

Robert Owen on his rise from Tradesman to Factory Owner, 1857

(Robert Owen (1771-1858), entrepreneur, trade union organizer, and industrialist, explains his humble origins and his rise to prominence as an entrepreneur and factory owner. Robert Owen. *The Life of Robert Owen. Written by Himself With Selections from his Writings and Correspondence*, 1857, I, 1, 12, 17-26; in J. T. Ward, ed., *The Factory System, Vol. I, Birth and Growth* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 115-19.)

As it appears in the family great Bible, I was born in Newtown, Montgomeryshire, North Wales, on the 14th of May, 1771, and was baptised on the 12th of June following.

My father was Robert Owen. He was born in Welsh Pool, and was brought up to be a saddler, and probably an ironmonger also, as these two trades were at that period often united in the small towns on the borders of Wales. He married into the family of Williams, a numerous family, who were in my childhood among the most respectable farmers around Newtown....

My father had written respecting me to his friend, a Mr. Heptinstall, of No. 6 Ludgate Hill, who was a large dealer in lace foreign and British; and Mr. Moore had written in my favor to Mr. Tilsley, of No. 100 Newgate Street, who then kept what was deemed a large draper's shop. This was in 1781. I think I had been on this visit to my brother nearly six weeks, when Mr. Heptinstall procured me a situation with a Mr. James McGuffog, of whom he spoke highly as carrying on a large business for a provincial town, in Stamford, Lincolnshire. The terms offered to me were for three years-the first without pay, the second with a salary of eight pounds, and the third with ten pounds, and with board, lodging, and washing, in the house. These terms I accepted, and being well found with clothes to serve me more than a year, I from that period, ten years of age, maintained myself without ever applying to my parents for any additional aid. . . .

After my three years had expired, Mr. McGuffog, wished me to remain with him, and to continue as an assistant for a year longer. . . [but] my wishes were for the attainment of more knowledge and an enlarged field of action...

Having been so long absent from my relations and friends I was glad to spend some months with my brother William....

After some time of this relaxation from business it was necessary for me to seek for a new situation, and through Mr. McGuffog's recommendation I procured one with Messrs. Flint and Palmer, an old established house on old London Bridge, Borough side, overlooking the Thames. It was a house established, and I believe the first, to sell at a small profit for ready money only.

This hurried work and slavery of every day in the week appeared to me more than my constitution could support for a continuance, and before the spring trade had terminated I had applied to my friend to look out for another situation for me.....

On leaving Messrs. Flint and Palmer's, I went to reside with Mr. Satterfield in Manchester. His establishment was then the first in his line in the retail department, but not much to boast of as a wholesale warehouse. It was upon the whole pretty well managed....

Our living was good, our treatment kind, and ... I therefore soon became reconciled to the change which my friend had made for me, and with forty pounds a year, over my board, lodging, and washing, I deemed myself overflowing with wealth, having more than my temperate habits required ... I thus continued until I was eighteen years of age. Among other articles which we sold were wires for the foundation or frame of ladies' bonnets. The manufacturer of these wire bonnet frames was a mechanic with some small inventive powers and a very active mind. When he brought his weekly supply of wire frames, I had to receive them from him, and he began to tell me about great and extraordinary discoveries that were beginning to be introduced into Manchester for spinning cotton by new and curious machinery. He said he was endeavouring to see and to act a knowledge of them, and that if he could succeed he could make a very good business of it. This kind of conversation was frequently renewed by the wire manufacturer, whose name was Jones. At length he told me he had succeeded in seeing these machines at work, and he was sure he could make them and work them. He had however no capital, and he could not begin without some. He said that with one hundred pounds he could commence and soon accumulate capital sufficient to proceed; and he ended by saying that if I would advance one hundred pounds, I should have one half of the great profits that were to result if I would join him in partnership. He made me believe that he had obtained a great secret, and that if assisted as he stated, he could soon make a good business. I wrote to my brother William in London, to ask him if he could conveniently advance me the sum required, and he immediately sent me the hundred pounds.... During the time between my giving notice and finally leaving Mr. Satterfield's establishment, Jones and I had agreed with a builder that he should erect and let to us a large machine workshop, with rooms also for some cotton spinners, and the building was finished by the time I left Mr. Satterfield. We had shortly about forty men at work to make machines, and we obtained wood, iron, and brass, for their construction, upon credit.

I soon found however that Jones was a mere working mechanic, without any idea how to manage workmen, or how to conduct business on the scale on which he had commenced.

I had not the slightest knowledge of this new machinery had never seen it at work. I was totally ignorant of what was required; but as there were so many men engaged to work for us, I knew that their wages must be paid, and that if they were not well looked after, our business must soon cease and end in our ruin. . . . We made what are technically called "mules" for spinning cotton, sold them, and appeared to be carrying on a good business; while, having discovered the want of business capacity in my partner, I proceeded with fear and trembling....

When I separated from Jones and the machine making business, I took a large newly erected building, or factory, as such places were then beginning to be called. It was situated in Ancoats Lane. I rented it from a builder of the name of Woodruff, with whom I afterwards went to board and lodge. From Jones and his new partner I received *three* out of six mule machines which were promised, with the reel and making up machine; and with this stock I commenced business for myself in a small part of one of the large rooms in this large building.

The machines were set to work, and I engaged three men to work them-that is, to spin cotton yarn or thread upon them from a previous preparation called rovings....

I had no machinery to make rovings, and was obliged to purchase them, -they were the half made materials to be spun into thread. I had become acquainted with two young industrious Scotchmen, of the names of McConnell and Kennedy, who had commenced about the same time as myself to make cotton machinery upon a small scale, and they had now proceeded so far as to make some of the machinery for preparing the cotton for the mule spinning machinery so far as to enable them to make the rovings, which they sold in that state to the spinners at a good profit....

Such was the commencement of Messrs. McConnell and Kennedy's successful career as cotton spinners, -such the foundation of those palace-like buildings which were afterwards erected by this firm,-of the princely fortunes which they made by them, and of my own proceedings in Manchester and in New Lanark in Scotland. *They* could then only make the *rovings*, without finishing the thread; and I could *only finish* the thread, without being competent to make the *rovings*.

These are the kind of circumstances which, without our knowledge or control, from small beginnings produce very different results to any anticipated by us when we commence.