WHEN, in February 1857, the Liverpool socialist pioneer, 
John Finch, died at his residence in Toxteth Park the 
event attracted little local interest. Laconic press comment on 
the decease forbore to mention the eccentric notions which 
were all that differentiated the career of an otherwise respectable 
old man from that of so many other retired merchants whose 
deaths were weekly recorded. A review of that career in its 
social and political aspect would, in any case, have proved an 
invidious catalogue of failure. The Liverpool Co-operative 
Society, founded by Finch in 1829, failed to survive the 'thirties; 
his Liverpool Dock Labourers' Society was strangled at birth 
by the employers in 1831. The temperance movement, which 
had once hailed Finch as King of the Teetotallers, finished by 
expelling him as an atheist. Later, in the 'forties, the Owenite 
socialist community of Harmony Hall, where Finch served as 
governor, dissolved in disreputable chaos, and an attempt to 
turn the family business into a co-operative iron foundry was 
ruined by the engineers' strike and lock-out of 1852. However 
sanguine, in his last years Finch could have found little hope for 
the future in a retrospect of his own experience. Yet, within 
four years of his death a Liverpool co-operative society on the 
new Rochdale model was doing over £30,000 annual business; 
within a generation Richard McGhee and Edward McHugh had 
organised, in 1889, a lasting Liverpool Dockers' Union, and 
even the wilder communist experiments seem less chimerical to 
contemporaries of the Soviet Kholkaz and the Israel Kibbutz 
than they did to the Victorians. John Finch, therefore, claims 
our attention not as a crank, but as a visionary whose failures 
were not those of a man who attempted the impossible but 
rather those of one who tried to do too much too soon.

I. CHILDHOOD AND CAREER

Born, in 1784, at Dudley, Finch was that rarity among 
contemporary socialist leaders, a self-made man of impeccably
working-class origin. According to his own account his father “was a mechanic . . . who, working 14 and 15 hours a day, was not able to earn more than 14 shillings a week, and with this he had to support himself and his wife and four children, and he did so without ever applying on any occasion to the parish for relief, and gave us all a good education”. (1) Despite this relative poverty John liked to recall that Mrs. Finch so well managed the home that the family “always had plenty both of food and clothing; never sat down to dinner without a pudding on a Sunday”. (2) Any social resentments which Finch carried with him from his childhood days, were not, therefore, those born of absolute and desperate material poverty, but those of an

(2) The Millennium, the Wisdom of Jesus, and the Foolery of Sectarianism (Liverpool 1837), letter one. Reprinted from Liverpool Chronicle, 1836.
intelligent youth, faced, in the attempt to develop his undoubted
talent, with the inequalities of an unfair social system. He was
forced to rely for his education on the local Unitarian charity
school in Pease Lane, founded by Robert Bayliss in 1732 for
the teaching and clothing of fifty poor boys. There the curricu-
lum consisted of “spelling, English, reading, writing, vulgar
arithmetic, the Assembly’s catechism, and other things suitable
to the scholars’ condition”. In Finch’s case this meant a
training in business affairs, and, at the age of fourteen he was
apprenticed to Messrs. D. and R. Parsons of Dudley, as a
clerk in their nail warehouse. With this firm he remained for
seventeen years, and with their successors, Hunt and Finch, for
another three, before leaving for Liverpool in 1818. In
the meantime the young clerk acquired a wife, Elizabeth, and a
family of four, whose names are entered in the registers of the
Unitarian Old Meeting House; there were later to be six
children of the marriage. Finch early became an active member
of the Unitarian congregation and an earnest proselytiser.
From age seventeen to twenty-four he taught a Sunday school
of seventy boys at Dudley, a half of them gratuitously. Later,
in 1814, he founded his own school at Walsall Wood, to which,
on Sunday he would walk the ten miles from Dudley before
starting to teach. The syllabus, we are told, was based on the
Bible “but no peculiar opinions on any religion taught”. At
the end of the first year, the schoolmaster proudly recalled that
one hundred children could read the scriptures; the parents
were charged 2/6d. a year. About 1814 too, inspired by the
tragic embezzlement of his father’s life-savings by a toping
friendly society committee he established a sick club in the
Dudley chapel schoolroom “for the people to have the benefit
of a sick club away from the Public House”. This institution
was still thriving twenty years later.

In 1818, his employers guaranteeing him as “perfectly honest,
sober, and well acquainted with his business”, Finch entered
the service of Irvin and Sons, iron merchants of Liverpool, as a
traveller, an occupation which he was able conveniently to
combine with nine years’ vigorous missionary work for Uni-
tarianism in the north and in Scotland. At the same time

(3) New Moral World, VII, p. 1108. Victoria County History, Worcester, IV,
p. 539.
(5) Rollason, The Extra Parochial Registers of Dudley (Registers of the old
Unitarian Meeting House) (Dudley, 1899), pp. 13 seq. The children were Mary
Ann (b. 1806), John (1809), Edward (1811), Charles who died within a year,
and Seney (1816).
Finch established himself among the influential congregation of the Unitarian Chapel, Renshaw Street, by whom, on 5 May 1822, he was elected a member of the committee of the chapel school, later twice serving on the chapel committee, in 1827 and 1831.\(^{(7)}\)

