Treasurer, John Holt. The others present included

James Bamford, Charles Howarth, James Holt, James Smithies, William Taylor, and James Tweedale. At the next quarterly meeting, Charles Howarth was elected President.

The cooperators held a second meeting on August 15, at the Social Institution. On that date they adopted the motion, "That the society date its establishment, 15th August, 1844." The co-op was registered as the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society on October 24, 1844. It was registered under the Friendly Society Act of 1836, which limited transactions to members. It is believed that the word cooperative was purposefully left out of the name because of the negative association with the failure of the previous co-op on Toad Lane.

James Daly did not object to the use of the word "Pioneers" but he was amused by it claims Robertson, "... for he had in his mind's eye the pioneers who were sent forth to facilitate the progress of an army, and he remarked that they might as well call themselves 'Equitable Shovellers.'"

At this time there were no laws in England which suited the needs of the new cooperative. James Standring had obtained a copy of the Friendly Societies Act and was studying how to form an association. The by-laws eventually were fashioned after those of the Rational, Sick, and Burial Society, an insurance society established by the Owenite Manchester Congress of 1837. They were also similar to the model rules of the 1832 Congress. The founders' plan contained many of the ideas laid out by Dr. King in *The Co-operator*. The later Industrial and Provident Acts of 1853, 1862, and 1876 were all created to provide a home for the growing cooperative sector, and they allowed co-ops to sell to non-members.

Although there are a number of differing lists of the original members, most co-op historians seem willing to accept those of G. D. H. Cole, in his book *Century of Co-operation*, clarified by co-op historian Arnold Bonner in *British Co-operation*. Cole's comprehensive survey shows the twenty-eight names regarded as the original members. They were all male; their average age at the time of the founding of Rochdale was 35, and the average age at death for the twenty-eight was 64.8 years old. However, in 1844 the ages of the four key figures were as follows: Howarth (32), Smithies

(25), Ashworth (19) and Cooper (24); the average age when the store opened was 25 and at their death was 49. (See Appendix A).

The ground floor of 31 Toad Lane was for rent—the Methodists operated a day school on the middle floor, and the Bethel Chapel occupied the top floor. The three-year lease for the ground floor of Dr. Walter Dunlap's warehouse was ten pounds per year, with the first three months to be paid in advance. Dunlop, a local medical doctor who was appalled at the poverty of the working-class cooperators, would not lease to the Pioneers. Charles Howarth stepped forward, personally guaranteed the lease, and paid the first quarter's rent. The first store measured 23 feet wide and 50 feet deep, about 1150 square feet. The retail part of the store measured 23 feet wide and 17 feet deep, measuring 391 square feet. The rear section was used for inventory and meetings.

Built around 1790, the building had been used for many years as a storehouse by the Pioneer Regiment, although there is supposedly no connection with the regiment's name and that of the co-op. Many groups used the word *pioneer* in that era to suggest their position at the forefront of change. A military barracks had stood at the corner near the co-op at Toad Lane and Blackwater Street ever since the riots of 1831; the troops finally left Rochdale in 1846.

### Building Capital

*The weavers of Rochdale who founded modern cooperative enterprise balanced independence with interdependence, self interest with good will, and action with foresight.*

—President Franklin D. Roosevelt  
*Greetings to Rochdale, 1944*

Prior to opening the store, the Pioneers collected twenty-eight pounds in capital, one pound each from many of the twenty-eight founders at the rate of two pennies a week. William Mallalieu added one pound to his installment, and David Brooks lent the Co-op five pounds and another five pounds came from the Weavers Union. Although not all of the Pioneers were weavers, most of them were involved with ei-

ther the cotton or wool weaving industry in Rochdale. Because of the level of artisanship and the age of many of the Pioneers, they became known affectionately as the Ow'd Weighvers, Lancashire dialect for old weavers.

Initially, a number of collectors, including James Tweedale and William Williams, were appointed to go from house to house on Sunday mornings to collect the members' weekly subscriptions of two or three pennies. The money was handed to the committee, which met every Sunday afternoon at James Smithies' house on Lord Street. Each member invested the equivalent of two weeks' wages and committed to a total investment of ten weeks wages. Measure that against the average investment of members in consumer cooperatives today! Does anyone today have the equivalent of ten weeks' wages as an investment in their co-op? It was this commitment of capital that gave the co-ops the resources to build their movement.

