



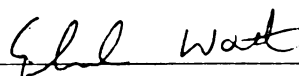
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**THE COLONY IN THE RADICAL MIND: SETTLEMENT PATTERNS, THE
CHARTIST LAND PLAN AND THE AMERICAN WEST, 1790-1850.**

By

Joseph Richard Hardwick

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ABSTRACT

THE COLONY IN THE RADICAL MIND: SETTLEMENT PATTERNS, THE CHARTIST LAND PLAN AND THE AMERICAN WEST, 1790-1850.

By

Joseph Richard Hardwick

The leaders of the nineteenth century radical labor movements in both America and Britain celebrated spade husbandry and small farms. Denouncing Malthusian arguments that linked economic distress to the crude behavior of the working class, agrarians proposed that a harmonious economic system would be realized once the land was redistributed according to natural law. To support such arguments, labor leaders commonly constructed the American west as a space free from the oppression attributed to the unjust ownership of land. It was here that the honest toil of the virtuous yeoman farmer would be rewarded with its true moral and economic reward. While few British working class people were willing to emigrate, we can argue that the American west and the image of the yeoman farmer was instrumental in helping to define the character of the Chartist Land Plan, the most popular of the mid-Victorian “back to the land” schemes. Yet by legitimizing the settlement of the American west, working class people in Britain were in fact condoning imperial expansion. While the landscape and indigenous people of the American west crucially informed the experience of white settlers, we find that the region was made to conform to the colonial project of the eastern metropolis - whether that metropolis existed in the eastern United States or in the minds of working class people in Britain and America.

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INTRODUCTION

On Monday, March 7th 1842, the gentleman leader of the Chartist movement, Feargus O'Connor MP (1794-1855), addressed a crowd gathered at the Hall of Science at Camp Field in Manchester. The lecture, entitled "The Land and its Capabilities," touched on agrarian themes familiar to nineteenth century British radicalism. A tireless campaigner for universal suffrage, O'Connor had watched the failure of the Newport insurgency in 1839 and the consequent waning of radical agitation. By 1842, and following the farcical failure of the "general" strike, O'Connor searched for a new strategy that would obtain the six points of the People's Charter for the disenfranchised working man and thereby alleviate the social ills of the "artificial" labor market and factory system. Asking the assembled crowd "WHAT IS THE REMEDY FOR OUR GRIEVANCES," O'Connor argued that the working classes of England could only achieve personal salvation and social regeneration by the redistribution of land ownership. O'Connor tapped into radical tradition that considered the land the property of all and the repository of virtue and ennobled labor; the "People's Farm" that aristocratic sway had wrenched from the people through enclosure and monopoly. For O'Connor the redistribution of land would not only "produce the food for want of which the people are starving," but would also combat the landed monopoly that underlay access to Parliament and political authority. Rather than invent this language, O'Connor told the crowd what they wanted to hear: "It is to the land, then, we look upon as the foundation of political power, - because land gives the power of electing men to serve in parliament."¹

¹ Feargus O'Connor, "The Land and its Capabilities," from Gregory Claeys ed. *The Chartist Movement in Britain, 1838-50*. 6 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2001), vol. ii, p. 430.

O'Connor's speech was the precursor for his campaign for a Chartist Land Plan, a tactical switch that trained Chartist attention on social, above political, reform. Rather than displace the political effort, the Land Plan was considered as a more direct reform effort aimed at alleviating the condition that the mass of "wage slaves" suffered in the urban centers. By instigating a lottery system where subscribers contributed to a central fund, lucky winners would be set up on land "colonies."

While the plan would invite working people back on the land and thereby reduce the labor surplus, it was also thought that the Land Plan would allow working people to circumvent the forty pounds property franchise requirement and vote for Chartist representatives in parliament. At its height the plan attracted 70,000 signatures. While the plan became bogged down in administrative chaos and eventually died an ignominious death, recent scholars have shown increasing interest in the Land Plan for a variety of reasons. This interest is in marked contrast to previous treatment of the Plan. As Malcolm Chase points out, R. C. Gamage described the Plan as "the great folly which was to contribute to the disgrace of the Chartist movement."² The perceived failure of the Plan was considered an anomaly in the "brisk progressivism that still characterizes much of the historiography of working-class politics."³

Scholars such as Chase have attempted to redress this treatment by treating the urge for real property ownership - a central element in the attraction of the Plan - as an early blossoming of the kind of working class mutual aid and self-help institutions that would leave their mark in the form of contemporary Building Societies (the last vestiges

² Malcolm Chase, "We Wish Only to Work for Ourselves: The Chartist Land Plan," from Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 133.

³ Malcolm Chase, "Out of Radicalism: The Mid-Victorian Freehold Land Movement," *English Historical Review*, 111 (1991), p. 320.

of which have only recently become banks). While the urge to own real property was one element of the Plan, Chase pays greater attention to representing the Land Plan as a flowering of the type of agrarianism that was a prevalent element in English radicalism since at least the seventeenth century and Gerard Winstanley's Diggers of the English Revolution.⁴ As he writes, the Chartist Land Plan "fathomed the depths of working people's attachment to the land," and "gave shape to deeply rooted popular feeling."⁵

To understand the force of such "back to the land" schemes provides us with a starting point for exploring the attraction that empty land and frontier space occupied in the radical imagination. Though the equitable systems of land ownership that contemporaries thought had existed in England before the advent of the Norman Yoke⁶ provided a notable precedent for Chartist plans for alternative systems of land ownership, one can also argue that the popular imaginings of the American frontier provided Chartists with more modern and practicable examples. The desire for land reform was premised on certain assumptions that contemporary labor leaders, on both sides of the Atlantic,⁷ made about the value of small property ownership and yeoman farming, both thought to be vital foundations for a just and equitable society. The most ready example of a society that seemed to be premised on such assumptions, of course, was the republican United States, a political experiment without precedent which European

⁴ See the relevant chapters in Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas in the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972) for the seventeenth century Diggers.

⁵ Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 177.

⁶ The "Norman Yoke" symbolized the invasion of foreign forces - in this case the villainous Plantagenet monarchy - which were seen to have destroyed the "liberal" institutions of Anglo-Saxon Britain. It was a central point in the argument that working-men enjoyed certain natural rights as "freeborn Englishmen," rights and liberties which had been corroded over the past centuries of feudalism and, more recently, capitalism.

⁷ Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1967).

contemporaries considered a thoroughly modern and republican space precisely because it boasted abundant virgin land that all white citizens enjoyed access.⁸ For European radicals the figure of the American “yeoman” or “husbandman” appeared as the ultimate democratic subject: independent, rugged and self-assertive, the “yeoman” emerged “as a fusion of eighteenth century agrarian theory with the observation of American experience beyond the Alleghanies.”⁹ What gave this vision its emotive power was the presence of abundant land in the western North American continent. The presence of broad expanses of virgin land inspired radicals to make the bold statement that the anxieties of modern European "civilization" could be redressed once social and communal experiments developed in the pastoral surroundings of the Midwest were implemented in the urban areas back east. Central to radical designs was the frontier: a rude and uncultivated world that marked the barrier between civilization and barbarity, a site devoid of history where European history could begin afresh. Providing the ideal environment in which rugged independence and self-assertiveness could be nurtured alongside a commitment to mutual co-operation and democratic sensibility, the frontier was considered as a laboratory where the remedies for Europe’s ills could be discovered and developed. By examining the assumptions that Chartists and other nineteenth century British radicals made about the frontier, we can begin to understand how the presence of "empty" land operated in the

⁸ The contemporary vision of the United States was heavily influenced by the work of Thomas Paine, whose *Rights of Man* (1791) was the model for British radicals to replace the relics of aristocratic government with republican institutions that existed as reflections of the popular will. Passages such as the following indicate the hopes that contemporaries had for the great experiment: “The independence of America, considered merely as a separation from England, would have been a matter of but little importance, had it not been accompanied by a revolution in the principles and practice of governments. She made a stand, not for herself only, but for the world, and looked beyond the advantages herself could receive.” Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick eds., *The Thomas Paine Reader* (Penguin, 1987), p. 263.

⁹ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Sixth edition. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 135.

radical mind, an investigation that allows us to pinpoint exactly the kind of world nineteenth century radicals considered ideal and normative.

The frontier emerged as a symbol in British radicalism partly through the influence of late eighteenth century writings that characterized the western lands of North America as pastoral idylls perfectly suited to nurturing an egalitarian and prosperous society. While it does not specifically address the frontier, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1794) provided an early statement on the kind of virtuous society that the independent yeoman farmer could be expected to craft out of the riotous nature of the lands west of the Alleghany Mountains. While he never used the term in his writings, the independent rural "yeoman" was for Jefferson (1743-1826) the moral and economic center of democratic society. In Jefferson's calculus, manufacturing and urban economic activity retarded morals and forced artisans to become the dependent slaves of the tyrannical market. In contrast to the dependency of the European artisan, Jefferson's Virginian husbandman was the epitome of simplicity and moral purity. While the husbandman was enmeshed in an Atlantic economy, Jefferson stressed the important moral benefits that accompanied an agricultural economy. For Jefferson, "corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example." While agricultural work was aimed primarily at sufficiency and hence nurtured independence, manufacturing led to dependence, "subservience and venality, suffocate[d] the germ of virtue, and prepare[d] fit tools for the design of ambition."¹⁰ Jefferson drew particular scorn on the fact that manufacturing and commercial activity was premised on an unnatural propensity in humans to accumulate

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. William Peden (ed.) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 165.

luxury and other ostentatious and frivolous items. In contrast to the shallow display and artificiality of Europe, the American farmer was committed to a rude equality and rustic simplicity. Freed from dependency on the market, the husbandman could realize a true reward for his labor, a reward that was principally moral, rather than economic. By depicting Virginia as a microcosm of the vast continent, Jefferson alluded to the vast potential of this new society and the inevitability of western America following Virginia's example.

Like Jefferson, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (1735-1813) celebrated the independence that was the natural product of rural toil. Hardly a radical thinker, Crevecoeur's celebration of the frontier is emblematic of his rather conservative commitment to the traditional values of stability and order rather than the disorder of change and revolution. By praising the honest work of the husbandman both writers advanced arguments for the meaning of American exceptionalism and identity. Yet rather than dwell on romantic descriptions of the benefits of rural work in a Virgilian mold, Crevecoeur's is again a highly physiocratic vision of a prosperous society that nurtures moral renewal. Where Europe groans under the weight of the feudal privileges of the *ancien regime*, "the rich and the poor" in America "are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe." The American farmer in Crevecoeur's *Letters* informs his Englishman friend "we are a people of cultivators,"

[S]cattered over an immense territory, communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bonds of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated by a spirit of industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself. If he travels through our rural districts he views not the hostile castle, and the haughty mansion,

contrasted with the clay-built hut and miserable cabin, where cattle and men help to keep each other warm, and dwell in meanness, smoke, and indigence.¹¹

Like Jefferson's Virginian yeomanry, Crevecoeur's farmers are a community of small producers, untainted by the corruption of the market, united in bonds of true affection, and all striving for common happiness. Both Jefferson and Crevecoeur remained convinced that America would not follow the example of crowded Europe as the promise of seemingly endless virgin land to the west would ensure the durability of America's republican institutions. Both Jefferson's and Crevecoeur's egalitarian societies only thrive on expansion. The latter notes, "who can tell how far it extends? Who can tell the millions of men whom it will feed and contain? For no European foot has yet traveled half the extent of the mighty continent!"¹²

Crevecoeur acknowledges that the task of the first settlers is brutish and savage, the unlimited freedom of the woods creating a "strange sort of lawless profligacy." He notes that "thus are our first steps trod, thus are our first trees felled, in general, by the most vicious of our people; and thus the path is opened for the arrival for a second and better class, the true American freeholders."¹³ Literature such as Jefferson's and Crevecoeur's sought to dwell on the virtues of this "second and better class," a project that succeeded in making the frontier and the pioneer farmer more palatable for European audiences. Both writers treated the west as a *tabula rasa* in which rational and natural government could be planted and modern farming techniques utilized. Rather than a romantic landscape of picturesque hills and winding rivers, the vision of men like Jefferson and Crevecouer was a profoundly rational and physiocratic. As Seelye writes,

¹¹ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (Everyman, 1962), p. 40.

¹² Crevecoeur, p. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 51, 52, 53, 55.

“natural beauty is fine, but the human heart really warms at the prospect of productivity, those useful and profitable works that catch the kind of light the Enlightenment preferred.”¹⁴

For radicals horrified by the violence of the French and Haitian Revolutions, the rational and orderly frontier would have excited the imagination. The literature of Jefferson and Crèvecoeur added to the sense that this empty paradise offered the most tangible environment for the dawn of the new egalitarian Millennium. While today’s reader may consider Jefferson’s vision to be a highly conservative one (and in a sense Crèvecoeur’s society is), in the context of the late eighteenth century the political connotations of Jefferson’s ideology were highly charged. As Leo Marx notes, this was not some romantic eulogy, rather “the pastoral ideal, instead of being contained by the literary design, spills over into thinking about real life.”¹⁵ For British thinkers, texts such as these would have brought into sharper focus the injustice of enclosure that was literally making British social life more crowded and claustrophobic. The expansionist tone and celebration of the rude frontier embedded in Jefferson and Crèvecoeur particularly excited the European mind as it automatically presumed the presence of a space shorn of history and the taint of western civilization, a ready environment for the realization of the next Millennium in human history.¹⁶ Through a process of settlement and pioneer farming, the European had turned wild nature into a harmonious and egalitarian “middle landscape” where democracy and community was nurtured and cultivated. While this

¹⁴ John Seelye, *Beautiful Machine: Rivers and the Republican Plan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 49.

¹⁵ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 130.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the significance of millennial thinking in the early nineteenth century, see J.F.C. Harrison, *Quest for a New Moral World: Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), pp. 92-139.

frontier environment stirred the passions of romantics like Coleridge and Southey, the vision of the west and the hopes for moral and social regeneration could inspire the imagination of thoroughly practical labor leaders in both Britain and America.¹⁷ Drawing on the familiar themes of progress and natural law, the land and the promise of virgin soil offered the best site in which a natural and harmonious society, founded on a citizenry of small producers, could be made reality.

While scholars such as Michael Durey have noted how the new Republic attracted the universal admiration of late eighteenth century British radicals, I am more interested in noting the ways in which the promise of the frontier gathered momentum in the British radical imagination.¹⁸ Both American and British popular audiences considered the independent and hardworking farmer the ideal citizen whose property was something to be celebrated and protected. In the popular imagination the rude frontier, and the values of independence that it engendered, was the anchor of the republic; the antithesis of the system of manufacturing in Europe that created a landless, dependent mass of people exploited by an aristocracy reveling in luxury and ostentatious display. Figures such as Andrew Jackson, (shorn of his less attractive qualities, notably his slave holding and his brazen expansionism), the epitome of the kind of energetic man of the people which British politics so lacked, would become a central symbol for English agrarianism and radicalism.

While the frontier ethos was attractive precisely for its image as a democratic space and site of initiative and self-determination, the frontier also provided a site where

¹⁷ Jamie L. Bronstein, *Land Reform and Working Class Experience in Britain and the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

British audiences could imagine idealized social systems and identities. Despite offering a thorough expression of modern radical arguments and ideals, one can also argue that the frontier space could be enlisted to reaffirm older identities and more traditional social relations. Part of the frontier's appeal can be understood as a satisfaction of a number of myths and images revolving around the concept of golden rural age in England's past. Praise for the independent, virtuous, and healthy husbandman went as far back as at least ancient Rome and Virgil, but in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the celebration of the rustic reached its apogee. The image of England as a land populated by diligent rustics in a comfortable landscape was deeply embedded in English consciousness.¹⁹

The American west occupied such a salient place in the radical imagination precisely because it allowed anti-capitalists and political radicals a blank space to affirm and solidify their national, racial and gender identities. In arguing this one echoes the work of Monica Lisa Rico who has studied the writings of upper and middle class Britons and come to conclusions about the distinctive role of the west in defining the self-conception of British travelers.²⁰ The west and the constantly moving frontier not only allowed working men to imagine an independent labor status, but the fact that America was culturally comparable to England provided evidence for the triumph of Anglo-Saxon cultural norms. In face of the inevitable progression of the frontier and "civilization", alternative social and cultural forms – designated as "savage" – were swept aside. In their place, British working-men could place an idealized and romanticized image of British national and gender identities. Here was a site where the myth of the freeborn Englishman - head of an orderly family with clearly delineated gender roles - could

¹⁹ James Sandbrook, *William Cobbett* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 29.

²⁰ Monica Lisa Rico, "Culture and capital: British travel in the nineteenth-century American west," University of California, Berkeley, 2000. Ph.D. Dissertation.

become reality. While we will explore the ways that the west attracted Owenism and a more pro-feminist take on social relations, one must conclude that the frontier was an overwhelmingly masculine space, whose place in the radical imagination served to confirm what was considered the “natural” gender roles of male creator and female nurturer. Ironically, the British working class could monopolize the American frontier and co-opt traits considered peculiarly American, to at once critique British modernity and at the same time reaffirm historically legitimate English identities.

