

**Biographical Briefing on Robert Owen**

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Edward I and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Robert Owen was born in Newton, a small market town in Montgomeryshire, mid-Wales, in 1771. He was the sixth of seven children. His father had a small business as a saddler and ironmonger. Owen’s mother came from a prosperous farming family. Owen attended school until the age of ten, served in a drapers shop for several years, and moved to London in 1787. During a visit to Glasgow he fell in love with Caroline Drew, the daughter of the New Lanark mill’s owner David Dale. Owen induced his partners to purchase the New Lanark mill, married Caroline Drew and in 1799 moved to New Lanark. He was manager and part owner of the mill. He was encouraged by his great success in the management of cotton mills in Manchester; he hoped to conduct New Lanark on higher principles and focus less on commercial principles.

The mill at New Lanark had been started in 1785 and the water power of the falls of the Clyde made it a great attraction. About two thousand people had associations with the mills. Five hundred of them were children who were brought at the age of five or six from the poorhouses and charities of Edinburg and Glasgow. The children had been well treated by Dale, the original owner, but the general condition of the people was very unsatisfactory. Many of the workers were in the lowest levels of the population; theft, drunkenness, and other vices were common; education and sanitation were neglected; and most families lived in one room. The respectable country people refused to submit to the long hours and drudgery of the mills.

* **Do you think that Owen’s childhood affected the way he believed children and other factory workers should be treated?**
* **Do you think that Owen’s improvement of the working conditions of the mill workers at New Lanark will affect his mills’ ability to remain profitable and competitive with other mills where owners operate their mills on more commercial (for profit only) principles?**

Many employers operated the “truck system,” where payment to the workers was made in part or totally by tokens. These tokens had no value outside the mill owner’s “truck shop.” The owners were able to supply shoddy goods to the truck shop and charge top prices. A series of “Truck Acts” (1831-1887) stopped this abuse. The Acts made it an offense not to pay employees in common currency. Owen opened a store where the people could buy goods of good quality at little more than wholesale cost, and he placed the sale of alcohol under strict supervision. He passed the savings of buying these goods in bulk on to the mill workers. These principles are still the basis of cooperative shops in Britain that continue to trade today.

* **Compare the lives of factory workers under the “truck system” to the lives of serfs living in the feudal system.**
* **Why do you think it took over fifty years to reform the “truck system?”**
* **Do you think a cooperative shop or market would work in the U.S.? Why?**

Owen’s greatest success was considered to be in his treatment of children. He was the founder of infant childcare in Great Britain. He also provided all the children at New Lanark with what he considered an “ideal” education. He soon won the confidence of the workers of his mill. The mill continued to have great commercial success, but some of Owen’s business practices involved considerable expense, which displeased his partners. Tired of the restrictions imposed on him by men who wished to conduct business in a more profitable manner, Owen arranged, in 1813, to have the mill purchased by new investors. This same year Owen began writing essays in which he expounded on the principles which underlay his educational philosophy.

For the next few years Owen’s work at New Lanark continued to have a national and even international significance. New principles were adopted by Owen in raising the standard of goods produced. Above each machinist’s workplace, a cube with different colored faces was installed. Depending on the quality of the work and the amount produced, a different color was used. The worker then had some indication to others of his work’s quality so the employee had an interest in doing his best. The conditions at New Lanark for the workers and their families were considered idyllic for the time.

* **Compare Owen’s way of motivating his workers to do their best to the grading system San Leandro High School uses to motivate students to do their best.**
* **Do you think the owner of a business should be responsible for the welfare and education of their workers and their workers’ families?**

At an early age Owen lost all belief in the prevailing forms of religion and had thought out a creed for himself, which he considered as entirely new and original discovery. The chief points of his philosophy were that man’s character is made not by him but for him, by circumstances over which he had no control over, and for which he deserved neither praise nor blame. These principles lead to the practical conclusion that the great secret in the formation of a man’s character is to place him under the proper influences—physical, moral, and social—from his earliest years. The principles of the irresponsibility of man and of the effect of early influences form the key to Owen’s whole system of education and social amelioration.

* **Do you agree with Owen’s belief that the way a child is raised determines the type of adult the child becomes?**
* **Do you agree with Owen that there is an “ideal” way to raise and educate a child?**

Robert Owen is considered to be one of the founders of the belief of Socialism which is practices to varying degrees by nearly all modern government. An example of a social welfare program that can be found in the United States would be the Social Security system which provides disability insurance and old age pensions to nearly all Americans.

* **Do you think that it is the responsibility of the government to provide for the welfare of all its people?**