The 1854 Almanac of the Pioneers stated, "How many stores have languished for years, flabby in pocket and lean in limb because its shabby minded members starved it by hardly subscribing one pound each." The Pioneers had planned too long to want to repeat the mistakes of other co-ops who undercapitalized the business. The Pioneers were intent on listening to Dr. King's admonition: "Workmen united together must be independent. Let them save, and save, and save, to form a common capital. Let this capital be their master."

To become a member of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, individuals had to appear at a meeting, pay one shilling (twelve pennies) immediately, and commit to paying a minimum of three pennies per week or thirty-nine pennies quarterly until each member had capital equal to five pounds (five shares at one pound each) invested in the co-op. A member could not invest more than one hundred pounds, a most unlikely occurrence, since in that day one hundred pounds could buy two houses. From 1844 to 1862 the liability of members for the debts of the society was unlimited. If the co-op failed, everyone was responsible for its total debts. Any member not being able to pay regularly (except for sickness, distress, or unemployment) was fined three pennies. The co-

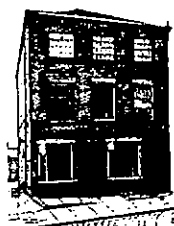
op stated, "The amount of capital each member ought to supply in order that the store may do well for him is eight pounds."

### **A Financial Return Based Upon Economic Use**

The concept of paying a dividend on purchases or usage is a practice which distinguishes co-ops from other enterprises. For the first hundred years of the Rochdale co-op, the dividend was both a cash machine and an equity builder. Copied all over the world, it continues to be an important member benefit bringing critical value to the cooperative. Howarth deserves immense credit for transforming the concept into reality. However, there is the possibility that Howarth first learned of the idea from Archibald Campbell. Campbell was an active Owenite, involved in the Scottish Owenite colony at Orbiston, and was one of the early organizers of the Scottish cooperative movement. Campbell had first advocated the idea of a dividend to customers rather than investors in 1830, and he lectured in Rochdale about co-ops a number of times between 1839 and 1843.

From the surplus or profits, invested member capital would receive 3.5 percent—soon increased to 5 percent—interest to attract capital. After paying interest on member capital, the store paid a quarterly dividend on purchases to the members. All interest and dividends were paid into the members' share accounts until they reached four pounds. After that, members received the interest and dividends directly in cash. The co-op developed a unique model to repay customers on the basis of upon their transactions with the society. The co-op focused reward on use and the co-op model was born.

## CHAPTER 6



## THE PIONEERS MAKE PROGRESS

*For my own part, I am not ashamed to say that if ten years ago anybody had prophesied to me the success of the cooperative system, as illustrated in the towns of the North, if I had been told that laboring men would associate together for mutual advantage, I should have regarded the prediction as absurd. There is, in my opinion, no greater social marvel than the manner in which these societies flourish, combined with a consideration of the soundness of the basis on which they are built.*

—Prime Minister William Gladstone  
House of Commons, 1864

Initially, the store did from four to seven pounds in weekly volume. Within a few months of opening, the committee decided to expand hours and stay open every evening except Tuesday and Sunday. They also decided to sell tea and tobacco, for which they needed licenses, so the members agreed to raise the necessary money. Once again, as he had done with rental of the store, Charles Howarth stepped forward to hold the license and liability in his name. By December of 1845, the store's weekly volume was doing upwards of thirty pounds per week.

In 1847, sales of thirty-six pounds a week were comparable to those of other small shops, but five to ten times smaller than those of larger ones. The co-op therefore did not yet pose a challenge to the other retailers of Rochdale. Their

decision to sell at market prices meant they were not trying to use price to build their market share. The co-op had two maxims: "To be safe we must sell at a profit," and "To be honest we must sell at a profit." This focus and drive for a profitable operation was a legacy of the previous failed co-op in Rochdale. It was indeed a major reason for their defining the modern model of cooperative development. It is their economic success and growth that made the world copy the practices of the Pioneers.

At the end of the first quarter of operations, the co-op paid a dividend of three pennies per pound spent (240 pennies in a pound). The fourth quarter returned a dividend of seven pennies. Soon the co-op's dividend varied between twenty-four to thirty pennies per pound spent, or a minimum of a ten percent dividend on purchases.