Within the context of industrial and agricultural revolution these agrarian concepts emerged as powerful languages of labor. Where England strained under enclosure acts, America and the west offered a space of unbridled nature, a pastoral scene free from the taint of Old Regime legacy. A site of almost Arcadian quality, the presence of a seemingly limitless access to free land in the west satisfied political theory and romantic myth that demanded that the land belonged to the people, that social and moral renewal could be ensured once man was restored to the land that, in the final analysis, God had created for the use of all. For Europeans, the essential American symbol of the yeoman farmer exuding manly independence and republican virtue, symbolically confirmed the redemptive qualities of the land. While the plight of labor in the eastern seaboard cities gradually tarnished the image of America as the republican panacea, emigrants such as Samuel Davies commonly wrote to the Chartist journal, the *Northern Star*, expressing views that while there was “nobody to stop people from being deluded from Pittsburg,” America still offered the promise of cheap land: “Now the land – the land is the spot for true happiness.”²¹ While emigration remained unattractive, the frontier and the offer of virgin land in America remained of crucial importance for British radicalism.

²¹ *Northern Star*, May 20th, 1843, p. 1.

At once offering a blank space in which ideal communities could be imagined, the frontier also influenced the land reform proposals of the 1840s. Though by the 1840s O'Connor and the Chartists grew increasingly skeptical and argued that the presence of a land reform tradition on the other side of the Atlantic indicated that the frontier no longer offered the haven to mankind that it may have previously, we can still argue that O'Connor held to the frontier ethos that in the British context should be termed the "cottage economy." Indeed his imagining of free land in America and the presence of the comparable land reform movement in America, led by George Henry Evans (1805-1856), were both instrumental for O'Connor when he developed his Land Plan.

While this paper wishes to support the thesis advanced by James Epstein that America, or rather the American west, occupied an "imagined space" in British radicalism,²² the argument will be layered by paying particular attention to the imperial connotations of this vision. Through their writings on the American west, radicals constructed the west as an "empty" Eden, a utopia that it was European Man's destiny to colonize. Through a process of description and settlement, working class radicals complied with the colonial project that erased existing regional historical and cultural knowledge that indigenous peoples might have held about the land, asserting in their place idealized cultural and social forms. However, one must not overplay the extent to which Europeans simply grafted their own meanings onto the landscape of the west. Crevecoeur's celebration of the refined frontier is emblematic of the fact that the west existed as a middle ground in which European experience and thought was enriched and informed by the presence of other cultures and alternative social systems. Despite the complexity and contradictions of life in the contact zone, however, it was the Europeans

²² James Epstein, "Spatial practices / democratic vistas," *Social History*, 24 (1999), pp. 294-310.

who dominated any exchange or negotiation with indigenous peoples, and from these encounters they were able to reaffirm their identity as the purveyors of art and civilization. While the Indian does provide the European with some valuable lessons in communal living, he is in essence a member of a dying race, a quaint curiosity who impedes the serious job of civilization-building. Far from the casting doubt on the colonial venture that was advocated by more conservative figures, working class radicals commonly drew on the same discourse that celebrated the passage of “civilization” into barbarous areas, a progress that treated the dispossession of indigenous lands as normative. Working class voices were not marginalized in empire: rather they were complicit in the master narrative of European civilization pushing back the ignorance and barbarity of the “unenlightened” regions of the world.

While the American land reform program largely came to fruition once Southerners were out of office during the Civil War that allowed the 1862 Homestead Act to be passed (though the act did not carry the kind of anti-capitalist critique that Evans’ reform entailed), the British reform effort collapsed under its own weight. Having committed his last radical energy to the plan, Feargus O’Connor’s mental health declined rapidly and he spent his last days in an insane asylum. Within the context of an increasingly industrial society that was totalizing in its influence, neither the Land Plan nor the frontier could provide the romantic escapism that was at the heart of radical attitudes to rural life. While the frontier was often summoned as the antithesis of the contemporary commercial society, it is ironical that elements of the frontier myth actually seem to satisfy values of respectability and self-help that we usually ascribe to the middle classes of this period. The interest in the west and the hopes for a colony constituted by

cottage economy can be simplified as reflecting the liberal languages of self-sufficiency and independence. The elements of respectable self-help in the working class psyche which the land plan fed off hardly portrays the working class radicalism of the mid-nineteenth century as a Marxist harbinger of militancy and revolution. Rather it seems as if elements of the working class were more willing accomplices to the liberal order than one might initially presume.²³

An affirmation of the importance of the land as a central metaphor in nineteenth century British radicalism and an effort to portray the relevance of the colony in the radical imagination are the twin goals of this paper. In order to argue that the American west provided a symbol for British radicalism, we must assume the cultural consequences that followed the expansion of print capitalism in the eighteenth century. While Benedict Anderson has argued that print culture created horizontal linkages that facilitated the readership to comprehend an “imagined community” such as a nation, we will use radical newspapers and common radical tracts to point to ways in which print culture served to remove working class people from their immediate context and provide them with a way in which to think about remote spaces.²⁴ This widening of cultural and geographical horizons was, as Anderson notes, a product of the sense of simultaneity and “temporal coincidence” provided by the “the basic structure of two forms of imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century: the novel and the newspaper.”²⁵ Of undoubted importance in the creation of a working class sensibility towards the American west was the presence of a steady stream of travel literature. While literature from British

²³ Gregory Claeys, “The Triumph of Class Consciousness Reformism in British Radicalism, 1790-1860,” *The Historical Journal* (1983), p. 985.

²⁴ Epstein, p. 309.

²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition (London, New York: Verso), p. 25.

travelers in the American west produced many difference voices and arguments, I am particularly interested in the travel literature of the late eighteenth century, as this literature betrays a tendency to describe the landscape by European standards and categories. Nature and landscape as represented through the medium of print succumbed to what western eyes wanted it to become. Mary Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*²⁶ has been instrumental in allowing me to think about the subtle plays of power that were present when European travelers described, and attempted to represent, the landscape of the American west. That these texts would constitute much of the print that fed the radical imagination speaks volumes about the complicity of seemingly well-intentioned radicals in the subtle forms of imperial domination.

²⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, New York: Routledge: 1992).

CHAPTER ONE

The “Natural State” and the Heritage of Land Reform Rhetoric

As Chase argues, the Chartist Land Plan drew on a “deeply rooted popular feeling” amongst the working classes. To explain this popular feeling one certainly cannot downplay the significance of memories of the land and rural work among the working populace, many of whom were migrants from rural areas. On a mundane level the presence of pastoral sympathies in the lives of early nineteenth century working people can be explained through the relative accessibility of open spaces and parks for working people (it is notable that Elizabeth Gaskell’s compassionate novel *Mary Barton* (1847) opens in such an environment, and indeed ends with the working-class Britons happily housed in a log cabin surrounded by the tamed Canadian wilderness). Indeed, radical gatherings drew on this popular agrarianism by frequently congregating in rural locales. The often fair-like atmosphere of radical meetings on moors and parks was a cogent critique of the declining rights of access that accompanied enclosure.²⁷

Feergus O’Connor’s recourse to the land to reverse the corrosive effects of the artificial labor system was therefore not a particularly original or unique tactic. Alongside these cultural sentiments that inclined the working classes towards “back to the land”

²⁷ The impact of agricultural revolution on rural life is a massive topic in itself, and one can only touch on it here. It is important to note that enclosures only present one aspect of wide-scale structural changes that altered the economic, social and cultural landscape of the English countryside in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See the opening chapters of Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude, *Captain Swing* (Pheonix Press Paperback, 2001) for an introduction to the impact of enclosure on rural life in the southern English counties. Rising food prices, the presence of an increasing labor surplus, and the invasion of capital into rural areas led to the increasing pauperization of the farm laborer class. Any existing ties of custom and tradition that had bound laborer, tenant and land-owner were now eroded and replaced by relationships determined by the cash nexus. As Hobsbawm and Rude write, “[W]e should not exaggerate the effect of enclosures by themselves. They were a special case of a more general situation: the growing inability of tiny marginal cultivators to hold out in a system of industrialized manufactures and capitalist agriculture.” p. 36.

schemes, O'Connor drew on existing languages that considered the land as a natural right and whose equitable distribution guaranteed legitimate political authority. In both early socialist political economy and popular myth the land was summoned as the primary productive power, the root of all value that everyone had an equal right to cultivate. As Noel Thompson writes, "for many radical writers...it was obviously some combination of the land and labour which was productive of economic value."²⁸ In a social and economic climate in which artisan labor became increasingly abstracted and reduced to a commodity, the land could be summoned as the ultimate metaphor for the full reward of labor: "what is property or what is the value of a dirty spot of earth before the hand of industry makes it fruitful?"²⁹ While no single language of reform rhetoric emerged, it is clear that an initial faith in the land's redemptive qualities spurred a variety of ideas concerning the land and its capabilities. Recent trends in the scholarship of British radicalism has indicated that attention is moving away from studies on the impact of structural changes in the economy associated with the industrial revolution³⁰ and instead focus specifically on the presence of continuity in radical languages between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³¹ While we cannot downplay the obvious significance of industrial changes on lived experience, it is interesting to note the ways in which working people used existing languages to interpret and understand the changes that were happening around them. While fields and open spaces were still highly accessible and visible in the lives of urban workers - and this might explain the obsession

²⁸ Noel W. Thompson, *The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis, 1816-1834* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 113.

²⁹ Quoted in Thompson, p. 112.

³⁰ David Cannadine, "The Past and the Present in the English Industrial Revolution," *Past and Present*, 103 (1984), pp. 131-72.

³¹ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

with access to the land in British radicalism - it is more instructive to point to the ways in which the land entered discourse as a metaphor for labor theories of value and as a contrast between “natural” economic and political systems and those considered “artificial”. By examining the ways in which Chartists held to private property as a natural right, we can begin to appreciate how Feargus O’Connor’s plans for a system of small farms explored the working class concerns over independence, personal production, and moral renewal, issues of immediate relevance given the declining status of artisan workers in the industrial revolution. By highlighting the importance of these themes, we can begin to understand the draw of the backwoods of America that seemed the physical embodiment of the natural state that occupied western thought well beyond the eighteenth century Enlightenment.

Even a cursory glance at the ideas of the foremost thinkers in agrarian politics reveals that no single discourse on land reform emerged in the Anglophone tradition. Rather we are faced by a number of competing strands. On the one side we are faced with the ideas for communal ownership of the land, as avowed by Thomas Spence and latterly the Spencean Philanthropists. Opposed to this was the faith in private property as put forward by Feargus O’Connor and followers of the Chartist Land Plan. In addition to these examples, we see British radicalism producing Robert Owen and Owenite Communitarianism, a brand of socialism that betrayed a focus on agriculture and rural virtue, yet considered private property distasteful as it facilitated the competition and fraud of the ruinous commercial system. Yet as Malcolm Chase argues, the disparate elements in the tradition of agrarian reform in the Anglo Saxon world can be reconciled when we understand that they all share common concerns: “belief in the universal right to

living out of the land; suspicion of centralized government; and a way of seeing property in land which was shaped by concepts of access and usage, rather than of absolute possession.”³²

At the core of the land’s attraction were the attitudes revolving around the relationship between status, independence and property. Of central importance were the lessons that radicals on both sides of the Atlantic drew from the example of John Locke (1632-1704) and the broader Enlightenment ideals concerning social contract theory and the natural system of property ownership. Locke’s theory of property followed the “Enlightenment effort to give a purely naturalistic account of the world,”³³ as he argued that property was defined through man’s labor on nature. Through the labor of the individual and the necessary improvements that the individual makes on the natural state, Locke can term property as the extension of the person:

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has a right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.³⁴

Through man’s labor on nature, Locke showed how the individual could ensure an independent existence. In line with Enlightenment natural law, Locke argued that God had placed the individual on the earth to labor and “subdue the earth” and as “much as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his

³² Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 183.

³³ William H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 120.

³⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Everyman, 1993), p. 128.

property.”³⁵ While the earth was granted by God to be common to all, the improvement and cultivation of man on God’s nature created private property. Hence “this law of reason makes the deer, that Indian’s who then killed it; ‘tis allowed to be his goods who hath bestowed his labour upon it, though before, it was the common right of everyone.” Labor therefore not only creates property, but it is the foundation of civil society. While Locke’s natural individual is independent and can exist in harmony with nature, the individual willingly enters a social contract to establish a government that must secure private property. The natural relationship between labor and property is then the bedrock upon which liberty rests.

British radicalism had a huge affinity for Locke’s ideas. The notion that “labour is the source or fountain of all wealth”³⁶ underlay early socialist political economy, and could be used to advance the argument that because the working classes created all wealth, then the franchise should be extended to include them. The cooperative press of the 1820s commonly made the link between labor, land, and true wealth to criticize the corrosive effects of parasitic industrial capital that retarded any labor theory of value. As the *Economist* claimed:

But capital, even when it is made to include all the productions of land and labour, is neither the true source, nor the true power, of production. The source of production is the land:- the real and only power of production, beyond the spontaneous gifts of nature, is the labour of man, rendered infinitely more productive if it is combined than in its individual exertions.³⁷

The dominance of capital in the production process was seen as draining labor of its true value and virtue. The theory of the origins of government in nature and labor not only

³⁵ Locke, p. 130.

³⁶ *Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator*, June 11, 1831, p. 4.

³⁷ *Economist*, 7, 1821, p. 103.

reimbursed labor with authority, but also seemed to highlight the necessity of an equitable distribution of land as insurance for legitimate government. This latter argument was one echoed in the work of the seventeenth century political economist James Harrington (1611-1677), who argued that just political power followed from the balanced division of property throughout the realm.³⁸

Locke's concept of the natural state and notions of common access to nature were themes upon which later radical writers frequently drew. In the formative stages of political economy, economic thinkers usually used an agrarian vocabulary to advance theories of value and exploitation. Exploitation was frequently categorized as a twin process through which laborers were first denied the land that was their natural right, and then subsequently denied the full fruits of their own labor. Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Charles Hall (1745-1825) and Thomas Spence (1750-1814) all considered that in the natural state men shared equal property rights, and that all the populace had a right to share the produce of the soil. As Paine argued, "it is a proposition not to be controverted that the earth, in its natural uncultivated state, was, and ever would have continued to be, the *common property of the human race*. In that state every man would have been born to property."³⁹ Through the course of European civilization (and improvements made upon the land), however, the common right to the land had been eroded through monopoly of the soil. As Gregory Claeys has argued, where writers like Paine in his *Agrarian Justice* (1795) were willing to accept the opulence of commercial society so long as the produce was distributed equitably, radicals such as Hall were concerned in removing present

³⁸ J.G.A. Pocock, (ed.). *The Political Works of James Harrington* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

³⁹ Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice* [1795] in Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (eds.), *The Thomas Paine Reader*, (Penguin, 1987), p. 476.

inequalities by an agrarian law that would insure that families had access to private property.⁴⁰ By returning the poor to their rightful land, the individual family could then subsist on the fruit of its own labor, thereby circumventing the grinding dependence on urban manufacturing employment. As Hall himself wrote, “no creature ought to be cut off from the possession of some part or other of the earth and that in such quantity as to furnish him with the necessaries of life.”⁴¹ As Claeys notes, Hall was one of the first radicals to equate wealth with the power of capitalists to demand the labor of operatives without just reimbursement. The existing system of commercial relations between the master and employee negated any compact between the two and instead increased the division of interest. Lockean notions of the virtues inherent in agricultural labor and man’s toil of nature’s fertility were useful weapons to summon in the critique of an “artificial” commercial system. In characteristic terms, Hall argued for a simplistic society of largely agricultural labor distributed among small producers that encouraged greater personal independence and equality. In this way, the land served as a metaphor for the just reward of labor. Such a model obviously entailed a rejection of commerce and trade, and instead favored self-sufficiency as a guarantor of independence.⁴²

For writers such as Hall and William Godwin (1756-1836), virtue could only be insured through an agricultural society. While Godwin did not go as far as Hall in rejecting commercial society wholesale, he did lament that manufacturing only ground down the resolve of the laborer, leaving him no time to cultivate his mind and achieve intellectual independence. Alongside Hall and Godwin, Thomas Spence similarly argued

⁴⁰ See Charles Hall, *The Effects of Civilisation* (London, 1805).

⁴¹ Hall quoted in Bronstein, p. 28.

⁴² Gregory Claeys, “The Origins of the Rights of Labor: Republicanism, Commerce, and the Construction of Modern Social Theory in Britain, 1796-1805,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 66 (June, 1994), pp. 249-290.

that virtue and moral renewal could only be achieved in a primarily agricultural society. Like Locke, Hall and Godwin, Spence based his theory of land reform on the premise that the land had originally been deemed by God to be held in common. But through the monopoly of a few landowners who acquired power and wealth through the “conquest or encroachment on the common Property of Mankind,” created an unjust system whereby the earth was cultivated “either by slaves, compelled, like beasts, to labour, or by indigent objects whom they [the landowners] first exclude from a share of the soil, that want may compel them to sell their labour for daily bread.”⁴³ Yet where Hall had proclaimed the benefits of private property and its concomitant self-sufficiency, Thomas Spence argued that common rights ought to be maintained and the land should be collectively owned through the medium of the parish.⁴⁴

While few thinkers went as far as Spence in denouncing the existing system of private property, the corpus of ideas concerning the land and the natural reward of labor provided the backdrop for a spate of land reform proposals in the 1840s, in both England and the United States.⁴⁵ While Feargus O’Connor’s was joined by his archenemy James ‘Bronterre’ O’Brien (1805-1864) in clamoring for reform of land ownership, it is North

⁴³ Spence quoted in Noel W. Thompson, *The People’s Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis, 1816-1834* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 40.

