

First Eutopy

Robert Owen at New Lanark

I was invited to address The Utopian Studies Society, and chose to describe two communities which sought to put high idealism into practice, to exemplify my meaning of 'eutopy'.

The program-sheet for the day when I addressed the Society was the first time 'eutopy' may have appeared in someone *else's* print - and I present a shortened form of my address:

Utopia is as Eutopy Does:

"Everyone who has asked himself about the origin of Thomas More's coined word 'Utopia' knows that it derives from the Greek origin meaning 'no-where', 'no-place'.

"Everyone who has not thought deeply about the underlying concept knows that it means, at best, 'idealistic', 'paradise'; or, at worst, 'impractical blueprint', 'Never-never-Land', 'Cloud-cuckoo-land'.

"We are sitting here in the **Robert Owen Room** in the village of New Lanark, home in the early 19th century to one of the most 'utopian' communities the world may ever have witnessed. It was a mini-'welfare state', as we would now term it, devised by Robert Owen, proto-feminist, proto-co-operativist, proto-socialist, proto-radical-educator, and proto-communitarian.

"I propose a more pragmatic definition. If Owen practised 'utopia' in this small Scots village, it was definitely *somewhere*, not '*no-where*'. It was *here* and *then*, where we are convened in New Lanark now.

"So let us look back to the Greek for a more precise word to describe Owen's experiment. What about 'eutopy'? to be defined as 'a good-place-to-be', (after 'eulogy', or 'good-speak'; 'euthanasia', or 'a-good-way-to-die', and 'euphemism', or 'a-good-way-of-saying-it').

"We have all - one trusts - experienced happiness, at some time, in some place. We have experienced 'eutopy' in the middle of a forest, on the top of a mountain, "simply messing about in boats", at a football or cricket match.

"Each of us has known happiness, but happiness was not experienced in a void; it happened *there*, at a place; it happened *then*, in time. We associate this *inner* feeling closely with an *outer* place: eutopy, '*a-place-where-we-were-happy*', personally, uniquely to ourselves."

Eutopology

Owen practised what he preached in New Lanark, as many witnesses recorded, in the science of what we may now begin to call 'eutopology', to be defined as 'the study of the *evidence* of the practice of eutopy'. of *witnesses* and *participants* to the practice of eutopy'. Such evidence should be 'audted' impartially.

Eutopism

I argue a higher case: for the coining of the word 'eutopism', to be defined as 'the *theory* of *creating-a-good-place*'. One of Owen's shorter pronouncements is that: "*The object of human existence is, above all else, to be happy.*"

The happiness of children was at the heart of Owen's philosophy, and the concept of happiness is integral to eutopism. As Sidney Smith pronounced: "*If you make children happy, you will make them happy twenty years after by the memory of it*".

Let us look at some of the contemporary witnesses of the New Lanarkian eutopy in the school and playground.

"I once had occasion to declare, in the House of Commons... that I never saw any population so moral, religious, well-behaved and happy as that in... New Lanark. The happiness of the children is distinctly expressed in their countenances."

John Smith M.P. 1818

"Our party... entered the play-ground [at New Lanark]... The children's faces, I see them now... Not a tear. Not a wrangle. Peaceful innocence pervaded the whole group. As soon as they saw us, curtsies and bows saluted us from all quarters."

Dr Henry McNab 1819

"In the education of the children, the thing that is most remarkable is the general spirit of kindness and affection shown [by the teachers] towards them... The consequence is that they appear like one well-regulated family, united by the ties of the closest affection. We heard no quarrels from the youngest to the eldest... They had no strife but in offices of kindness."

1819 Report by the Leeds Guardians of the Poor

Yours faithfully,
Bryn Purdy

Footnote: It was while Robert Owen was working in Stamford that he took early morning walks in the grounds of Burghley House where he dreamed of and desiderated the translation of his high utopian ideals into daily practice. Curiously, it was within the walls of Burghley House that Ralph Robinson made the first translation of Thomas More's **Utopia** into English.

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