The years of 1846 to 1848 were marked by slow progress and a number of setbacks. The year 1847 was a disastrous one for the economy of Britain, and there was a major cholera epidemic. The co-op also seemed to go through the same disension of any new democratic organization, with arguments about religion and nonreligious Sunday activities at the store. A number of members withdrew. Somehow things held together, and the co-op toiled on.

Interestingly, in the midst of these setbacks, the failure of the Rochdale Savings Bank in 1849 gave the young co-op society its initial economic credibility. Most working-class people in Rochdale had deposited their meager savings in the bank, including 191 sick clubs serving 10,000 members. Disastrously, the bank's owner had used the deposits to cover losses incurred in his other industrial activities. In comparison the co-op was an attractive and solid place to invest one's hard-earned pennies. Members were also impressed that they were allowed to inspect the open books of the penny capitalists at the co-op's quarterly meetings and democratically elect the board.

In 1851, the co-op decided to open all day and they appointed the first salaried officer, James Smithies, to act as secretary. He was paid fifteen pounds per year, and was to manage a superintendent (William Cooper) and two shopmen (John Rudman and James Standing) at the



weekly wages of 18, 16, and 15 shillings. All four were members of the original twenty-eight. At the same meeting, they clarified that no board member of the Pioneers shall be an employee or vice-versa.

The decade of the 1850s was one of tremendous growth for the Pioneers. At the end of 1850 there were 390 members and a retail volume of 13,179 pounds. In 1860 there were 3,450 members and a retail volume of 152,063 pounds, approximately a tenfold increase. The Pioneers' growth and profitability allowed them to pursue many different opportunities.

Members from the Castleton district of Rochdale petitioned the board in 1856 to open a store on their side of town, and within three months the first branch store was open. A smaller cooperative society asked to be merged with the Pioneers, and their store became the second branch store on March 7, 1857. Members in different parts of Rochdale immediately petitioned for a store in their neighborhood, and the Pioneers opened two other branches by June 2, 1857. By 1860 there were eight branches, and by 1875 there were sixteen. Ten out of the sixteen stores were owned by the co-op, and twelve of the sixteen had newsrooms.

The co-op began with a grocery department in 1844, added a butchers' department in 1846, then a drapery department in 1847, and later added shoemaking in 1852. In 1855 the Pioneers opened a wholesale department from which they made their joint buying available to other societies. By 1856 the Pioneers had also opened up another shop at 8 Toad Lane, probably to display and manufacture shoes and tailoring. A little later the Pioneers opened a furnishings showroom across the road from 31 Toad. Other services were added such as bakeries, dairies, building and painting, laundry, and coal delivery. Many of these were all brought together when the Central Stores were opened in 1867.

As the Pioneers were then linked with the Christian Socialists and other progressive groups (the Red), a number of other co-ops were founded. The Conservative Industrial Society (the Blue) was started, then an Irish Society (the Green) began, and later the Rochdale Provident (the Yellow), a group that did not like the links with the Cooperative Wholesale

Society. By 1874 the Pioneers had 6,444 members, the Conservatives had 1,206, and the Provident had 884. The Green had already died, the Blue would be next, and the Yellow merged with the Pioneers in 1933.

From the very start, the Pioneers had been concerned about the adulteration of food. In a protest against the adulteration of flour by the local millers, the Pioneers decided to start the Rochdale District Cooperative Corn Mill Society in 1850. The mill grew so fast that a new mill was erected in 1856, and by 1862 the new mill was supplying fifty-six co-op stores. The mill was enlarged three times, and when the Cooperative Congress met in Rochdale in 1892 the mill employed over seventy people. However, with the changes in transportation and national competition, the local co-ops generally agreed to turn over the milling business to the Cooperative Wholesale Society milling division.

Another business owing its start to the Pioneers was the Rochdale Cooperative Manufacturing Society. This society was a cooperative partnership of capital and labor. The Society had the support of many cooperators anxious to see labor gain a return on their efforts in partnership with capital. Many of the mill workers and partners had seen the fruits of cooperation through the growth of their shares in the Pioneers Society and the Corn Mill. Because of its cooperative nature, the Mitchell Hey Mill was the last to lay off people during the Cotton Famine and the first to take everyone back. However, at the end of the famine, with speculation in the air, the society stopped sharing profits with the workers to increase the profits paid to capital. From that day on, the mill lost its cooperative flavor and became a normal joint stock company.