⁴⁴ See Thomas Spence, *The Real Rights of Man* (London, 1793); *The End of Oppression being a Dialogue between an Old Mechanic and a Young One concerning the Establishment of the Rights of Man* (London, 1796).

⁴⁵ The land reform movement in America in the 1840s merged with the larger labor movement and provided just one strategy for social reform, both feeding off and helping to nurture attempts to set up Protective Unions and Co-operative Exchanges. Despite the variety of strategies advanced by a highly creative American labor movement, they all commonly drew on the same labor theory of value heritage and the notion that workingmen were united in a “republic of labor.” On the origins of the republic of labor, see Ronald Schulze, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). For the most extensive discussion of the links between co-operatives and the land reform effort, one should consult Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*. Paperback edition. (Vintage, 1984). See also Carl Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 293-319.

America where we actually see a greater range of land reform ideas, eventually coalescing around the republican slogan “Vote Yourself a Farm.” Of minor success was Thomas Skidmore’s (1790-1832) proposed destruction of private property and accumulation by the implementation a general division of land amongst the people. Skidmore could never really rely on a wide support as his ideas entailed the end of inheritance and the transmission of property. The various elements in the American land reform tradition eventually centered on George Henry Evans’ (1805-1856) National Reform Association. The NRA’s plans for western removal drew most support from urban artisans such as cordwainers, blacksmiths and journeymen who shared an increasing disillusionment with a commercial system that threatened to throw them into servile dependency and reduce them to the status of wage slaves. Like its counterpart in Britain, the NRA offered a future where the bonds of community and genuine reciprocity, which it was thought had once united small producers, would be resurrected and their labor rewarded by honest toil on the earth. Offering the ultimate metaphor for the labor theory of value, the redistribution of land appeared to working-men as the reversal of the system of land monopoly that underlay the entire unjust commercial system.⁴⁶

Despite the fact that arguments for the redistribution of land obviously drew heavily on older, “traditional” values and ideas, it is important to appreciate how radical the land reform movement was, posing as it did the most powerful critique of the existing relationship between capital and labor. Landed monopoly and the prevention of common access to the land was lambasted by radicals and hailed an unnatural subversion of divine law. Radical thinkers such as Charles Hall grasped this agrarian imagery to present a strong critique of the commercial system that had thrown the rich and poor, employer and

⁴⁶ Wilentz, pp. 335-343.

employee, into two hostile camps. The interest in the land then emerges as less a romantic yearning for a lost time before the advent of the “Norman Yoke,” than as a complex comment on the radical interest in ideas of status, independence and the dignity of labor. Above all, the concern for the land can be treated as a metaphor for the urge within the working class to restore the natural order of labor and home life. Entailed within this vision of the cottage economy ideal was a strict sexual division of labor, where mothers nurtured and fathers provided.

By arguing that “‘tis labour then which puts the greatest part of value upon land, without which it would scarcely be worth anything”⁴⁷ Locke not only lay the groundwork for nineteenth century conceptions of the individual’s right to property, he also justified colonial expansion. In the *Second Treatise* he famously wrote “in the beginning all the world was America,”⁴⁸ meaning that the world originally existed in a natural state that invited improvement and cultivation. For Locke, colonists had a greater right to the land than the indigenous inhabitants as they used the land more effectively and improved upon nature. As he states:

For I ask whether in the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America left to nature, without any improvement, tillage or husbandry, a thousand acres [will] yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land do in Devonshire where they are well cultivated?⁴⁹

Locke’s continual references to America are a means by which he can placate any fears that Europeans might have about the dangers of landed monopoly. While monopolistic individual ownership of the land in crowded Europe threatened inequality and

⁴⁷ Locke, p. 136.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

exploitation, the open lands of America ensured that people would have access to the land that was their inherent right. Locke argued that expansion into uncultivated areas was the key to peace, social happiness and liberty. Locke, then, was a thoroughgoing imperialist. Swallowing mercantile doctrine, Locke argued that imperial expansion was necessary to insure the survival of society: “Riches do not consist in having more Gold and Silver, but in having more in proportion than the rest of the World, or than our Neighbours, whereby we are enabled to procure to ourselves a greater Plenty of the Conveniences of Life than comes within the reach of Neighbouring Kingdoms and States.”⁵⁰

The argument that “in the beginning all the world was America” constituted the genesis of a popular imagining of America as a blank slate free from history, one Voltaire (1694-1778) would echo when he wrote, “if ever a golden age existed, it was in the middle provinces of America.”⁵¹ It not only satisfied the theory prevalent in the works of Spence and Hall that there had existed a natural state wherein all men had a right to the land, it also justified Europeans to plant their own visions of a ideal community on the “waste” land of the American interior. While open space allowed the European the opportunity to realize normative social and domestic relations, this project was predicated on the denial of any existing knowledge and history of the lands deemed “empty”. While the history of Europe was a narrative of the slow erosion of communal rights to land, the virgin lands of the American west were seen as the environment where a new period in

⁵⁰ Locke quoted in William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America's Present Predicament Along With a Few Thoughts About an Alternative* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 22.

⁵¹ I am drawing this quote from Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants* [1793] (Penguin, 1998), p. 232. In their note Verhoeven and Gilroy comment that no exact source of the quotation has been found, and that while Voltaire expressed comparable views, Imlay was probably quoting from memory.

the linear European historical narrative could be realized. For the nineteenth century Chartists, the “empty” lands of the west were spaces that captured the imagination. Drawing on the travel literature of the eighteenth century that constructed the American west as an empty landscape fit for European expansion, radicals could reconfigure this empty land to submit to Locke’s notion of a natural state where labor would achieve its natural reward.

CHAPTER TWO

The Settlement Vanguard: Travel Writing and the American West

In her book *Imperial Eyes* Mary Louise Pratt details the work of the imperial “vanguard”, groups of naturalists who swept the interiors of Africa and South America and systematically categorized and ordered their discoveries to fit a European epistemological framework. As she argues, “the eighteenth century systematizing of nature as a European knowledge-building project,” “created a new kind of Euro-centered planetary consciousness.”⁵² While these naturalists thought themselves occupying a relatively harmless and effeminate position in the contact zone, one Pratt terms almost an “anti-conquest”, their presence on the boundaries of European expansion was hardly innocent. For Pratt, categorizers of nature such as Linnaeus “interrupted existing networks of historical and material relations among people, plants, and animals wherever it applied itself.”⁵³

Rather than apply Pratt’s method to the European presence in the contact zones of Africa and South America, one can use the notion of the “imperial eye” to understand the process by which the landscape of the American west at the end of the eighteenth century was categorized and reconfigured to fit a European schema.⁵⁴ Two writers in particular – the early Americans John Filson (1753?-1788) and Gilbert Imlay (1754?-1828) – both commanded the landscape to conform to a vision of future prosperity. Their description of the landscape, the language they use, and the literary modes they deploy is infused

⁵² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 38.

⁵³ Pratt, p. 32.

⁵⁴ I am making the assumption that these American writers betray traits that reveal their European heritage.

with the hopes and dreams that these men carry about a region that they consider to be the perfect landscape for settlement and the creation of a rational and orderly society. The region draws uniqueness from the perfection of the landscape itself, a pastoral scene that hardly requires the improving hand of man.

As Pratt notes, visions of the landscape changed between the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Where seventeenth century visions of landscape had commonly been of a “composite” nature, where a general statement of the suitability of a landscape was expressed, by the eighteenth century we see descriptions of landscape which are more “totalizing” in their ability to force landscape into prescribed categories and frameworks of knowledge: “the eye ‘commands’ what falls within its gaze; mountains and valleys ‘show themselves,’ ‘present a picture’; the country ‘opens up’ before the visitors. The European presence is absolutely uncontested.”⁵⁵ Largely due to the fact that indigenous voices are silenced and spatial descriptions uncontested, the image that is created of the soon-to-be colony is one of an empty Eden awaiting European presence. As Pratt writes, “the European improving eye produces subsistence habitats as ‘empty’ landscapes, meaningful only in terms of a capitalist future and of their potential for producing a marketable surplus.”⁵⁶ Seelye concurs: “the abstract quality of the landscape dominates, virtually obliterating any vestiges of realistic depiction”, but “the landscape is highly charged with symbolic meanings.”⁵⁷ We shall see how both Imlay and Filson construct a landscape of level prospects and linear perspectives, an accommodating scene that awaits western man. By examining the kinds of travel literature that made up the stock of the

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁷ John Seelye, *Beautiful Machine: Rivers and the Republican Plan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 151.

works distributed in public sphere and that excited the English imagination, we can detail the ways in which well-intentioned radicals could be complicit in imperial domination.

Certainly an imperial language permeated the descriptions of the American west made by late eighteenth century travelers and writers. Commonly, descriptions of the American west were framed so as to conform to an existing narrative of European history. The colonization of the American west therefore existed as a new stage – albeit a return to an earlier period - in the linear course of European civilization. Similarly, the regions seem to be drained of their immediate context and then reconfigured to resemble spaces intelligible by European reference points. Through creating the image of an empty space existing local distinctions or history is necessarily erased, the inhabitants of the area are then positioned as merely an extension of a malleable landscape.

But we must be careful to temper such an interpretation by paying attention to the means by which the landscape and the people – both white frontiersmen and indigenous peoples – while stereotyped and constructed as passive subjects, did crucially inform the writing of three American writers who glorified the west and the frontier prospect – Gilbert Imlay, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, and John Filson. While these writers do display traits emblematic of eastern authority, I wish to pay attention to the ways in which their descriptions of the landscape and the people, while highly simplistic and biased, are not simply Eurocentric descriptions. While they are undoubtedly projections of the hopes and dreams of Europeans onto a space deemed “empty”, they are also celebrations of a region that lies separate and distant from Europe itself. All three texts display a strong separatist agenda, and while their description of this land is strongly influenced by their understanding of previous European history, the vision that they

create of the American west is more influenced by their experience in the west itself. In the hands of these writers the west, and America itself, is a place apart, a new stage in human history. While the European might hold the upper hand and might wield the pen and printing press, the west is a middle ground in which European experience is enriched and informed by the presence of other cultures and alternative social systems.

As we have seen in the previous section, the American west and the vast lands of the interior quickly captured the imagination of European writers. John Locke makes frequent reference to North America and her open space in his *Second Treatise on government*. Locke constructed America as a space of natural purity that had characterized Europe centuries ago and before the onset of a debilitating feudalism that denied the people of the land that was theirs by natural right. More romantically, the vast space that confronted the eighteenth century European in the North American interior captivated the senses and inspired romantic rapture. Thomas Paine expressed this sentiment when he wrote, “the scene which that country presents to the eye of the spectator, has something in it which generates and encourages great ideas. Nature appears to him in magnitude. The mighty objects that he beholds, act upon his mind in enlarging it, and he partakes of the greatness he contemplates.”⁵⁸ Yet this eulogy of the American west was not simply a satisfaction of the hopes and desires of Europeans. While America was constructed as occupying a new stage in human experience, there is enough to suggest that this was not merely the product of Old World propaganda. As we shall argue, when thinkers like Voltaire stated, “if ever a golden age existed, it was in the middle provinces of America,” they were not simply projecting their European world

⁵⁸ Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* [1791-2] in Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (eds.), *The Thomas Paine Reader* (Penguin, 1987), p. 263.

onto a blank space. That “blank” space was very much inhabited: its population and natural features were instrumental in influencing European thinking on history and the universal nature of humankind.

Certainly there is an effort by Europeans and early Americans to force the landscape of the American interior to conform to their desire for an empire that would stretch right across the North American continent. Contemporaries took it for granted that American society would expand westward, creating a continental empire from land that they deemed “empty.” Presenting a spectacle of open space contiguous to the settled space of eastern America, thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson sought to impose their vision of a uniform and rational west. Organized electoral districts would replace disorderly squatters and unprofitable homesteads. In the fashion of Enlightenment rationalism, documents such as the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which declared that the Northwest “shall forever remain a part of this confederacy of the United States of America,” sought to bring order to disorderly nature. Jefferson’s plan simplified the complexity of nature, dividing the land into a patchwork grid of “hundreds” – squares of ten miles by ten miles. In so doing Jefferson hoped to create a system of uniformity that insured the yeoman of his fair share of nature’s fertility and erased the possibility of Old World landed monopolies. Drawing the land into the framework of eastern politics and government, such schemes ensured that the lands of the west of the Ohio River would submit to eastern authority and would follow the dictates of the eastern seaboard metropolis. Any distinguishing geographical traits that could complicate this order of things were removed by ignoring them during the process of surveying and mapping, and any titles Indians peoples might have claimed to the land were “extinguished.” While

borders and boundaries pervade the opening lines of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, these are hardly rigid or impermeable impasses that prevent the expansion of American society. From the outset the American west was categorized as an empty space to be surveyed, mapped, and finally forced to submit to schemas planned in the old world, whether this old world was Europe or the new republican metropolis.⁵⁹

In the same way as Jefferson simplified the cartography of the American west to conform to his rational grid system, a host of American writers systematically described the landscape of the American west so as to conform to the future hope for settlement. While the description of the landscape may have been Eurocentric in terms of what the viewer focused on and what he left out, we must continually keep in view the essentially separatist nature of this project: the natural paradise that is being described, or indeed constructed, offers a sight of utopian pleasure that is a release from European history and civilization.

Hector St. John de Crevecoeur clearly states that this landscape is a thoroughly modern space, a summation of previous European history with the bad bits taken out. Here, as Crevecoeur writes, one "might contemplate the very beginnings and outlines of human society, which can be traced nowhere now but in this part of the world." America presents a vision of the future, the traveler, "instead of submitting to the painful and useless retrospect of revolutions, desolations, and plagues, would, on the contrary, wisely spring forward to the anticipated future extent of those generations which are to replenish

⁵⁹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 51. See also Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977*. Colin Gordon (ed.). (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), ch. 4.

and embellish this boundless continent.”⁶⁰ Crevecoeur continually draws his American west as a comfortable pastoral idyll that rewards simple and honest toil. In place of the artificiality and falseness of urban European life and commercial society, Crevecoeur’s frontier is unclouded by history, free from the taint of old world civilization. “In Italy,” he notes condescendingly, “all the reveries of the traveler, must have reference to ancient generations, and to very distant periods, clouded with the mists of ages. – Here, on the contrary, everything is peaceful, modern and benign.”⁶¹

In part America’s perceived modernity was a satisfaction of European conception of their own past. Centuries of feudalism and class repression would be redeemed in a sight of almost Arcadian quality. Certainly the construction of the American west as a pastoral paradise was a product of European propaganda. The descriptions that we shall study construct the American west in terms and categories familiar to European sentiment. James C. Scott’s insights into the means by which the “official” accounts endorsed by state governments often simplify and control the otherwise complex nature of social and environmental realities is a useful starting point for thinking about the often narrow and limited vision of the writers under review. Scott notes:

Certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of vision. The great advantage of such tunnel vision is that it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality. This very simplification, in turn, makes the phenomenon at the center of the field of vision more legible and hence more susceptible to careful measurement and calculation. Combined with similar observations, as overall, aggregate, synoptic view of a selective reality is achieved, making possible a high degree of schematic knowledge, control, and manipulation.⁶²

⁶⁰ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (Everyman, 1962), p. 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶² Scott, p. 11.

While Scott focuses on the nineteenth century Prussian state's survey of their forest reserves, the same "utilitarian discourse" was at play when our writers described the American west. "The vocabulary used to organize nature," Scott writes, "typically betrays the overriding interests of its human users."⁶³ The writers of the new Republic, as Seelye demonstrates, often supported designs for an orderly and rational society to spring up in the open space of the west, a society in accordance with the agrarian democracy of the republican plan back east.⁶⁴ The region was characteristically drawn as the ideal haven for mankind, an asylum for the distressed masses away from the villainy and corruption of aristocratic - and urban - Europe. This pastoral image of simplicity, purity and nature was intimately tied to the spectacle that the landscape presented to travelers. The revolutionary, writer, land speculator, and international playboy Gilbert Imlay was one such writer who provided readers back east with a glowing appraisal of the pastoral scene that awaited the European presence in his *Topographical Description of the Western Territory* (1792):

Immediately in the fork the land is flat and liable to overflow; but as you advance on either river the banks rise, and the country expanding, displays a luxuriant soil for a long distance above the Wabash on the Ohio side, and quite to the Illinois on the Mississippi side, which is about two hundred and thirty miles above its junction with the Ohio, and twenty above the mouth of the Missouri...From the mouth of the Wabash the bottoms of the Ohio are extensively and extremely fertile...This is certainly a beautiful country, and the immense number of deer, elk, and buffalo, which are seen grazing in those meadows, renders even wildness enchanting. The air in this climate is pure, and the almost continual unclouded sky tends to charm the senses.⁶⁵

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁶⁴ John Seelye, *Beautiful Machine: Rivers and the Republican Plan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁶⁵ Gilbert Imlay, *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory on North America* (London, 1793), pp.75-6.

The word “displays” reinforces the sense the reader has of an unrestricted imperial gaze scanning and surveying a level and linear landscape. Throughout such descriptions Imlay plays on the overwhelming sense of space that confronts the uncontested European eye; vast open areas that draw a stark comparison with the enclosed land and crowded public life in the Old World. But as the passage above suggests, Imlay is somewhat restrained in his eulogy and is careful to avoid falling into a romantic rhapsody that might blur the essentially practical description of a land fit for European colonization and settlement that remains his central concern.

While the glorification of the landscape is understandable in terms of the kinds of assumptions these writers make about urban and rural social life in Europe, the landscape is constructed as the sight for a new stage in human experience, a more simplistic return to nature that was immensely popular among the upper and middle classes of the eighteenth century (witness Marie Antoinette dressing as a simple rustic and building her own mock-village at Versailles). In his “sequel” to the *Topographical Description, The Emigrants* (1793) Imlay clearly indicates the separatist agenda that was more muted in the earlier text. Imlay’s characters experience a definite break once they pass over the mountains, a natural barrier between eastern complication and western romantic simplicity:

The Allegany is not as broad as the Monangahala, but its current is much more impetuous, and from the fierceness of its aspect, and the wildness which lowers over its banks, *it appears to be what it really is, the line between civilization and barbarism*. So that you see, my dear Sister, I have passed from the most populous city in the world – a city which the accumulated industry of ages have produced, to the remote corner of the empire of reason and science. (My emphasis)⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Gilbert Imlay, *The Emigrants*, p. 53.

However, the frontier is never static and the definitive escapist moment can only be assured so long as wilderness remains to be brought under cultivation in the future. The frontier is constantly moving and leaves behind a charming cultivated utopia, though the fear is that this new “civilized” landscape has begun the inevitable descent into Old World sophistry. Imlay describes how utopia exists at the confluence and meeting place, or the “middle landscape,” between civilization and barbarity:

On one side of us lie the wild regions of the Indian country; on the other our prospect is obstructed by the high banks of the Monongahala, beyond which lies a beautiful country that is well peopled and cultivated – behind us a considerable plain that is laid out in orchards and gardens, and which yields as a profusion of delicious fruits, - and in our front the Ohio displays the most captivating beauty, and after shooting forward for about a mile it abruptly turns round a high and projecting point, as if conscious of its charms, and if with an intent to elude the enraptured sight.⁶⁷

Seelye argues that Imlay’s new moral world does not exist in the United States, but in a new untainted land of purity and virtue: “The pastoral intensity emphasizes Imlay’s idealistic division between the corruptions of the old world east of the mountains and the ‘innocence’ of the western regions – as in his topography, asserting the contiguity of the separatist, the secessionist, and the utopian impulses.”⁶⁸

While Imlay’s broad vision draws a line between London and an American west “robed in all her charms,”⁶⁹ it is important to stress the fact that his characters are in a new land in the “remote corner of reason and science.” His characters are artistically and intellectually charged and enriched by their contact with barbarity, indeed the naturalness they confront inspires democratic sympathies and communal sentiments. It is here that

⁶⁷ Imlay, pp. 53–4.

⁶⁸ Seelye, p. 160.

⁶⁹ Imlay, *The Emigrants*, p. 58.

the character Arl—ton proposes to set up his perfected community “Bellefont.” Here the inhabitants, mostly revolutionary veterans who display the required love of liberty and the desired traits of virtue and independence, would enjoy universal suffrage and ownership of “two hundred and fifty-six parcels” of designated land. In the surroundings of an idyllic retreat on the banks of the Ohio the inhabitants of Bellefont would be allowed time to cultivate their minds and “discuss upon the science of government and jurisprudence.” Buying into the theory of the westward transition of empire, it is Arl—ton’s mission to establish a “system conformable to reason and humanity, and thereby extend the blessings of civilization to all orders of men.”⁷⁰ By placing his ideal community in the west, Imlay shifts the ideals of the American Revolution away from the eastern seaboard and signifies where the new millennium in human history will take place.

Yet this millennium is not a simple application of perfected European civilization to the frontier. While the sense that the American west was a comfortable pastoral scene was partly a product of eastern propaganda - a projection of eastern ideals and myths onto a space west of the Allegany mountains - it is necessary to temper this interpretation and understand that the meanings that are grafted onto this area are informed by the contact with the landscape and the native peoples. The landscape is one that overwhelms the European gaze, but it is also one that is essentially accommodating and commodious. John Filson’s *Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (1784) reinforces the idea that the practical realization of the agrarian ideal and the accompanying moral and social transformation can best be realized on the untouched frontier. The west is a natural

⁷⁰ Imlay, p. 233.

paradise where the fertility of the land mirrors the growth and regeneration that awaits humanity:

This fertile region, abounding with all the luxuries of nature, stored with all the principal materials for art and industry, inhabited by virtuous and indigenous citizens, must universally attract the attention of mankind, being situated in the central part of the extensive American empire, where agriculture, industry, laws, arts and sciences, flourish; where affected humanity raises her drooping head; where springs a harvest for the poor; where the conscience ceases to be a slave, and laws are no more than the security of happiness; where nature makes reparation for having man; and government, so long prostituted to the most criminal purposes, establishes an asylum in the wilderness for the distressed of mankind.⁷¹

Within this arcadia, moral regeneration can be achieved by toiling on natural fertility, “real” labor that exists beyond the purview of a commercial society that only brings alienation and fraud:

Let the irons of your mines, the wool of your flocks, your flax and hemp, the skins of the savage animals that wander in your woods, be fashioned into manufactures, and take an extraordinary value from your hands. Then you will rival the superfluities of Europe, and know that happiness may be found, without the commerce so universally desired by mankind.⁷²

This is surely a place apart, a space where man is transformed from a slave into an economic agent and political activist. Like Jefferson, Filson argues that production should be for use and not for profit or luxury. Filson’s is a highly physiocratic vision, where wealth springs from the resources that nature provides.

While this space is undoubtedly apart and separate from existing European historical narratives, this does not imply that the American west was a region whose

⁷¹ John Filson, *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (New York: Corinth Books, 1962), pp. 107-8.

⁷² Filson, p. 109.

meaning only existed within frameworks of knowledge developed in the Old World. Rather, the landscape, and perhaps more importantly, the indigenous people, are instrumental in defining the meaning of the landscape for Europeans. The west is a democratic and natural paradise to Europeans precisely because of the presence of native peoples. While one must recognize that they, like the landscape, are to some extent constructed by our writers, it is important to also acknowledge that while the pen-wielding Europeans did dominate the discussions across the cultural boundary, the presence of natives was influential in creating the west as a democratic and simplistic Garden of Eden. In similar terms to the innocent and tranquil landscape that greets the European eye, the indigenous people are constructed as communal and noble beings. In part a fulfillment of romantic European yearning, the native peoples display traits that Europeans themselves wish to imitate and emulate. While Filson relegates a description of the natives to an entry before the conclusion, he paints them as “noble savages”, free from the taint of Old World corruption, artificiality and falseness:

Among the Indians, all men are equal, personal qualities being most esteemed. No distinction of birth, no rank, renders any man capable of doing prejudice to the rights of private persons; and there is no pre-eminence of merit, which begets pride, and which makes others too sensible of their own inferiority. Though there is perhaps less delicacy of sentiment in the Indians than amongst us; there is, however, abundantly more probity, with infinitely less ceremony, or equivocal compliments. Their public conference shew them to be men of genius; and they have, in a high degree, the talent of natural eloquence.⁷³

Filson concludes his glowing description by stating that “thus, your country, favoured with the smiles heaven, will probably be inhabited by the first people the world ever knew.” It is clear that the natural state that Europeans have in mind was not so much

⁷³ Filson, p. 101.

adopted from assumptions made about European history, but was more a statement on the garden that presents itself in western America. The west is a pastoral bliss charged with democratic meanings, meanings clarified by the presence of Indigenous people that seem to live in the style of natural Man. This was a space that could attract the universal admiration of mankind precisely because it seemed that Europeans had found a race of men who were the universal human subject.

Yet we should not allow such a romantic portrait of frontier relations to obscure the less savory elements of life in the contact zone. The rude wilderness of the frontier was hardly the most inspiring of prospects for enlightenment. Writers like Crèvecoeur agreed. While Crèvecoeur celebrated the frontier and the yeoman farmer as the triumph of traditional values of stability and order above the disorder and change of political revolution, he did concede that the task of the first settlers was brutish and savage. The unlimited freedom of the woods created a “strange sort of lawless profligacy” among bands of white frontiersmen, frightening Daniel Boone-like characters who subvert the moral codes of civilized society and who represent the enemies of progress. True wilderness tended to turn frontiersmen away from the virtues of farming and the tilling of the soil, and instead “put (sic) a gun into their hands” and made them hunters, what Crèvecoeur derogatorily calls a “licentious idle life.” He notes that “thus are our first steps trod, thus are our first trees felled, in general, by the most vicious of our people; and thus the path is opened for the arrival for a second and better class, the true American freeholders.”⁷⁴ The rude white frontiersman, charged with the unpleasant job of removing and taming the cluttered – and often frightening – wilderness, would happily eventually recede from view, in the same way as the compliant Indian.

⁷⁴ Crèvecoeur, p. 51, 52, 53, 55.

It is notable that Filson detailed the extinction of various species of elephants and the ancient remains of lost civilizations in his topographical description. He does this to give the sense that this is a land that has been awaiting the “curiosity and avidity of civilized man.”⁷⁵ Filson rejoices that the dangerous elephant, and by inference, the Indian, will soon “perish from the chain of nature.” As Richard Slotkin notes, “the metaphorical linkage of the Indian’s fate to the natural processes like the growth and decay of plants or the rise and fall of contending animal species. Nature, not human choice, is destroying the Indian.”⁷⁶ By clearing away such debris and threats, the land is open for, “all the unfortunate of the earth, who, having experienced oppression, political or religious, will there find deliverance from their chains.”⁷⁷ Such a celebration seems to ignore the fact that it is the Indian’s presence who has charged the landscape with such democratic overtones in the first place. While the Indian does provide the European with some valuable lessons in communal living, he is in essence a member of a dying race, a quaint curiosity who impedes the serious job of civilization-building.

This should not detract from the importance of the indigenous presence for European thought. The American west, and the example of the people who inhabited it, offered Europe the hope of redemption. Against the backdrop of a French Revolution that was increasingly depicted as departing from its republican ideals, the *Topographical Description* offered, as Verhoeven and Gilroy note in their introduction to the 1998 edition, a “promise for a Rousseauesque return to nature in the pristine wilderness of the

⁷⁵ Filson, p.97, 36.

⁷⁶ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*. Paperback edition (University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), p.79.

⁷⁷ Filson, p.108.

New World.”⁷⁸ For men like Imlay, the eastern seaboard itself seemed to following the same trajectory as the Old World, descending into an urban hell of corruption and fraud. For this reason, Imlay, Filson and Crevecoeur, all writers displaying the youthful optimism of the early Republic, shift the moral and spiritual center of the revolution to the land west of the Ohio. It is here that the Anglo-Saxon will be redeemed and experience regeneration and moral uplift. While modern scholars have sought to stress the power of colonial literature to erase existing cultural and regional knowledge of colonial peoples,⁷⁹ we can take a slightly more traditional view: that the American west was not simply constructed as “empty” or forced to conform to existing Eurocentric narratives, but rather it, as a populated area of land, had the capacity to influence colonial discourses. One could only disagree with Henry Nash Smith’s comment that, “the theory of civilization implied that America in general, and the West *a fortiori*, were meaningless except in so far as they managed to reproduce the achievements of Europe.”⁸⁰

The concept of a “natural state” proved to be of enduring importance in western thinking, both for enlightenment rationalism and poetic romanticism. Pervading the work of thinkers like John Locke, the natural state was commonly drawn as the literal representation of legitimate and just social relations that had characterized mankind before the Fall of Man. Strongly agrarian in its imagery and overtones, the natural state was drawn as an agricultural utopia where each man received his allotment of the earth: a communal system of property that insured a collectivity of interests and precluded the possibility of gross acquisition of private property and mobile goods. Well into the

⁷⁸ Gilbert Imlay, *The Emigrants*, p. xvi

⁷⁹ Edward S. Watts, *An American Colony: Regionalism and the Roots of Midwestern Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).

⁸⁰ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1950), p.260.

nineteenth century, as we have seen in the previous section, radicals – in both Britain and America – continued to draw on such conceptions of a natural state to reinforce their demands for land reform that would open up land and insure that each had access to the products of the soil. Much of these hopes for a return to an agricultural past hinged on the contemporary language of Thomas Jefferson and his celebration of the yeoman farmer, an ideological creed that proclaimed rural virtue and licensed colonial expansion, or as Henry Nash Smith termed it, “the notion of empire as a populous future society occupying the interior of the American continent.”⁸¹ But while these sympathies were in part understandable as a satisfaction of the hopes and dreams of a Europe that continued to strain under the legacy of feudalism and enclosure acts, one can also argue that the agrarian myth of the natural state drew its emotive power from the experiences of Anglo-Saxons in western North America. While the contact zone was often violent and hardly conducive to the new dawn of mankind, the writers that we have studied are careful to point to the capacity of European man to take the place of brutish wilderness man and insure the triumph of refined art. We have seen with this literature an effort to construct the American west as a site of almost mythical beauty that would provide the ideal environment for communal experiments that would redress the course of European civilization. But these ideas on history and the possible future were not simply a Eurocentric project nor just a comment on European civilization: rather, the American west offered a space apart, and while Anglo-Saxons might have viewed the landscape and the people with biased spectacles, the experience they had in this middle ground and the romantic literature that it spawned, meant that the American west itself, its people and

⁸¹ Smith, p. 12.

landscape, was capable of informing and influencing European discourses and systems of thinking.

As we have seen in this chapter, the travel literature of the late eighteenth century developed a discourse that justified the appropriation of land and the establishment of ideal communities in order to proclaim the “progress” of Anglo Saxon civilization. Future British radicals, notably the Owenites, would come to America with the same assumptions concerning the legitimacy of the European colonial endeavor and would have no qualms about seeking a new path for European civilization by experimenting amidst the pastoral spectacle of the west. While on the one hand some radicals were physically drawn to the blank spaces on the map and were willing to settle in America, we will also find that relatively few English laborers in both the urban and rural environments were willing to emigrate. Despite this, the kind of vision that Imlay and Filson proposed in their topographical descriptions reinforced radical conceptions of the desirability of a reclaimable natural state in the tradition of John Locke. While the existence of a vision of a comfortable frontier existence would attract some alienated workers, we shall see that assumptions concerning the “blankness” of America and the moral benefits associated with spade husbandry would be instrumental in O’Connor’s ability to formulate his land plan and the proposals for “home colonization.”

CHAPTER THREE

Colonizing the *Tabula Rasa*: Morris Birkbeck and Robert Owen

The vast expansion in travel literature witnessed during the eighteenth century provided the burgeoning utopian literature of the period with a wealth of examples and models. The imaginary lands created by Daniel Defoe (1661-1731) and Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) were utilized by a host of utopian writers as backdrops for their model communities and ideal commonwealths. While such utopian literature may appear futile and foolish to the modern reader, utopian literature was a crucial genre and an important means by which radicals could critique the inadequacies and poverty of contemporary society and in response construct imaginary societies as realizable solutions. Social improvement through moral renewal was a key theme, and many plans for imaginary societies used a republican framework of government to protect these values and virtues. Once the French Revolution descended into the maelstrom of The Terror, the promise of empty space, untarnished by European history, took increasing salience in the radical imagination.⁸² While we have seen the 1790s as a decade in which radical minds were excited by texts like Imlay's, in this chapter we shall examine the ways in which the nineteenth century saw plans for utopian communities move from the abstract stage to physical reality. A single colonization paradigm did not emerge, rather we shall see that the American west attracted both socialist communitarians and radicals committed to private ownership of the land. Both strands however drew on the same Lockean heritage and the notions of a reclaimable natural state.

⁸² Gregory Claeys (ed.), *Utopias of the British Enlightenment*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. vii-xxvii.