As the Pioneers made progress, a coherent philosophy emerged. The cooperative idea was born in a revolutionary era, but the dour Pioneers mounted a unique "counter-revolution." When members exchanged money over the counter for the cooperative's goods, an empire was born, an empire meant to equalize, not to exploit. The Pioneers believed that trading together could build a better world, one without conflict. Revolutions were occurring frequently throughout Europe, and groups secretly plotted to overthrow governments.

While others urged armed revolt, strikes, and mass action on the streets, the cooperators quietly built the people's business. Amidst the revolutionary working-class fervor, cooperators adopted "Labor and Wait" as a motto, the beehive as a symbol to suggest industriousness, and solid brand names such as "Perseverance," "Federation," and "Anchor."



## Chapter 7



# Champions of the Co-op

Pride Builds an Idea

*O Teacher of Teachers and Helper of all,  
Thou knowest our need, and thou hearest our call —  
Give strength to they servants their task to fulfill,  
And send forth, we pray thee, more labourers still.*

*(This hymn was sung at the Unitarian Chapel, Clover Street,  
Rochdale on Sunday, October 20, 1844, four days before the co-op  
was incorporated. A number of the Pioneers were chapel members.)*

Most of the original members of the Pioneers had been active or sympathetic to the Chartist cause. Many had also been followers of Robert Owen. After Chartism ebbed, a large portion of the Pioneers would describe themselves as socialists. Yet at the same time many of them were very religious and participated in the growth of the nondenominational church and chapel movement. The birth of religious movements outside of the established Church of England was another attempt to wrest power away from existing institutions. The co-op and the chapel walked hand in hand down the road to a more democratic land. More importantly, as is often the case in history, existing groups gave birth and support to new groups. Three groups stand out in particular as providing an early home for discussions, membership re

cruitment, and organizing support for the co-op.

### **The Unitarians**

The Unitarian Chapel on Clover Street, built in 1818, became known as the "Co-op Chapel." A number of Unitarians played important roles in developing the co-op: Miles Ashworth became the first President (he was one of the guards sent to accompany Napoleon when exiled to the island of St. Helena in 1818); his son, Samuel Ashworth, one of the first shopkeepers; James Smithies, the chief of the fighting Pioneers and the only one to become a member of the Rochdale Town Council; and James Wilkinson, a lay pastor at the Chapel for forty years, who gave the hard-working members a home on Sunday. Charles Howarth became a leader in the nearby Heywood Unitarian Church.

### **The Socialists' Institute**

The other institution supportive of the Pioneers in its early days was the Socialists' Institute, founded in 1838 next door to the Weavers Arms. Thomas Livesy, later an Alderman of Rochdale and a good friend of the Pioneers, was the treasurer of the Institute. The Institute sponsored fervent debates among the Chartists, Owenites, and socialists. One minute they were foes at the Institute, the next minute they were friends at the Weavers' Arms. The proximity of the two was good for politics. The "pubs and clubs" of the North were the centers of working-class life. Here, the ideas of the day were discussed, and various friendly societies were organized and operated. Even the teetotalers had their temperance halls. Working people might be willing to go without a drink, but they were not willing to go without their pub. It was in the pub, club, and chapel that the early Pioneers would gather with their friends and supporters and gain the confidence to meet the challenges of another day.

### **Christian Socialists**

In the early days of the co-op's existence, the Christian Socialists became their legal and parliamentary champions. The Christian Socialists were influenced by Frederick Denison Maurice, who wrote *The Kingdom of Christ*. The au-

thor identified a progressive social message within the teachings of Christ, and that message was taken up by a group of respectable and learned followers. One of the first was Charles Kingsley, author of *Alton Locke*. Kingsley wrote to Maurice in the summer of 1844 asking for a meeting with Maurice to gain his advice on how to be an activist Christian.