The symbol of the west in British radicalism found one of its earliest manifestations in the ideas of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's (1772-1834) and Robert Southey's (1774-1843) plans to set up a "pantisocracy" on the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. In the same vein as Imlay, Coleridge argued that an agricultural society would facilitate moral renewal and personal salvation. He wrote to George Dyer (1755-1841) that while "man was not made to live in great cities," the "pleasures which we receive from rural beauties are of little consequence compared with the moral effect of these pleasures; beholding constantly the best possible, we are at last become ourselves the best possible."⁸³ Coleridge proclaimed his personal commitment to a scheme that would finally achieve the perfectibility of man:

Whilst pale Anxiety, corrosive Care,
The Tear of Woe, the gloom of sad Despair,
And deepn'd Anguish generous bosoms rend;-
Whilst made with rage demoniac, foul intent,
Embattled legions Despots vainly send
To arrest the immortal mind's expanding ray
Of everlasting Truth; - In other climes
Where dawns, with hope serene, a brighter day
Than e'er saw Albion in her happiest times,
With mental eye exulting now explore,
And soon with kindred minds shall haste to enjoy
(Free from the ills which were here our peace destroy)
Content and Bliss on Transatlantic shore.⁸⁴

Needless to say the plans never got beyond the planning stage. Southey bemoaned the fact that the pantisocracy was only achievable in a "miraculous Millennium."⁸⁵

⁸³ Letter from S.T. Coleridge to George Dyer, 10th March 1795, in Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 505.

⁸⁴ "On the Prospect of Establishing a Pantisocracy in America," in John Beer (ed.), *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poems* (London: Everyman, 1993), p. 22.

⁸⁵ W. H. G. Armytage, *Heavens Below: Utopian Experiments in England, 1560-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), p. 64.

While Southey and Coleridge, perhaps wisely, disbanded their project, the kinds of assumptions that they made about the west would reappear in later literature. The process by which the American west was constructed as an asylum for ideal communities can nowhere be more starkly seen than in the 1820 tract, *New Britain. A Narrative of a Journey by Mr. Ellis*.⁸⁶ While lamenting on the “variety of colours and shades of misery” that characterize Old England, the fictional Ellis jumps at the chance of visiting a colony of British ex-patriots who live in pastoral bliss surrounded by the wilds of unsettled Missouri. Displaying an intense faith in human improvement and hope for future settlement of “empty” lands, Ellis finds in Missouri a community of hardy Brits “living in the stile of Old England,”⁸⁷ and existing by the enlightened tenets of reason and natural law. Rather than congregate in cities or large towns that facilitate the “degradation of moral character”, the evil of luxury, and conspicuous consumption, the land is held in common for the virtuous Britons have “determined not to possess more land than the quantity requisite for comfortable subsistence.”⁸⁸ By limiting the size of private property the inhabitants have prevented the “few from rising into improper consequence, and the many from sinking into servility”; which the inhabitants believe is the true source of other nation’s misfortunes. In the place of money and the pursuit of luxury, the people, of both sexes, find solace in labor, the cultivation of their minds, and cricket. Ignorance, the “prolific parent of evil in human life” from which “arises all the ills which men are continually heaping upon each other” has been erased through education, religious

⁸⁶ *New Britain. A Narrative of a Journey by Mr. Ellis, to a country so called by its inhabitants, discovered in the vast plain of the Missouri, in North America, and inhabited by a people of British origin, who live under an equitable system of society, productive of peculiar independence and happiness, also some account of their constitution, laws, institutions, customs and philosophical opinions: together with a brief sketch of their history from the time of their departure from Great Britain*, in Gregory Claeys ed., *Modern British Utopias 1700-1850*. 8 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), vol. i, pp. 149-305.

⁸⁷ *New Britain*, p. 166.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

tolerance and the accumulation of knowledge. Rather than gradations of rank, “whatever it is necessary for men to do for the general good is accounted equally honourable.” The communal experiment replicates the male political bias of the Old World, yet the political structure is a republic premised on a social contract model in which “government emanates from the whole people. They are the solid rock, upon which all power is founded.”⁸⁹ Political power resides in the vote of family and the household: where a home has no male voter, the vote passes to the widow. Public business is transacted in public, and there is a strong emphasis on justice and civic virtue. The communistic basis of the society is evident: “all shall labour for, and assist each other, in cases of need, as equals and brethren: as God created mankind.”⁹⁰ When Ellis and his party “see them, on the borders of unappropriated forests and savannahs, inclosing only the small necessary portion of land, where others would have appropriated large domains,” he is “now almost convinced there may have been a golden age.”⁹¹

The reader can easily detect a Lockean discourse permeating the tract. The text satisfies a corpus of ideas revolving around the familiar concepts of a natural state, ennobled labor and moral redemption. However, the community emphasizes the competing strands in British radicalism as the Britons reject private property in favor of a return to a communal ownership of land. A certain Mr. Powell gives Ellis a summing up of western civilization and the evils of private ownership:

In the first ages, men lived in common, upon the spontaneous productions of nature. The Creator of all, made them with desires for which his bounteous laws of nature provided, till reason and observation enabled them to assist in supplying themselves. By degrees, the advantages of cultivation were discovered, and the land became appropriated, and with appropriation, the notions of property.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Population became crowded, men arose, for whom there was no land left in their native places: thus began servitude, dissensions, and trouble.⁹²

A tract like *New Britain* reinforces the idea that British radicals were complicit in the European propaganda that designated areas like Missouri “empty.” The Indians are mentioned as “marauding” and the forests “unappropriated,” while Ellis and his party are “agreeably surprised with the prospect of houses and a cultivated country” that “brought with it a mixture of painful recollections of Old England and old friends.”⁹³ The line between civilization and barbarity is therefore starkly drawn. While a tract like *New Britain* may have been entirely the work of fiction and the imagination, it is important as work of its type provided radicals such as Thomas Spence and Robert Owen with precedents for their ideas for a common ownership of the land and experimental communalism. Plans for primitive communities that resurrected a mythical golden age of simplicity and cooperation existed into the nineteenth century with writers such as Owen and O’Connor. While Claeys notes that such ideas received a frosty reception from writers like Thomas Paine who were more inclined to combine republicanism with the existing commercial system,⁹⁴ the primitive social model had considerable staying power in the radical imagination.⁹⁵ Like Imlay, radicals such as Robert Owen (1771-1858) and Morris Birkbeck (1764-1825) drew on the same assumptions concerning European expansion and sought to make the utopian literature reality by respectively colonizing areas of Indiana and Illinois and establishing their model communities.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁹⁴ The inhabitants of New Britain rejected commercial society to return to rustic simplicity and subsistence farming: “That commerce is, too generally, a system of injustice, thriving upon, or using particular information to take advantage of the want of it in others; and that all manufactures for commerce, contribute to the vices of avarice and unjust accumulation.” *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁹⁵ Gregory Claeys (ed.), pp. vii-xxvii.

The fictional Mr. Ellis perhaps referred to the emigrant Morris Birkbeck, a well-to-do Norfolk farmer who leased an estate of some 1,500 acres where he practiced modern agricultural techniques. Yet frustrated at his lack of enfranchisement in Britain, Birkbeck chose to exchange “the condition of an English farmer for an American proprietor.”⁹⁶ Though his lack of enfranchisement in England left Birkbeck politically charged, he appears as a somewhat conservative figure in many respects, as he dwells, like other English observers, on the coarse manners of Americans. Birkbeck rejoices that the political equality existing in America has resulted in a self-determined, independent and political aware populace, so much so that “the embarrassed air of an awkward rustic, so frequent, in England, is rarely seen in the United States.”⁹⁷

Birkbeck’s *Notes on a Journey in America* (1818) presents us with a valuable source for delineating the means by which British travelers used the American west as an empty space to advance their plans for establishing what they considered the optimum community and harmonious society. Like Imlay, Birkbeck experiences a definite moment of release when he passes from known civilization to the “land of promise” that lies on the other side of the Ohio River. Like Imlay, Birkbeck gives a physiocratic description of the land, yet this is a land already settled, and Birkbeck is overjoyed to find a “Hibernian” who has achieved the dream of independence and moral regeneration through his own labor:

He came to this place fourteen years ago, before an axe had been lifted, except to make a blaze road, a track across the wilderness, marked by the hatchet on the trees, which passed over the spot where the town now stands. A free and independent American, and a warm politician, he now discusses the interests of

⁹⁶ Morris Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey in America, From the Coast of Virginia to the Territory of Illinois* (London, 1818), p. 9.

⁹⁷ Birkbeck, p. 102.

the state as one concerned in its prosperity:- and so he is, for he owns one hundred and eighteen acres of excellent land, and has twenty descendants. He has also a right to scrutinize the acts of the government, for he has a share in its appointment, and pays eight dollars a year in taxes...He still inhabits a *cabin*, but it is not an *Irish cabin*.⁹⁸

While he trusts that the moving frontier leaves behind it spaces in which an enlightened civilization can flourish, Birkbeck tends to have reservations, like Crèvecoeur, about the people who inhabit the frontier itself. Birkbeck's settlement agenda that he outlines at the conclusion of his narrative is similar in a number of respects to that advanced by Imlay.

While Birkbeck plans to use the colonial space to recreate a Euro-centric civilization that will be open to "all" who wish to settle there, he deploys a similar tactic as Imlay and Crèvecoeur in depicting the white settlers, as well as the native Indians, as extensions of the landscape who will soon be swept aside once eastern civilization and metropolitan ideology have been imported. Birkbeck notes how there are "a number of backwoods' men, somewhat savage in character, and who look on new comers as intruders."⁹⁹

Birkbeck subsumes both the "savage" Indians and backwoods men into a barbaric other who will soon be conquered and colonized by enlightened and virtuous settlers who are in the process of reordering society along the lines of a reasonable and rational republican government.¹⁰⁰ Barbarity always exists alongside the frontier, and its presence indeed brings the virtue of the settled areas into sharper focus:

An unsettled country, lying contiguous to one that is settled, is always a place of retreat for rude and even abandoned characters, who find the regulations of society intolerable; and such, no doubt, had taken up their unfixed abode in Indiana. These people retire, with the wolves, from the regular colonists, keeping

⁹⁸ Birkbeck, p. 54.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁰ Edward S. Watts, *An American Colony: Regionalism and the Roots of Midwestern Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), p. 45.

always to the outside of civilized settlements. They rely for their subsistence on their rifle, and a scanty cultivation of corn, and live in great poverty and privation, a degree only short of the savage state of the Indians.¹⁰¹

Birkbeck emphasizes a stage theory of frontier colonization, one that will happily see the ruder elements of frontier life being replaced by morals and social characteristics more tolerable in the civilized metropole. The cast-offs of society are charged with the less savory elements of colonial expansion. They would then stand back while the march of progress washed over them and the advance of western civilization and colonization continued on unhindered:

America was bred in a cabin: this is not a reproach; for the origin is most honourable: but as she has exchanged her hovel of unhewn logs for a framed building, and that again for a mansion of brick, some of her cabin habits have been unconsciously retained. Many have been quitted; and, one by one, they will all be cleared away, as I am told they are now in the cities of the eastern states.¹⁰²

While Birkbeck argues that “we have no design of forming a society of English,”¹⁰³ it seems that he judges America by European standards: he laments the indolence of many of the American inhabitants, their lack of “taste”, and their ignorance of scientific knowledge – a true marker of Enlightenment values. Yet again, Birkbeck has hope for future settlement: “Nature has not yet displayed to them those charms of distant and various prospect, which will delight the future inhabitants of this noble country.”¹⁰⁴

While the colony that Birkbeck wishes to establish differs from that proposed by Imlay in that there will be a greater leveling impulse (“That no person may be tempted, by the low price at which our lands shall be offered to *possess* themselves of it as a mere

¹⁰¹ Birkbeck, pp. 87-8.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

object of speculation”¹⁰⁵), there emerges the same colonial agenda and desire to conquer barbarity and put in its place a civilization legitimized by the metropole, one which Birkbeck believes offers a “more simple state than was ever portrayed by an utopian theorist.”¹⁰⁶

One of the most vocal of these “utopian theorists” of the first decades of the nineteenth century was Robert Owen, whose *A New View of Society* (1812) excited radical debate on either side of Atlantic upon publication. Like Birkbeck, Owen believed that man was conditioned by his environment, and that true happiness and moral regeneration depended on educational opportunity. With this argument, Owen advanced that the regeneration of man could only be realized in small communities set away from the filth and corruption of urban society. The hopes that British radicals held for the social and moral benefit that a pastoral setting and cultivation of the land offered were intimately tied to the appeal of the community. Coleridge’s pantisocracy plan provides a ready example of the hopes British social critics held that the changes summoned by early industrial capitalism and the concomitant frictions between producer and master could be reversed and a new society, based on an alternative set of social and economic assumptions, could be put in its place. Upholding an intense faith in human progress and perfectibility, social reformers maintained that the establishment of separate communities detached from the capricious effects of urban industrial society could resurrect natural social relationships. As Royle points out, the hopes of men like Coleridge were essentially humanitarian and conservative. The “desire for separation”, Royle writes, “reinforced the attractions of the countryside, away from urban and industrial

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

corruption.” Clearly the endless space in the American west, the ultimate anti-urban sentiment, offered the best site in which these utopian dreams could be made manifest.¹⁰⁷ The literal lack of space in Britain resulting from the closing off of public space and the prevalence of game-laws and tithes only reinforced the contrast and increased the attraction of the west as a land of “newness and purity...an earlier stage...to which many Europeans longed to return.”¹⁰⁸ Despite the radicalism of these views, these theorists shared the same imperial assumptions of more conservative thinkers. Like Imlay and Filson and their hopes for a return to a golden age, Owen’s hope that the American west would offer the suitable environment for this New Moral World indicates the narrowness of a European imperial imagination that can only tolerate one historical narrative and one view of the human condition.

Robert Owen went further than any of his peers as his plans for model communities sought to make the twin appeals of the land and community reality. The community, or the Village of Cooperation, was Owenism’s central institution. The community was the instrument by which the individual could be educated and socialized to reject the competition and ignorance of the old “individual system”. For Owen and the Owenites, industrialization spelled the advent of the factory system that created overproduction and denied the operative the fruits of his own labor, alienating him in a society committed to competition. Through what Owen called a “New Social System” premised on the notion that members would live together devoid of conflict and with true ties of love and affection, man could use his innate reason to achieve true happiness.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Royle, *Robert Owen and the Commencement of the Millennium: A Study of the Harmony Community* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 46-7.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas K. Murphy, *A Land Without Castles: The Changing Image of America in Europe, 1780-1830* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001), p. 181.

Owen lambasted institutions that led to what he called the “individualized” man. The family attracted particular scorn from Owen, as it was considered merely a foundation of the irrational competitive society. Autonomous and isolationist, the family bred self-interest and individualism, provided a breeding ground for male authority and tyranny, and justified private property. In place of the family and the evil of private property, the community was summoned as the new bulwark against capitalist exploitation. Human happiness and satisfactory human relationships, Owen contended, could only be achieved if they were nurtured through the community and if private property was forever erased. Owen envisaged that the “evils of the old selfish individual system” (which he termed the “evil trinity” of private property, religion and the “irrational system” of marriage) could only be replaced through communal education and a system of mutual cooperation, thereby guaranteeing “real intelligence,” equal rights and enjoyment for all. The Tory tradition of community and the working class culture of collectivism provided strong roots in Britain for the popularity of Owen’s communitarian visions and schemes for “home colonies.” One must not dismiss the fact that the sense of community was strong in working class communities where a feeling of “particularism” was prevalent if the members of an area were all engaged in a similar craft activity. Even across disparate regions, a sense of collective identity and common standard of living could unite workers in common bonds of loyalty if they worked in comparable workplaces or belonged to the same trade union.¹⁰⁹

The example of the American west provided an immediate site in which Owen might achieve his “New Moral World.” Shorn of the legacy of the *ancien regime*, the

¹⁰⁹ Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Hutchinson: London, 1982), p. 127.

empty west had attracted the communitarian seed long before Owen even stepped foot in America. Both the Shakers and Rappites followed a desire to achieve spiritual renewal by removing themselves from the sin of the Old World. Particularly prevalent in the Shakers' case was an intense communitarian ethos spurred by a desire to reject existing social relationships. The success of the communal discipline of both groups showed to Owen that the American west could foster a communal consciousness. While Harrison has argued that communitarianism did not originate on the frontier, nor did the frontier provide a particularly conducive environment to communal living, he did contend that the west appeared to contemporaries as the perfect site for moral and social experiments. The rapid speed at which the industrial landscape spread across Britain and France gave rise to the theory that social change was not permanent and could actually be shaped and manipulated by man. Displaying an intense faith in Enlightenment notions of man's ability to control and order nature, the west appeared as the most readily untouched untamed wilderness that could provide the testing ground for modest experiments that could reverse the effects of industrialization before it was too late. While corruption was entrenched in the Old World and the unavailability of land precluded the possibility of social experimentation, within the context of social flux the west took on the meaning as a space that could be manipulated and shaped, a space in which communal living could be made to work, and therefore "could vitally affect the social which was emerging." Enthusiastic Owenites confirmed the attraction of the west as they sang, "Land of the West! We fly to thee, / Sick of the Old World's sophistry."¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ J.F.C. Harrison, *Quest for a New Moral World: Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 54-5.