Other leading Christian Socialists included Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's School Days*, John Malcolm Ludlow, a famous lawyer of the day, and Edward Vansittart Neale. For many years, the Christian Socialists gave lectures in the halls of the local cooperatives throughout Britain. Often, they were keynote speakers at the Cooperative Congress and would come to Rochdale to teach in the classes given by the Pioneers. Quite a few Christian Socialists wrote widely read pamphlets on cooperation. Many of them were also strong internationalists and played an important role in fostering the beginnings of the International Cooperative Alliance.

Educated at Oxford and later a renowned barrister, Neale was to give his professional life and most of his sizable family fortune to building the cooperative movement. Neale drafted the Industrial and Provident Societies Act of 1852, which gave birth to the freedom of cooperative trade. The Act removed the numerous restrictions placed upon cooperatives, particularly those that limited co-ops from working together on joint ventures, the ownership of property, and the raising of capital. This act is known as the "Magna Charta of Co-operation."

Later, in 1876, Neale played the key role in drafting amendments to the Industrial and Provident Societies Act, which allowed the single retail cooperatives to branch out or to federate into wholesaling, banking, and distribution. Neale also played a major role in drafting the incorporation papers of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, the Co-operative Insurance Company, the Co-operative Newspaper Society, the Co-operative Production Federation, and the Co-operative Union.

Roy Garratt, the Curator of the Pioneers Museum and the Librarian of the Cooperative Union, calls Neale "the unknown giant of Co-operation" for all he accomplished on be-

half of the movement. Neale worked ceaselessly for development of worker cooperatives and for profit sharing with workers in consumer cooperatives. Garratt recounts, "Altogether in the 1850s Neale spent some 40,000 pounds of his own money (about 2 million pounds in today's money) on these cooperatives."

Neale died in 1892, having seen the co-op movement grow from one store to thousands and the idea spread all across the world. His steady role in guiding critical legislation through Parliament should be regarded as the passport to progress for the cooperative movement. At death, he was honored both by cooperators and by the nation. A memorial service was held for him at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, where a permanent plaque was unveiled in the crypt. The inscription reads:

*He neither power nor riches sought.  
For others, not himself, he fought.  
Union is strength.*

His contribution to cooperatives should never be forgotten.

### **South East Lancashire Folk — Proud People**

Historically, Toad Lane was one of the busiest streets, leading directly to the open-air market and town center of Rochdale. There is a belief that its original name was "The Old Lane" which was changed by Lancashire dialect into Towd Lane. An 1831 map shows Toad Lane as being the original road from northern Lancashire into the center of Rochdale. On the map, Toad Lane is depicted as "old road to Whitworth," further reason to believe that Towd Lane has veracity.

John Collier, creator of the character "Tim Bobbin," Samuel Bamford, and Edwin Waugh are the three greatest writers of Lancashire dialect. They all had strong ties to Rochdale and co-ops and were builders of regional working-class pride. John Collier's son, Tom, addressed a crowd of thirteen thousand at Rochdale a fortnight before Peterloo, and Tom's nephew, John, became one of the earnest original



Pioneers. John Collier even had the early co-op symbol, the beehive, carved on his grave.

Edwin Waugh (1817-1890), the famous Lancashire dialect writer, was born in Rochdale, near "Old Clock Face" on Toad Lane. In 1844, Waugh returned from London to Rochdale and must have observed the new co-op. Waugh was the author of the first song published in Lancashire dialect, which appeared in *The Manchester Examiner* in 1856. Waugh was an honored speaker at many co-op meetings and at the opening of the Milkstone co-op store of the Pioneers Society in 1872. It was from the Milkstone store in Rochdale during the Second World War that the BBC broadcast the greetings from Rochdale to cooperators in the United States in 1944.

Waugh used the appetite of the newspaper age to spread the virtues of Lancashire dialect to a growing working-class readership. The rise of Manchester as "Cotton Capital of the World" led to a growth in regional pride. The opening of the Manchester Royal Exchange in 1874 and the 36-mile-long Manchester Ship Canal opened in 1894 were the two most physical proofs that Manchester was emerging as the second most important city of England, after London. The unique northern dialect was now a part of the robust Industrial Revolution, but not always welcome in the drawing rooms of London. That bias drove people in the North to see themselves as different from people in the South.

Samuel Bamford, who worked in London over a decade, said, "I have heard more common sense spoken in half an hour in a Lancashire tap room than I heard in my whole stay in London." The way was paved for the arrival of the protest novel written in dialect. In 1848, a transplanted southerner, Elizabeth Gaskell, published *Mary Barton*, a story about life in Manchester during the Chartist era. It was the first national best-seller to feature Lancashire dialect.