While scholars have often pointed to Owenism's generally positive attitude to the United States, Gregory Claeys has reminded us that Owen was critical of the hierarchical taint of the older American states on the eastern seaboard. Scholars have been invited to treat Owen as a supporter of the United States through a reading of such speeches as "A Declaration of Mental Independence" that Owen gave at New Harmony on the fourth of July 1826. On this occasion Owen declared that the Revolution had emancipated the minds of men:

It is true, the right of mental liberty is inherent in our nature; for, while, man exists in mental health, no human power can deprive him of it; but until the Revolution of 1776, no people had acquired the *political power* to permit them to use that right... You have indeed abundant reason to rejoice in this victory, obtained over the thick mental darkness which, till then, covered the earth.¹¹¹

While Owen told the gathering that the American Revolution and the establishment of a republic had heralded the, "death blow to the tyranny and despotism which, for unnumbered ages past, had held the human mind spell-bound"; on later occasions he qualified this comment by pointing to the increasing corruption in the older states. When Owen returned to New Harmony after a period in Europe, he pessimistically spoke that,

The United States are following the same example of Great Britain in its rapidity of production; and they will soon experience many of its evils. The productions of this continent which are necessary to the best state of human existence will very shortly be in such abundance as to exceed the demand for them; and as soon as that period shall arrive, manual labour will decrease in value, and the non-producers will become the lords and oppressors... The system in progress in the United States tends to form an Aristocracy composed of the Priesthood, the Lawyers and the Wealthy, and threatens to produce a state of society the least calculated to promote the general welfare and happiness of any population.¹¹²

¹¹¹ "Oration Containing a Declaration of Mental Independence," July 4th 1826, *New Harmony Gazette*, vol. 1, No. 42, July 12 1826; *Robert Owen's New Harmony Addresses: A Compilation*, D.K. Ennis ed. (Earsville, Indiana: Scholars Portable Publication, 1977), p. 23.

¹¹² "A Address," April 13th 1828, *New Harmony Gazette*, 26, 1828, from Ennis (ed.), pp. 68-9.

Owen offered a politically moderate approach to social reform, which partly explains his lukewarm attitude to the presence of a republican system of government. For Owen, republican government could not guard against the formation of an acquisitive and competitive society. As Claeys tells us, Owen's "social critique" of radicalism – the idea that poverty originated in the economic realm rather than the political system – relied strongly upon the example of America. The April 4th edition of the radical *Poor Man's Guardian* newspaper noted how Owen retorted, "you have Universal Suffrage in America, and that has not prevented the like evils there which we experienced here."¹¹³ The presence of distressed laboring masses and social divisions in America led to the construction of a social, rather than a politically orientated radical campaign among Owenites who saw America, "with all its boasted institutions," to be "as liable as the old country to ruinous alterations in its commercial undertakings."¹¹⁴ For Owen, experiments in the social, rather than the political sphere, was the only means by which industrial capitalism could be subverted and the erosion of labor halted. However, Owen's lack of a political agenda meant that once Owenism lost the backing of the trade unions in 1834, Owenism could offer radicalism little, while Chartism became the focus for working class political agitation.

Because he seemingly found the ruinous effects of the "individual system" everywhere he turned, Owen had come to Indiana to try an experiment "that if successful...should be an example which all might follow and which all might benefit." It

¹¹³ *Poor Man's Guardian*, April 4th, 1834.

¹¹⁴ Gregory Claeys, "The Example of America a Warning to England? The Transformation of American in British Radicalism and Socialism, 1790-1850," from Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 71.

was therefore not coincidental that in 1824 Owen chose to invest \$125,000 in New Harmony, Indiana from the Rappites. For Owen the land was suitably distant from the “unfavourable influences” of the eastern cities and had been “prepared in the most remarkable manner for the New System.”¹¹⁵ Not only could land be brought relatively cheaply, but the physical landscape and the intellectual climate was conducive to Owenite social philosophy. Owen’s attraction to the west betrays the pastoral and agrarian biases in Owenism, and brings into sharper focus the intense faith in the redemptive qualities of spade husbandry, one of the few issues that the main radical leaders could unanimously agree on.¹¹⁶ While Owen would have recoiled from the private property connotation of Jefferson’s yeoman ideal, he was merely another in a long line of English reformers for whom the attraction of America was due to the fact that the republic did appear to be essentially an agrarian democracy of morally virtuous independent yeoman farmers. In place of the factories of England, Owen hoped that a communitarian Britain would be essentially agricultural, as only through rural pursuits could man experience moral renewal. Owen was to write years later in his autobiography how he saw in the “new fertile soil” of New Harmony “the cradle of the future liberty of the human race.”¹¹⁷ While Owen moaned that the old states of America had succumbed to the corruption of the competitive society of the old World and were in the “very bondage of mental slavery” that existed in Europe, the west promised a new start. While the American frontier held symbolic value for British radicals, Owen went a stage a further in making dreams material reality.

¹¹⁵ Harrison, p. 55.

¹¹⁶ Malcolm Chase, *The People’s Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 139.

¹¹⁷ *The Life of Robert Owen, Written By Himself* [1857], from Gregory Claeys (ed.), *Selected Writings of Robert Owen*, (London: W. Pickering, 1993), vol. iv, p. 209.

Owen's presence in the backwoods of Indiana indicates the extent to which the American west could attract a variety of radical projects. His efforts to create a "New Moral World" were doomed to failure - if only because everything he planned was hideously expensive - and he remains a somewhat anomalous figure in British radicalism of the nineteenth century. His hopes for communal ownership of the land would soon be replaced by a commitment to private property as avowed by the Chartists. Morris Birkbeck, on the other hand, displays an intense commitment to English identity that he would share with radicals such as Cobbett and, to a lesser extent, the Irishman O'Connor. While the American west for Birkbeck was an egalitarian haven for mankind, it is important to remember that his vision of the ideal society was one very much in keeping with Tory conceptions of a genuinely orderly and organic community that had existed in a happier age. While Owen drew on a similar heritage, Owen's vision of a classless community premised on mutual help and equal access to education was far more radical than Birkbeck's squirearchical society. In the final section, we shall see how the frontier, while rapidly occupying the status of myth, was still critical in allowing British radicals to elaborate on what they considered the natural social relations between master and worker, and indeed husband and wife.

CHAPTER FOUR

Realities and Responses: The American West and the Chartist Land Plan

Anticipating Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), the Owenite criticism of America revolved around the belief that the republican system of government was unequipped to hold back the commercial and competitive forces that corroded human morals and natural sociability.¹¹⁸ This Owenite effort to interpret contemporary problems from a social angle was taken up to a large extent by other radicals. While Gregory Claeys has argued that a negative model of America was firmly in place by the 1840s,¹¹⁹ the number of positive and negative voices seems to preclude our ability to make a generalized statement about British attitudes to America as the nineteenth century wore on. Despite the multiplicity of competing voices, it seems that radicals began to see that republicanism and prosperity did not necessarily go hand in hand, and that social responses to economic distress and unemployment were more likely to meet with success than political reform. In the midst of capitalist revolution, radicals argued that, irrespective of political equality, society should be organized so that all its inhabitants could expect a minimum standard of living below which none should be allowed to fall.

¹¹⁸ The political economist, John Bray, would echo this critique. He wrote, "from the very nature of things there can never be a true republic – there can never be equal rights and equal laws – under the present social system...The United States government, whatever it may be called, is, like that of Britain, the government of a class – the government of men of money." See John F. Bray, *Labour's Wrongs and Labour's Remedy, or the Age of Might against the Age of Right* [1839] (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967), p. 72. For a particularly stinging Owenite critique of the United States and western civilization in general, see Bray's amusing "A Voyage from Utopia to Several Unknown Regions of the World [1842], in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *Modern British Utopias 1700-1850*. 8 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), vol. vii, pp. 349-486. Bray would later emigrate and settle in Michigan.

¹¹⁹ Gregory Claeys, "The Example of America a Warning to England? The transformation of American in British radicalism and socialism, 1790-1850," from Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck eds. *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 66-79.

While this shift to social above political reform had its precursor in Owenite socialism, we can argue that it reached its greatest apogee with the Chartist Land Plan of the 1840s. Within this context the American frontier occupied a rather ambivalent presence in the radical imagination. While the Chartist journal, the *Northern Star*, and the radical agrarian William Cobbett (1763-1835) published tracts glorifying the frontier's greatest son – Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) – the evidence of increasing unavailability of land meant that by the 1840s America and her frontier moved from being an example of a “natural space” to an example of what land reform might achieve. Rather than present a raw space of innocent nature, the frontier increasingly became seen as a site where commercial tyranny held sway. As Jamie Bronstein notes, the presence of a land reform tradition on the other side of the Atlantic indicated to radicals that frontier ethic was swiftly becoming fantasy: “Examination of the land reform movements in a transatlantic context has illustrated that even with its much-vaunted frontier, the United States was not perceived to be a haven for the land-hungry workingman in the antebellum period.”¹²⁰ While this may be true, it is equally true that radicals still considered the individual yeoman farmer owning his own land to be the attainment of true happiness. Committed to the moral and social rewards of independence and self-determination that stemmed directly from a pastoral context, the myth of the frontier remained instrumental in defining the practical strategy of British agrarian fundamentalism.

The increasingly ambivalent radical attitudes to America as the nineteenth century progressed are epitomized in the figure of William Cobbett. The father of nineteenth century radical print culture, Cobbett's *Political Register* set the standard for radical

¹²⁰ Jamie L. Bronstein, *Land Reform and Working-Class Experience in Britain and the United States, 1800-1862* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 249.

periodicals and structured the way in which political radicalism was made intelligible to the common farm laborer and urban artisan. Like Owen, Cobbett was deeply committed to the redemptive qualities of spade husbandry. To political economy's faith in the land, Cobbett added the element of rural romanticism. Conjuring images of the rustic simplicity, Cobbett sought to redress movement to the town and thereby reaffirm rural virtue and the "liberties of the stout yeoman."¹²¹ A somewhat conservative figure, Cobbett had previously only seen in America the "rust of *Federalism*." Yet following a years' residence in Long Island – dodging imprisonment in England - Cobbett grew more favorable and noted that the average American worker was some three times as wealthy as his British counterpart. During his period in America he wrote *A Year's Residence in the United States of America* (1819), mostly an agricultural treatise offering good farming techniques and describing the wonders of the swede vegetable. Yet while Cobbett was free to tend his garden in Long Island, the contrast between the respective conditions of the American and English laborer did not escape him, a contrast that he put down to the difference in laws, government and taxation between the old and new worlds. Cobbett uses the apparent improvement and affluence characteristic of the Long Island landscape and rural labor as a means to launch a stinging attack on the system of taxation and aristocracy who have forced the English rustic into the "Poor-houses, Madhouses, and Jails":

It is a curious thing to observe the farm-houses of this country. They consist, almost without exception, of a considerably large and very neat house, with sash windows, and of a *small house*, which seems to have been *tacked on* to the large one...But, as to the *cause*, the process has been the opposite of this instance of the works of nature, for it is *the larger house which has grown out of the small one*.

¹²¹ Edward Royle, *Robert Owen and the Commencement of the Millennium: A Study of the Harmony Community* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 42.

The father, or grandfather, while he was toiling for his children, lived in the small house, constructed chiefly by himself, and consisting of rude materials. The means, accumulated in the small house, enabled a son to rear the large one... What a contrast with the farm houses of England! There the *little* farm-houses are falling into ruins... contain a miserable labourer, who ought to have been a farmer like his grandfather was... The cause of this sad change is to be found in the crushing taxes; and the cause of them, in the Borough usurpation, which has robbed the people of their best right.¹²²

The evidence of prosperity in American society resulted in the “intercourse between man and man, family and family”, being “easy and pleasant.”¹²³ Despite Cobbett’s glowing appraisal of the freedom of American life, his stay did not turn him into some American patriot. Rather for Cobbett the liberal American life reflected the state that England had enjoyed centuries before the spread of the Norman Yoke, the Reformation and the “plundering tyrants” - the Boroughmongers, who “take away men’s property at their pleasure, *without any appeal to any tribunal.*”¹²⁴ America was not a land that should attract English emigrants, it was instead constructed by Cobbett as a model of what England had been during the “Golden Age” before the odious Norman Conquest. Any virtues that Americans displayed, were only those that they had inherited from “the ancient laws of England, which say that *no man shall be taxed without his own consent*”¹²⁵:

When one sees this sort of living, with the houses *full of good beds*, ready for the guests as well as family to sleep in, we cannot help perceiving that this is that “*English Hospitality*”, of which we have *read* so much; but, which Boroughmongers’ taxes and pawns have long since driven out of England.¹²⁶

¹²² Cobbett quoted in James Sandbrook, *William Cobbett* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 101.

¹²³ Cobbett, *A Year’s Residence in the United States of America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964 [1819]), p. 192.

¹²⁴ Cobbett, *A Year’s Residence*, p. 194.

¹²⁵ Cobbett, p. 219.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

While America inspired in Cobbett nostalgia for what had been, Cobbett follows the writers that we have analyzed by celebrating the pastoral simplicity and democratic ambience of the frontier, one that emerges forcefully in his *Life of Andrew Jackson, President of the United States of America* (1834). Jackson is the embodiment of the virtues of the frontier: independent, assertive, uncompromising and driven by a democratic spirit to serve the public interest. In his preface, Cobbett draws a characteristic picture of the frontier and the homestead as a breeding ground of republican virtue and masculine strength:

It is with no small delight that I see, in the following pages, proofs undeniable of the superiority of nature over art, of genius over rank and over riches: it is with pride, and with just pride, I trust, that I behold all that is great in the character of man, springing out of the humble homestead.¹²⁷

Ignoring the fact that Jackson was a staunch removalist and a slaveholder, Cobbett dwells on celebrating Jackson's rugged physicality, noting that "however accustomed to it from early life few are capable of enduring so much fatigue or with so little injury." True to his frontier roots, "honest poverty" has always been "respected by him, while he has turned his back on dishonest wealth." Jackson is the epitome of the kind of disinterested leadership that England lacks. In contrast to "Captain Swallow-Pension" and the "swaggering nobility" and "spongers" "living upon the labour of the industrious part of the community" who typify England's political elite, Jackson prefers the simple life of the farm and enters the political realm only through devotion to civic duty:

Jackson, happy on his farm, in the midst of this fine and flourishing state; and retired, as he apparently thought, for ever, from all public affairs, though only

¹²⁷ William Cobbett, *The Life of Andrew Jackson, President of the United States of America* (London, 1834), p. ix.

forty-five years of age; retired, as he thought, for ever, was again roused by the insults offered to his country; by the wrongs inflicted upon her citizens.¹²⁸

Defeating the “imperious” English army at New Orleans, Jackson turns his attention in true imperial fashion to the “savages” and “wretches” who have been inflicting “murders and cruelties the most horrible” in his native Tennessee and Kentucky. Unlike Imlay and Birkbeck who blurred the frontier vanguard and the native Indians, Jackson is constructed as the embodiment of the noble dream of the virtuous frontiersman.

As Epstein has argued, the ideal of the backcountry as an idealized and romanticized space “died hard” in the British radical imagination. Here was a site that had never been invaded by the capricious effects of Old World corruption, a symbolic space of “populist yearning” where humans could exist in rough social and political equality. While the British worker toiled for the benefit of another, the land of the western backwoods provided the laborer with direct access to the means of subsistence. The excitement that the frontier generated in the British radical imagination was prevalent when the *Northern Star* similarly published a tribute to Jackson. Parallel to Cobbett, the *Star* contrasted Jackson’s disinterestedness and virtue with Prime Minister Gray, who orchestrated the 1832 Poor Law.¹²⁹ While generally opposed to emigration, the *Star* did publish letters from recently emigrated Britons who celebrated the sense of renewal and regeneration they had encountered upon reaching the Midwest. One William Butterworth wrote to the *Northern Star* in April 1843, saying that the factories in the United States are “little better than those in England,” and that “thousands have landed in New York, who have returned to England in a few weeks giving very distressing

¹²⁸ Cobbett, p. 19.

¹²⁹ James Epstein, “Spatial Practices/Democratic Vistas,” *Social History*, 24 (1999), p. 306.

accounts of the country.” But persons, Butterworth continued, of “small capital and industrious habits,”

May better their fortunes considerably by emigrating to the Western States, say Michigan, Illinois, Tennessee, and buying a small farm, putting up themselves a house, in which they are assisted by their neighbours, and obtaining an employment at their trade, or assisting their neighbours in getting their crops, for first year till they are settled...Sir, of the contrast! A man here by doing so, may secure a permanent independence for his offspring; whilst in England he toils all his life for a scanty subsistence, and his landlord’s rent.¹³⁰

Usury and fraud are sharply contrasted with communal cooperation and moral virtue. In the minds of British radicals, the frontier made America exceptional. In contrast to the dependency of European landlord-tenant relationships, the American backcountry was where the worker’s toil would be rewarded with its true, full value. The empty and virtuous west attracted English emigrants such as M. Trumbull. Trumbull remembered how one Sunday evening in 1846 he was in a coffeehouse in London, where Chartists commonly gathered to discuss the *Northern Star*. He remembered how,

The paper for that week contained a copy of the new constitution of Wisconsin, which territory was then making preparations for admission as a state into the American Union. Discussing it, one of the party said, ‘Here is a land where the Charter is already law; where there is plenty of work and good wages for all; why not go there?’ To me the question sounded logical...shortly after that I was on board an emigrant ship a-sailing Westward Ho!¹³¹

Wisconsin also drew the attention of the Staffordshire Potter’s Union in early 1844. The introduction of machinery – in particular the scorned “jolly” – created a surplus labor force and depressed wages. To combat rising unemployment the only alternative to expensive strike action was emigration to the virgin lands of the United

¹³⁰ *Northern Star*, April 29th, 1843, p. 7.

¹³¹ R. Boston, *British Chartists in America: 1839-1900* (Manchester University Press, 1971), p. 29.

States. Drawing on the agrarian consciousness of British labor, the emigrants planned to engage in agricultural activity, a logical choice given that their entry into the American pottery industry meant that they would compete with British labor. As Burchill notes, the logical choice was private property farming, as socialist arguments and Owenite communitarianism had never been too popular in the potteries: “No attempt was made to analyse an alternative political system as possibly a feature of life in America – unless one infers an archaic system of free, contiguous, but separate landowners, enjoying the health of the land, each his own boss and free from the oppression of the factory and its Master and presumably self-sufficient.”¹³² The plan was to buy twelve thousand acres of land in Wisconsin, divided into allotments of twenty acres, and each to be populated by the families of pottery operatives. Each would contribute to a central fund and a lottery system would determine which of the lucky winners would constitute the vanguard of the colonization endeavor. The town of Pottersville was to be a “LANDED HOME FOR ALL”, and “FREE FROM RENT, TAXES AND TITHE.”¹³³ While the Emigration Society was allegedly in possession of some 50,000 acres in Wisconsin, the movement began to fall apart in 1849 and 1850 due to financial shortages back in England. The *Northern Star* printed the truth behind the Potters’ sojourn in the wilderness:

We find the land at present in the hands of Indians and cannot be secured by any party until surveyed by the American government and afterwards brought into market for sale, and, therefore, that all settlers are considered as trespassers. The greater part of the land is sandy and wet marsh land, and in the opinion of many practical men, unsuitable for farming... We, your memorialists, feel heartsick, duped as they have been by being caused to break up their homes and quit their native land to be thrown destitute upon a strange country without means of extrication.¹³⁴

¹³² Frank Burchill and Richard Ross, *A History of the Potters’ Union* (Stafford, 1977), p. 86.

¹³³ Burchill and Ross, p. 91.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

The disappointment of the potters was characteristic of the increasingly pessimistic messages that began to filter back from British emigrants in the west. Rather than finding the Garden of Eden and natural state that they had expected, British travelers in the west increasingly discovered that the idyllic image of the west as a land of rustic simplicity and equality was a fallacy. Middle class observers were particularly scornful of a landscape that they considered lacked history, rural charm, and ancient harmony.¹³⁵ Charles Dickens offers classic statements of this sentiment in *American Notes* (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844). Dickens' attitudes to the west are indicative of a generation of British radicals and travelers who found the rural scene confronting them in the west a far cry from that projected in contemporary discourse. While Dickens had chosen to visit the western areas to avoid the corrupt slave holding south, his description of the Midwest landscape reveals the damage and violence that the swiftly moving frontier had inflicted. Before setting out for the Midwest, Dickens follows many of his compatriots by "imagining" the western landscape as unspoiled by the pernicious effects of industrial capitalism: "I began to listen to old whisperings which had often been present to me at home in England, when I little thought of ever being here, and to dream again of cities growing up, like palaces in fairy tales, among the wilds and forest of the west."¹³⁶ Dickens is excited and initially positive about his adventure in the wilderness, but his vision darkens considerably on confronting reality. When the hinterland of the town of Cairo (the satirically titled "Eden" of *Martin Chuzzlewit*) comes into view, Dickens' eye was,

¹³⁵ Epstein, p. 305.

¹³⁶ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 127

Pained to see the stumps of great trees thickly strewn in every field of wheat, and seldom to lose the eternal swamp and dull morass, with hundreds of rotten trunks and twisted branches steeped in unwholesome water. It was quite sad and oppressive, to come upon great tracts where settlers had been burning down trees, and where their wounded bodies lay scattered about.¹³⁷

Dickens' pain upon confronting the charred remnants of the wilderness is emblematic of the fact that the static moment of rural bliss and moral happiness that the frontier is supposed to offer can never be achieved. Again, the frontier can never remain immobile. The frontier moves on and leaves behind environmental carnage and towns like Cairo, Illinois, a "breeding place of fever, ague and death," "a slimy monster hideous to behold," and a "place uncheered by any gleam or promise, a place without one single quality."¹³⁸ Dickens' greatest concern, like the British radicals he would have hardly considered fellow-travelers, was that the malicious effects of industrialism had reached the virtuous Midwest. Like the residents of the Coketown of *Hard Times* (1854), the Americans accompanying Dickens on the canal boat, "are all alike...there is no diversity of character. They travel about on the same errands, say and do the same things in exactly the same manner, and follow in the same dull cheerless round."¹³⁹ Where once the lands of the west had been regarded as a release from the claustrophobia of industrial towns like the mythical Coketown, Dickens' comments indicates that contemporaries saw the west as no longer a site of material abundance and social equality unspoiled by pernicious commercialism.

The Chartist William Aitken shared Dickens' criticism of the urban landscape that the moving frontier deposited. Aitken's attitude towards the United States, like Dickens',

¹³⁷ Dickens, p.153

¹³⁸ Dickens, *American Notes*, p. 171.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

is generally lukewarm, for instance when he castigates Americans for the slavery that has poisoned American morals. Ironically, while other radicals had been want to celebrate America's democratic sentiments, Aitken actually pours scorn on what he deems the corrosive result of the democratization of American life: the factionalism of party politics which Aitken feels is responsible for "the dearest interests of the nation" being "sacrificed amidst its ravings." Like Dickens, Aitken's vision darkens considerably on reaching the west, arguing that the capital outlay and threat of insecurity on the frontier means that emigration to the western states is an undertaking "nearly all who hazard it will regret."¹⁴⁰ While Aitken notes that the "the woods and prairies of the far west of America, where land is sold a dollar and quarter per acre" must inspire "visions of happiness" in an "individual who has been brought up in a manufacturing district...whose eye only meets the beauties of green fields and nature once a week," he qualifies this by stating that one must be willing to meet the inevitable hardship with "resolution and fortitude."¹⁴¹

Continuing his rather negative portrayal of the west, Aitken calls towns like Nauvoo, Illinois - that had initially offered a place of asylum for communal groups such as the Mormons - as squalid settlements that one should avoid "as they would the city of a plague." Like Dickens' Cairo, Nauvoo presents a site that Aitken felt he had left in Lancashire:

The same appearance everywhere presented themselves - miserable huts, and tales of wretchedness from the inmates. The murmur of discontent arose from the dwellings; and that dissatisfied, without money and spiritless, had no means to get away. But I appeal to commonest comprehension, and ask what else could be the

¹⁴⁰ William Aitken, *A Journey up the Mississippi River, from its mouth to Nauvoo, the city of the Latter Day Saints* (Ashton-under-Lyme, 1845), p. 48.

¹⁴¹ Aitken, p. 24.

result of thousands coming suddenly into one place, destitute of capital themselves, and nearly all that way, similarly situated.¹⁴²

It is important to note that Aitken does not criticize the imperial presence. Rather his issue is with the corrosive effects of “party spirit” and the “spirit of speculation” that have brought social schism, “depreciated your money, destroyed confidence, ruined the opulent, beggared the labourer, and manacled your commerce.” Aitken is thoroughly committed to the political equality that he believes America symbolizes, and which he believes will bring a more natural system of labor and insure that America is once more the country to which “the oppressed of every country look for carrying...the blessings of political equality to every human being, be he white or black.” That this political and social equality depends on expansion appears not to concern Aitken when he celebrates the potential of the United States:

If the mighty tide of empire is to keep rolling on, from the broad waters of the Atlantic, to the broader waters of the Pacific. If the woods, which have never echoed to a sound save that of the cataract or the scream of the wild bird, are to give way for cities and villages teeming with an industrious people, and with fertile fields waving with luxury and abundance. -If the dazzling of the ‘star spangled banner,’ which has assisted in lighting thousands to your shores, is to be upheld with undiminished luster, - if prosperity is again to shine upon the tillers of the soil, and take the place of the loud murmur of discontent, - if you intended to convince the powers of the earth that a republican form of government is the best that can be devised, in theory and practice, - party spirit must be annihilated.¹⁴³

Like Filson and Imlay before him, Aitken makes the prehistoric open spaces that “have never echoed to a sound save that of the cataract,” submit to the designs of Western historical development and modernity.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 30-31.

Despite the generally pro-American tone of the newspaper, the *Northern Star* did join this chorus of dissent, and throughout the 1840s published evidence of mounting suffering in America. The spread of such reports suggested to contemporaries that economic liberty did not automatically stem from democratic government. By the mid 1840s the British press printed scores of articles sharply criticizing America. In June 1844 the *Star* ran an article that pointed to the catalogue of problems in American cities, including declining wages in Philadelphia and the overwork of female workers in Boston. Even the promise of free land that had defined America as exceptional now appeared a hollow promise. The *Star* painted a picture of rural America that was reminiscent of the enclosures of the Old Country:

The consequences have been the establishment of a social or rather anti-social system, very like that which has for centuries existed in this country. The few usurp the soil and deny the many that heritage which Nature proclaims the property of all. A horde of capitalists monopolize the accumulated fruits of mechanical industry.¹⁴⁴

The *Star* here echoes Spencean and Lockean notions of a natural state, and confirms the longevity of ideas revolving around the land as the essential metaphor for moral and social benefit. While radicals acknowledged that the “horde of capitalists” had invaded urban areas, what was even more disconcerting was the realization that now the average American was restricted in his access to the land.”¹⁴⁵

For British radicals, the presence of commercial sway in the backwoods of America was concluding proof of what Owen had warned: that untrammelled capitalism

¹⁴⁴ *Northern Star* June 1, 1844, p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ Bronstein, p. 160.

had compromised republican virtue.¹⁴⁶ Universal suffrage could not by itself ensure the general happiness. While on the one hand independence and self-determination were considered companions to private ownership of land, political theory stipulated that free access to land was the mainstay of the republican experiment. Free land, as Gjerde writes, ensured the loyalty of republican subjects, muted class conflict and kept the “people and their institutions free.”¹⁴⁷ As the American James B. Bowlin commented, if one wanted to perpetuate the democratic form of government, “you must pursue a policy tending to disseminate the lands amongst the largest possible number of people in the state.”¹⁴⁸ The connection between free land and republican government was so clear to Orlando B. Ficklin that he commented,

In a republican government, the people, the masses, should as far as possible, be encouraged in their laudable desires to become owners of the soil. The relation of landlord to tenant is not favorable to the growth or maintenance of free principles... The moment a citizen becomes a freeholder, his ties to his country and its institutions are increased. He has his home, his fireside, and his personal liberty and security, to protect and defend.¹⁴⁹

As Patricia Limerick writes, “the success of the American experiment rested on the property-holding success of many individuals. ‘Power always followed property,’ John Adams said bluntly; property, widely distributed among the people, would hold the line against pernicious concentrations of power.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Gregory Claeys, “The Example of America a Warning to England? The Transformation of American in British Radicalism and Socialism, 1790-1850,” from Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 66-79.

¹⁴⁷ Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 29.

¹⁴⁸ Gjerde, p. 29.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁵⁰ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), p. 59.

Despite the fact that the blank, virtuous *tabula rasa* had become corrupted by materialism and greed, and that the *Star* denounced the west as the “mockery of the masses,” Feargus O’Connor remained committed to the potentiality of free land and made the same link between land distribution and political authority that Bowlin and Ficklin had made. Initially one of the foremost critics of America, O’Connor had argued in the pages of the *Northern Star* that both the French and American Revolutions had failed to create true republics because the people had never taken control of the land. O’Connor noted how “the pernicious effects of Capital and Class Legislation are as deeply felt in America as they are in England.” For O’Connor, America “had her revolution,” but its only result was the ousting of the foreign foe” – she was yet to deal with the “domestic enemy.” Yet O’Connor did not dwell on denouncing the threats to liberty in the new republic, rather he used the *Northern Star* to celebrate the efforts of land reform schemes in America that would provide the model for similar efforts in Britain. O’Connor stressed the efforts of the American working classes in founding a “real republic” through their land reform proposals. Tapping into the agrarian tradition, O’Connor noted how the land was labor’s “mainstay and only resource.” The redistribution of land would avoid the necessity of America “undergoing another bloody Revolution to destroy the power of capital and class.” Land reform proposals would provide the “basis of a real republic.” Once again the land would provide a safety valve for free workers to escape from political slavery and social degradation:

You may rest assured that when the comparatively small population of America takes this early step for the LAND that belongs to them, that the English working

classes will be impelled with anxiety proportionate to their larger populations, to take the same steps for their redemption.¹⁵¹

Bronstein argues that the “Chartist movement transform[ed] itself from a political movement in the service of social ends to an economic movement in the service of political ends” because of desperation and exhaustion of strategic alternatives.

Petitioning, general strikes and physical force had all failed to bring the make the six points of the People’s Charter reality.¹⁵² While he would not have admitted that the movement was in the throes of desperation, O’Connor indicated in his work *A Practical Work on the Management of Small Farms* (1846) that the effort to construct colonies of small farms would work hand in hand with the political effort. The land plan, by moving urban workers back onto the land, would insure them of the moral and political attributes necessary for the franchise:

The question may here arise then, as to which of the changes that I contend for should have the priority:- the establishment of the small farm principle – or the enactment of the People’s Charter, by which the land would be stripped of it political qualification...I should say, that without political power the system never could be made so general as to be of national benefit; while, upon the other hand, I do not believe that any other inducement, save that of the practical result of the plan of small farms, ever will be sufficiently strong to produce such a public feeling as will bring into moral action such an amount of mind in favour of both changes, as neither minister of party would dare to resist...Possession of political power is indispensable as a means for making the plan of free labour a national benefit; while I am further of the opinion, that no writing, no talking, no reasoning, no declamation, no exaggeration, can have the effect of enlisting, in

¹⁵¹ *Northern Star*, May 4th, 1844, p. 1. As early as 1834 emigrants were voicing complaints about the corrosive influence of the United States’ commercial system, but countered this by holding to the land as a safety valve. A “colonist” wrote to the *Poor Man’s Guardian* that “we have some means got into difficulties, from which we can not extricate ourselves, because the usurers and lawyers, in conjunction with the revenue, swallow up our whole earnings, without making our liabilities which will, ere long, come upon the LAND for satisfaction. *Poor Man’s Guardian*, July 5th, 1834.

¹⁵² Bronstein, p. 10

support of the small farm plan, the one hundredth part of that thought and mind that the *practice*, if seen to a considerable extent, would produce.¹⁵³

In contrast to the artificial labor market and the factory system that resulted in a surplus labor supply that drove wages down, O'Connor wished to create a free labor market that allowed the worker to choose and select a place of work. By sending the surplus labor force to work on the land, the overpopulation of the industrial towns could be relieved. Overlooking the long-term campaign for the Charter, the social rewards of the small farm system were plain to see. In contrast to the "slave" who sells himself to the capitalist's will, O'Connor draws a caricature of the noble farm laborer who works for himself in the natural market:

It is his pride to rise betimes, according to his strength, rejoicing in the reflection that upon his industry the whole family must depend; while, in return, he looks for that contentment that a happy home can bestow...[I]f he should be overworked, or even drowsy, he dreads not the awful sound of the morning toll of the factory bell. He is not deprived of the comfort of the society his wife; he is not degraded by living as a prostitute upon her and his children's labour...[H]e is master of himself and of his time, and is answerable to society for the disposal of both.¹⁵⁴

By reversing the rhythm of industrial factory labor, the land would restore normative social and gender roles, insuring that the independent male would return to labor on the land and the female to her private sphere. O'Connor's tract was clearly drawing on what popular emotions deemed the natural order of labor and home life. By displacing abstract labor and artificial relationships between master and worker, the cottage economy ideal provided the most powerful language to imagine the resurrection of the lost natural

¹⁵³ Feargus O'Connor, *A Practical Work on the Management of Small Farms* (Manchester, 1846), pp. 10-11.

¹⁵⁴ O'Connor, p. 20.

order.¹⁵⁵ O'Connor echoed Cobbett and Owen in his avowal of the rewards of spade husbandry when he commented that, "Never lose sight of this one irrefutable fact, that man is born with propensities which may be nourished into virtues, or thwarted into vices, according to his training. That the system that I propose would nourish these propensities into virtues, which would constitute the characteristic of Englishmen, while the slave system now in operation, thwarts these propensities into vices."¹⁵⁶ O'Connor's rhetoric certainly struck a chord with the working classes, with the plan attracting 70,000 subscribers at its peak. "An Unlocated Member," who wrote to the radical *Reynold's Political Instructor* as late as 1850, resurrects old languages of labor and gives us a sense of what was so attractive in O'Connor's plan:

'Earn thy bread by the sweat of thy brow,' is an old law of nature, older than the Land Plan of Mr. O'Connor, and it was for those who joined the Land Society to remember it. As to pictures of rural bliss, and a kind of paradise happiness, those extravagancies are common to many men who have the mistake the meaning of happiness, and mistake words for things...Those who live in agricultural districts are, on average, longer lived than those who live in manufacturing districts...Mr. O'Connor was justified in speaking in even glowing language in favour of a rural life.¹⁵⁷

While Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the frontier transformed the European into the rugged American, it is clear that the in the hands of radicals like Cobbett and O'Connor, the independence and autonomy with which the frontier was intimately associated, could be used to reaffirm English, rather than American, identity.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Malcolm Chase, "We Wish Only to Work for Ourselves: the Chartist Land Plan," from Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), p. 36.