Writing in his preface to *Lancashire Sketches*, published in 1881, Waugh wrote, "Lancashire has some learned writers who have written upon themes generally and locally interesting. . . but for native force and truth John Collier and Samuel Bamford are probably the foremost of all genuine expositors of the characteristics of the Lancashire people."

Through their work, the three writers each gave the ordinary people of Lancashire the self-esteem needed to perform extraordinary acts. Flush with the immense changes occurring in society, working people were no longer passive. The co-ops were beneficiaries of this pride as Lancashire people stood together to build a strong and expansive movement. The dialect writers elevated the rich qualities of working people and added color to the culture of South Lancashire. With their newly found pride, working people were prepared to take on the impossible. To commemorate Rochdale's role in dialect writing, the town was chosen as the site for the Lancashire Dialect Writers' Memorial.

## CHAPTER 8



# Co-op—The Pioneer of Pure Food

*The energetic and enterprising pursuit of such policies, often in the face of a hostile public, is a striking testimony to the faith of the early co-operators. Through them, and through them alone, some at least of the working-classes were familiarized with a standard of purity they had never before known, and were educated to an appreciation of the moral as well as the economic value of honest dealing.*

—John Burnett  
*Plenty and Want*

Newspaper reports and studies of the 1840s show that sugar and rice cost twelve pennies per pound, pure milk was too expensive for any working person to buy, and the milk they tried to sell to working people was too watered down to be worth it. Most working people drank concoctions of dried apple leaves, because the cheapest sort of real tea was ninety-six pennies per pound. Beer ranged from twelve to eighteen pennies per gallon, and was drunk all too often in place of tea. Only a few families ate meat more than once a week, usually in a stew, and many could afford it only for Christmas. Few people ate fruit unless it was stolen. Arrests for stealing from orchards were usually highest on Sundays, the one day off for working people. Bread was ten pennies a loaf. Only potatoes were cheap enough for everyone. Cab-

bage, potatoes, bread, and beer were the unappetizing diet staples of working people.

In addition to being expensive, much available food had substantial impurities. Flour was commonly adulterated with ground beans, plaster of Paris, and ground bones. Some sugar was found to be half salt. Tea was supplemented with iron filings and other minerals or chemicals. To this day, the London Cockney slang for thief is “tea leaf.”

In 1844 *The Liverpool Echo* reported:

Salted butter is sold for fresh, the lumps being covered with a coating of fresh butter, or a pound of fresh being laid on top to taste, while the salted article is sold after this test, or the whole mass is washed and then sold as fresh. With sugar, pounded rice and other cheap adulterating materials are mixed, and the whole sold at full price. The refuse of soap-boiling establishments also is mixed with other things and sold as sugar. Chicory and other cheap stuff is mixed with ground coffee, and artificial coffee beans with the unground article. Cocoa is often adulterated with fine brown earth, treated with fat to tender it more easily mistakable for real cocoa. Tea is mixed with the leaves of sloe and with other refuse, or dry tea-leaves are roasted on hot copper plates, so returning to the proper colour and being sold as fresh. Pepper is mixed with pounded nut-shells; port-wine is manufactured outright (out of alcohol, dye-stuffs, etc.), while it is notorious that more of it is consumed in England alone than is grown in Portugal; and tobacco is mixed with disgusting substances of all sorts and in all possible forms in which the article is produced.

Engels also shared his observations on life around Manchester in 1844:

But the poor, the working people, to whom a couple of farthings are important, who must buy many things with little money, who cannot afford to inquire too closely into the quality of their purchases, and can-

not do so in any case because they have had no opportunity of cultivating their taste—to their share fall all the adulterated, poisoned provisions. They must deal with the small retailers, must buy perhaps on credit, and these small retail dealers who cannot sell even the same quality of goods so cheaply as the largest retailers, because of their small capital and the large proportional expenses of their business, must knowingly or unknowingly buy adulterated goods in order to sell at the lower prices required, and to meet the competition of the others. . . . Not in the quality alone, but in the quantity of his goods as well, is the English working man defrauded. The small dealers usually have false weights and measures, and an incredible number of convictions for such offences may be read in the police reports. How universal this form of fraud is in the manufacturing districts, a couple of extracts from *The Manchester Guardian* may serve to show. They cover only a short period, and, even here, I have not all the numbers at hand:

*Guardian*, 16 June 1844, Rochdale Sessions—Four dealers fined five to ten shillings for using light weights. Stockport Sessions—Two dealers fined one shilling, one of them having seven light weights and a false scale, and both having been warned.