¹⁵⁶ O'Connor, p. 20.

¹⁵⁷ *Reynold's Political Instructor*, March 9th, 1850, p. 141.

¹⁵⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications Limited, 1996).

Like Owen and Cobbett, O'Connor's argument that the land plan would return the English worker to a natural state and golden age of pastoral bliss and agrarian toil relied on an American model. As Bronstein notes, land reform on both sides of the Atlantic fed on the same Lockean heritage. "A fortuitous combination of circumstances in both countries – among them the experience of factory labor, transitions in the external environment, histories of failed political radicalism, the activities of experienced leaders committed to the notion of small proprietorship, and the widespread perception that farmers led particularly healthy and virtuous lives – combined to push this change in a new direction: the search for land for the laborer."¹⁵⁹ The *Northern Star* emphasized the example of American land reform: when it wrote, "It is because the power of the capitalist of America has so long deprived Labour of its real value in the free market that Labour in that country is now compelled to look to the LAND as its mainstay and only resource."¹⁶⁰ Arguing that the French had achieved more by their revolution than Americans did by independence by a partial sub-division of land, the *Star* went onto denounce the American republic for breeding the same lethargy among the productive populace that had kept the English working class subservient:

It would either appear that land for want of population was useless when American declared her independence, or that the voice of American knowledge was lost in the exultation of her triumph, in as much as it is only now that the people of that country are beginning to turn their attention from the shadow to the substance, from the protection of others to THE LAND FOR THEMSELVES.¹⁶¹

Despite the mounting evidence of social inequality that suggested that America was no longer the site of popular democracy that it was once thought to be, the frontier

¹⁵⁹ Bronstein, p. 1.

¹⁶⁰ *Northern Star*, May 4th, 1844, p. 1.

¹⁶¹ *Northern Star*, 10th January, 1846, p. 4.

and concepts revolving around the ennoblement of labor on the land remained powerful working class languages. While Chase notes that the Chartist Land Plan was the “ending” of the “literal acceptance of a reclaimable natural state, derived from the paradigms of Locke and the popular enlightenment,” the land plan also started the tradition of working class “self-made social institutions”, such as the building society and the notion of private home ownership.¹⁶² The Land Plan drew heavily on notions of domesticity and the home as the repository of love, a site of personal ennoblement free from the alienation of the factory and the artificial commercial system.¹⁶³ We have seen how the presence of a land reform tradition in America strengthened, rather than weakened, the agrarian urge in British radicalism, an influence that can perhaps be explained by the strong masculine bias of the frontier ethic that would have supported Chartist notions of the natural roles of the sexes. Although by the 1840s the frontier was considered a place susceptible, like any other, to concentrated land ownership and the inevitable loss of the working man’s control of production, one can argue that in the realm of popular myth, the normative social roles that the frontier epitomized were of lasting importance for the working class. That the working classes often aimed for the somewhat anti-revolutionary return to nature, personal independence, and a cult of domesticity - traits that we usually ascribe to middle class attitudes of the period - provides us with a picture of the working class that does not exactly square with the traditional Marxist image of a militant and revolutionary labor force.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Chase, p. 144

¹⁶³ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁶⁴ Malcolm Chase, *The People’s Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 189.

CONCLUSION

As Edward Pessen notes, the labor leaders of the British and American labor movements were “children of the Enlightenment.” While leaders such as Owen, O’Connor, Skidmore, and Evans all avowed markedly different proposals for reasserting the rights of labor, they all shared similar assumptions and all spoke “the language of the generation of Jefferson, Paine [and] the theories of John Locke.”¹⁶⁵ Each was concerned to reassert the natural rights that God had endowed all human beings; natural laws that the artificial institutions of a corrupt and unnatural society had obscured and denied to the mass of people. Drawing on the doctrines of John Locke, the radicals of the nineteenth century argued that in the beginning the land had been held in common, and that property was defined through the labor and improvements that man made on the natural environment. Advancing a stinging attack on the existing capitalist and market system that increasingly denied labor of any authority and reduced it to abstract commodity in a cash equation, radicals utilized Locke to totally question the legitimacy and justice of a system of a commercial system that denied labor its natural reward. To support this labor theory of value, radicals and labor leaders often resorted to agrarian imagery: the land was sacred and it was the natural right of all to return to the land and toil on the fertility that God had granted for the use of all. It was the right of all to enjoy the fruits of his own labor and not suffer the social degradation of the regimen of early industrial capitalism, a new and totalizing rhythm of work that threatened to turn the independent artisan into a “wage slave.” The fundamental place of the land in the consciousness of both the British

¹⁶⁵ Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (State University of New York Press, 1967), p. 103.

and American working class is evident when we consider that land reform proposals could attract such excitement from artisans whose only familiarity with rural work were vague childhood memories.

Alongside this commitment to natural rights and a faith in a reclaimable natural state, the labor leaders considered human nature to be malleable and subject to environmental conditioning. While this argument received fullest expression with Robert Owen and his plans for villages of cooperation set back in backwoods locales, O'Connor and others concurred that the competitive commercial system fostered the depraved aspects of man's character: egotism, selfishness, aggression, ruthless ambition and vanity were allowed to exist unchecked to the detriment of society. Cooperation and the bonds of mutual love that were supposed to tie mankind together were eroded in the face of a market system that turned honest toil into a commodity and dissolved social life into a series of commercial transactions. But as Pessen writes, the labor leaders remained convinced that such a situation was only fleeting, and that a return to a utopian golden age was possible: "it is because as *social* reformers they regarded human problems as ephemeral – due to temporary societal maladjustments rather than to man's innate shortcomings or the nature of things – that they remained optimistic."¹⁶⁶

By appreciating the importance of the popular Enlightenment in the radical consciousness, we can begin to understand the attraction of the frontier in the radical imagination. Anticipating Frederick Jackson Turner¹⁶⁷ and his argument that the frontier was more of a process than a place, radical thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries argued that the frontier offered an environment that produced the assertive,

¹⁶⁶ Pessen, p. 110.

¹⁶⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications Limited, 1996).

independent, and self-confident frontiersman, a rugged individual who cut out a democratic society from the wilderness of nature and thereby freed himself from the legacy of hierarchy and pretensions of birth of aristocratic Europe. Despite the attraction of this vision, relatively few British and American workingmen were willing to pack their bags and head west on what could prove an insecure venture in the wilderness. That the majority of workingmen were immobile should not prevent us from drawing important conclusions about the significance of the vision of the frontier for the labor movements of the nineteenth century. The attraction of the frontier allows us to view the kinds of social relations workingmen considered normative: a strict gendered division of labor and a commitment to cooperation and community among small producers.

While transatlantic radicals constructed the frontier as the ultimate embodiment of Enlightenment ideals, radicals also inherited from the Enlightenment the notion of single historical narrative, a linear vision of the past and possible future that denied any alternative to the central European story of progress. In the hands of European reformers and radicals this theory of history could be used to envision a new stage in the progress of European civilization. Amidst the wilds of frontier America, an orderly and rational community would be implanted, an ideal community that licensed colonial expansion. The romantic and millennial tone that such colonial expansion was frequently couched indicates that Europeans clearly considered that they were a chosen people ordained by God.

Yet while the landscape of the Midwest provided a suitable prospect for colonization, Europeans also constructed the indigenous inhabitants of the west into idealized “noble savages.” Like earlier Enlightenment *philosophes*, the radicals of the late

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries such as Jefferson, and indeed Marx, drew much of their inspiration for what they considered the natural social systems from the behavior of seemingly “noble savages.” Where “civilization” had merely resulted in an urban world characterized by fraud and poverty, the native inhabitants of North America seemed to live in a paradise that resembled Europe before the advent of aristocracy and feudalism. As Thomas Paine wrote, “to understand what the state of society ought to be, it is necessary to have some idea of the natural and primitive state of man; such as it is at this day among the Indians of North America. There is not, in that state, any of those spectacles of human misery which poverty and want present to our eyes in all the towns and streets in Europe.”¹⁶⁸ The democratic example provided by such virtuous indigenous peoples, whether real or mythical, was therefore instrumental in defining the meaning of freedom for Europeans. Enlightenment universalism and conceptions of a common human teleology were not debates discussed in a vacuum nor were they generated within an enclosed Europe. Rather, European ideas on historical development and the universals that seemingly bonded humanity grew from encounters with indigenous people remote to metropolitan Europe. While Europeans no doubt occupied the dominant position in any negotiation with indigenous peoples whether in the Pacific or in North America, it is important to note the extent to which contact with these areas were highly influential for European thought. Indeed without these encounters with native peoples, Rousseau would never have been able to use the “noble savage” as a celebration of mankind in his simple, natural state. European intellectual thought and Europe itself are hardly stable nor do they possess their own internal dynamic; rather, the experience of Europeans in far off areas

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice* [1795], Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (eds.), *The Thomas Paine Reader* (Penguin, 1987), p. 470.

informed European conceptions of historical development and human nature, both central tenets of the European Enlightenment.

While it seems some distance between the indigenous peoples of North America's Midwest and the Chartist Land Plan, we can bridge this gap by arguing that the Chartists, and their plans for a Land Plan, drew on an imperial discourse which legitimized the expansion and colonization of lands as a means through which they could imagine an alternative society that challenged the malicious effects of industrial capitalism. For both Chartists and George Henry Evans' National Reform Association, the empty lands of the American west was a legitimate site for expansion and colonization precisely because it offered the last hope for European Man: here lay a ready environment in which man could rediscover the natural and communal rights that had been slowly eroded throughout the previous centuries. This vision considered the world as a *tabula rasa* awaiting the civilizing presence of the European: while indigenous peoples might provide examples of virtuous living, they were still stuck in some prehistoric moment.

Despite the attraction of the frontier myth, we should beware of arguing that the attraction of the frontier acted as an invitation for workers to emigrate from the British Isles. Rather, the American Midwest existed as evidence of the social benefits that were possible once any land was settled responsibly and equitably. For radicals such as Feargus O'Connor, a reformed distribution of the land across the Midwest would provide a ready example of a prosperous society of small homesteads, a society that challenged the Malthusian proposition that the land was incapable of providing sustenance for modern industrial populations. For O'Connor and other radicals, emigration to the Midwest was unnecessary as once the landed monopolies were broken up through land

reform, the surplus labor force would return to the land, at once creating a “natural” market system that would reimburse labor with its full, true value. Yet while Chartists were unconvinced by the benefits of emigration and heaped blame on landed monopoly for the contemporary “condition of England,” more conservative writers and middle class thinkers with Malthusian leanings explained the imminent social revolution in terms of the debilitating presence of a surplus population. While Malcolm Chase has argued that “back to the land” schemes flourished among the working classes in the mid-Victorian period, it is increasingly clear that the kind of plan for “home colonization” that the Chartists envisioned was increasingly replaced by colonization doctrines whose propagators, such as Edward Gibbon Wakefield (1796-1862), argued that only expansion into colonial territories and a concomitant enlarging of Britain’s “field of production” provided the necessary remedy for Britain’s chronic labor problem. Labeling a landscape of scattered farms “barbarous,” “uncivilized,” and unprofitable, Wakefield envisioned a colonization venture that would attract both capital and labor away from the metropole. Proposing that the “extreme cheapness of new soil” in areas of “waste land” had created a “minute division of labour” which could not “even support the isolated labourer,” Wakefield designed what he considered a more profitable and systematic colonization venture. Castigating the squatter – like the “celebrated Daniel Boon,” only known for his “eccentricity” - as a man whose main objective is “merely to get a few crops from the virgin soil,” and who “then remove[s] for the purpose of exhausting another spot of virgin soil,” Wakefield proposed that prices for colonial land should be deliberately set high, so as to only attract only capital, which would then in turn, “keep people together, so that they might combine their labour,” which “would be for the interest of every one

to remain where he could be assisted and give assistance.” A system akin to indenture would be put in place, which would not only allow laborers to consider that they had a possibility in owning land after accumulating enough wages over a period of years, but which for the time being provided capital with sufficient labor so as to make the colonies profitable.¹⁶⁹ “Colonization would then proceed,”

not as hitherto, more or less, by the scattering of people over a wilderness, and placing them for ages in a state between civilization and barbarism, but by the extension to new places of all that is good in an old society; by the removal to new places of people, civilized, and experienced in all the arts of production; willing and able to assist each other...obtaining the highest profits of capital and the highest wages of labour...enjoying all the advantages of an old society without its evils...an old society in everything save the uneasiness of capitalists and the misery of the bulk of the people.¹⁷⁰

While Wakefield argued that the colony would provide the laborer with more opportunities for social mobility than the factories of the “old society”, an argument that might attract the admiration of some members of the working class (indeed some of his writings were published in the Chartist press), his proposals were still a dramatic step away from the kind of society of small producers that the Chartist envisioned with their Land Plan. While the Chartists differed from Wakefield in that their response to the excesses of capitalism was to set up self-help and mutual aid schemes such as the land reform schemes, we must remember that the Chartists shared with Wakefield common assumptions about the place of the colony in the British imagination. For both Wakefield and the Chartists, land deemed empty and “waste” provided a testing ground where the ills of commercial and competitive capitalist society could be redressed and a solution

¹⁶⁹ Edward Gibbon Wakefield, “England and America: A Comparison of the Social and Political State of Both Nations” [1834], *The Collected Works of Edward Gibbon Wakefield*, M.F. Lloyd Pritchard (ed.) (Glasgow and London: Collins Clear Type Press, 1967), p. 550.

¹⁷⁰ Wakefield, p. 549.

realized. While their plans for settlement diverged, both imperial economists and working class thinkers drew on a common epistemological heritage that coerced the rest of the world into a European symbolic order that stipulated that Europe was at the forefront of human development and modernity, a narrow and linear perspective that justified expansion and colonization.

While the Chartist proposals for “home colonies” were displaced by Wakefieldian plans for foreign colonization, the American land reform effort achieved greater, though by no means total, success; particularly once elements of the National Reform Association were taken up by the Republican Party during the 1850s. While the anti-capitalist tone of George Henry Evans’ proposals were discarded, the Republican Party profited from the use of the National Reform tenets of free labor and free land to create an anti-slavery platform. The 1862 Homestead Act, which guaranteed 160 acres of public lands to those who were willing to work it for a minimum of five years, indicates that the agrarian ideal never totally receded from the popular imagination. Yet the act also can be read as another flowering of the notion that the west offered a new start. Discarding Evans’ plans for a system of land reform that would counter wage capitalism back east, the Homestead Act instead was premised on the slogan “homes for the homeless”, what Bronstein calls a “stirring call to domesticity for all.”¹⁷¹ The act would not only contain southern expansionism, but also alleviate the problems that were generated back east, ensuring that a safety valve existed for society’s very poorest. With the Homestead Act we find not only a stinging rebuttal of slavery, but also a solid reaffirmation of a society based on Jefferson’s yeoman farmer ideal. The land was to be divided into small units, a

¹⁷¹ Jamie L. Bronstein, *Land Reform and Working Class Experience in Britain and the United States, 1800-1862* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 8.

social landscape of independent homesteads cultivated by freemen, not slaves, thus producing the longed-for agrarian utopia that “had haunted the imaginations of writers about the West since the time of Crèvecoeur.”¹⁷²

That “back to the land” schemes held such a salient place within the working classes on either side of the Atlantic speaks volumes about the depth of working-class attachment to values of respectability and class co-operation that we commonly ascribe to the middle-classes and the liberal tenets of the period. The agrarian movements of both nations fundamentally envisioned a society in which private property would be widely distributed, where social harmony would prevail once each member of society enjoyed the stability of domestic life. As Chase argues, the mid-Victorian schemes that proposed freehold properties for the working classes eventually merged with the campaign for Building Societies that aimed to create working class people into “urban landlords.” For Chase, Victorian stability, class co-operation and the liberal consensus was “generated as much from *within* working-class experience, as they were imposed from without.”¹⁷³

Middle class nervousness about the threats posed by a class of Marxist revolutionaries was clearly misplaced; the workingman “became part of the fabric of a viable class society” once he was ensured of a home and some private property to call his own.¹⁷⁴ We can now return to Crèvecoeur, who seems to anticipate the sentiments of a generation of nineteenth century workingmen in both Britain and America when he wrote, “the instant I

¹⁷² Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Sixth edition. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 170.

¹⁷³ Malcolm Chase, “Out of Radicalism: the Mid-Victorian Freehold Land Movement,” *English Historical Review*, 111 (1991), p. 342.

¹⁷⁴ Chase, p. 342.

enter upon my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence
exalt my mind.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (Everyman, 1962), p. 24.

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