*Guardian*, 19 June, Rochdale Sessions—One dealer fined five, and two farmers ten shillings.

*Guardian*, 22 June, Manchester Justices of the Peace—Nineteen dealers fined two shillings and sixpence to two pounds.

*Guardian*, 26 June, Ashton Sessions—Fourteen dealers and farmers fined two shillings and sixpence to one pound. Hyde Petty Sessions—Nine farmers and dealers condemned to pay costs and five shillings fines.

*Guardian*, 9 July, Manchester—Sixteen dealers condemned to pay costs and fines not exceeding ten shillings.

*Guardian*, 13 July, Rochdale—Nine dealers fined from two shillings and six pence to twenty shillings.

*Guardian*, 24 July, Rochdale—Four dealers fined ten to twenty shillings.

Provision of pure unadulterated food was an early goal of the Rochdale Pioneers. However, in 1843, Holyoake had warned them: "When you have a little store and have reached the point of getting pure provisions, you may find your purchasers will not like them, nor know them when they taste them. Their taste will require to be educated." When the co-ops entered into their own production with the Rochdale Flour Mill, their natural products were resisted by a public used to white and shiny foods. In 1852, the Cooperative Central Agency, the first national buying group, published a pamphlet to educate members about pure food and held lectures on the subject throughout the country.

Holyoake's predictions were quite accurate. The "pure food" goals of the co-op were no easy task. When they were unable to locate high-quality flour, the Rochdale and Brickfield co-ops entered into a joint venture with individuals to start a mill in 1850. Initially, the mill did poorly because the members complained that the flour was much darker than the lighter-colored adulterated flour they were used to. Fortunately, the Pioneers took Holyoake's advice and an education campaign won the day. Flour sales increased, and the mill became profitable.

In 1860, the first Food and Drugs Act was passed; however, in 1861, a lecture at the Royal Society revealed that 87 percent of the bread and 74 percent of the milk sold in London was still adulterated. It was not until the Act was amended in 1872 that the identification and suppression of food adulteration was made more effective.

The commitment to honest weight was continued by the wholesale societies. In 1882, when the Scottish and English Co-operative Wholesale Societies entered into a partnership to sell tea, they agreed that the member should get sixteen ounces of tea in the package. This practice differed from those of other grocers, who put the tea in heavy paper pack-

aging and declared the whole package to be sixteen ounces. The Rochdale co-op practice of giving sixteen ounces to the pound became the law of the land during World War I.

The emphasis on pure food continued to be a main objective of the co-ops. In the November 4, 1871, issue of *The Co-operative News* there is an advertisement placed by the Co-operative Farming Society consisting of a prospectus for a new farm to be run on cooperative principles with shares sold at ten shillings each. The temporary offices of the society were located at the headquarters of the Co-operative Wholesale Society in Manchester. The board was composed of members from a number of different Lancashire cooperatives. "The object of this society is to raise a sufficient capital to establish a Farm in a convenient locality, within easy access of Manchester, for the purpose of supplying its members and the public with pure and unadulterated articles of farm produce."

In the same issue of *The Co-operative News* there is also an advertisement by the Agricultural and Horticultural Co-operative Association proclaiming:

The association was formed in 1867 to supply its members with Farm, Garden and Household requisites, of ascertained purity and highest quality, as nearly as possible at wholesale prices. The Association employs an Analytical Chemist to examine all goods contracted for, and nothing but unadulterated goods of the highest quality are dealt in.

In 1874, a House of Commons Committee investigated food adulteration and reported that people were "cheated rather than poisoned." In the following year, Parliament passed the Sale of Food and Drug Act which, as W. Henry Brown wrote, "minimized the cheating and lessened the risk of poisoning. But the Rochdale Pioneers had initiated such a trading policy thirty years before. Parliament followed the Pioneers."