In 1827 Finch left Irvins’ to start a private business with his eldest son, John. His subsequent business career, though unspectacular, was fairly successful. An early partnership with fellow chapel-members Roscoe and Mather was dissolved in 1831 in curious circumstances. In the autumn of 1830 T. Swindlehurst of Preston defaulted on a purchase of £110 worth of iron bought from the Liverpool firm. The following April, sent to try to collect the bad debt, Finch discovered Swindlehurst’s financial difficulties to be the result of chronic insobriety, persuaded him to sign the temperance pledge, and induced his partners to advance him another £350 in kind and cash to avoid impending bankruptcy. A certain coldness crept into relationships within the firm, and in June, Finch left his partners and began with Swindlehurst a joint venture in roller-making at Preston, “almost all he had in the world being this dubious debt of £460”. It is a valuable index of the scale of Finch’s enterprise that within four years he had made more than £4,000.\(^{(8)}\) This was in the period of the first great boom in railway speculation which forced, between 1832 and 1836, a 65\(\%\) increase in the price of bar iron.\(^{(9)}\) At the end of June 1831 Finch wrote to Robert Owen that he had secured the Liverpool agency of the Low Moor Iron Company of Bradford, one of the largest works in the country, and had opened an office in Charlotte Place.\(^{(10)}\) In 1835 a second Liverpool branch was opened, and, in 1837, a central office in Sir Thomas’s Buildings. In 1845 yet another group of premises were acquired near the Clarence Dock, and in the ‘fifties Finch and Son also had a branch office on New Quay, Preston.\(^{(11)}\) Appropriate changes of address accompanied growing prosperity. By 1832, John senior had moved out from Wolfe St. to the fashionable suburb of Toxteth Park. After a brief residence in the solidly bourgeois Chatham Street, dating from 1844, John junior moved across the Mersey to the even more select Rock Ferry district.\(^{(12)}\)

\(^{(10)}\) For this information I am indebted to A. E. Musson of Manchester University.
\(^{(11)}\) Mannex, P., *History and Topography of Mid-Lancashire, 1851, 1855 etc.*
\(^{(12)}\) Gore’s Liverpool Directory.
Such was the common pattern for the middle class in a period of rapid industrial expansion and growing fortunes, and, together with it went often a parallel pattern (which John Finch jr. closely followed) of political liberalism, of church or chapel leadership, and of judicious philanthropy. What is remarkable is the extent to which, while attending to his business, John Finch rejected this pattern for the unorthodox in politics, religion, and even in philanthropy.

II. CO-OPERATION AND ABSTINENCE

The story of early Liverpool co-operation has been told by W. H. Brown in his centenary history and can only be summarised here. It is a story dominated by the contribution of John Finch, who, in the winter of 1829, first gathered together the thirty-two members of the "First Liverpool Co-operative Society" at the Harrington Free School, Hope St. By the summer of 1830 the society, for which Finch acted as secretary and treasurer, had opened a shop in James St. at a rent of £45 and there were half a dozen other local societies in embryo. The James St. establishment was more than a commercial venture, for, in addition to the expected appointments, it boasted an assembly room, a library and facilities for a school. The early advance was not consolidated, and at the 1831 Birmingham co-operative congress Finch was able to report the existence of only one other Liverpool society. Support, indeed, began to fall away, and by December 1832 the Liverpool co-operators were obliged to admit total defeat. In The Bee, an ephemeral Liverpool journal, which he edited jointly with the Catholic socialist M. J. Falvey, Finch regretted that "several attempts have been made here to establish co-operative societies. Hitherto they have not succeeded as was expected because some have been formed on wrong principles; in others members have departed from their own rules, and others were altogether ignorant of the system".

Earlier in 1832 Finch had attended the London and Liverpool co-operative congress as a delegate of the Liverpool society. At London, in April, he spoke on the same public platform as William Lovett, future framer of the People's Charter. In October, as a member of the arranging committee for the

(13) The Bee, No. 1, Saturday, 22 December 1832. Falvey, one-time teacher of languages and editor of the Comet, was landlord of the Thistle's Nest. (Stonehouse, J., The Streets of Liverpool, p. 47). In 1830 Finch, Falvey, and Rev. Wm. Dalton, rector of St. Jude's, held a monster public discussion on "Romanism", which lasted twelve sessions. (Smith, E., Report of a Discussion of the Claims of the Church of Rome . . . held in the Music Hall (Liverpool 1830)).
Liverpool congress, he was chairman of a meeting at the Assembly Rooms, the King's Arms, Castle St., attended by "600 members of the middle and higher classes".

There is no further record of an interest in Liverpool co-operation, and it is not impossible that the Liverpool pioneer, like Robert Owen, discarded the co-operative societies impatiently as a mere palliative and a hindrance to more ambitious plans for a network of socialist communities. As early as April 1831 Finch had announced in a letter written to the Liverpool Kaleidoscope, on behalf of the Labourer's Friend Society and the working men's allotments movement, his conviction that "the greatest amount of human happiness with the least labour and expense can only be obtained in a state of community". More probably it was the development of a new and absorbing interest in the problems of the reform of drunkenness which diverted his energies into fresh ventures. In September 1830 Finch had become a founder member of the Liverpool Temperance Society, and an unusual acuteness in the search for the economic and social causes of drunkenness began to lead him along strange and original paths of investigation.

Concentrating his energies on the dock labourers, where the evil seemed at its worst, Finch managed to secure, between July and December 1830 upwards of 160 pledges. In the process he discovered an iniquitous economic arrangement which made drunkenness almost obligatory for the docker, "I made a particular enquiry into the situation of the dock labourers" he told a parliamentary committee in 1834 "and I found that there were about 120 of those persons called 'lumpers' in Liverpool—men who take the jobs of loading and discharging the vessels from the merchants for a certain sum, and then go out upon the quay and engage a number of labourers to do the work for something less, living themselves on the profits. . . . I found that there were not more than one or two out of all the 120 lumpers who did not pay the workmen at a public house. Some of them kept public houses themselves; the rest had their pay-houses where they took their men to". The implications of such a system are obvious; "Unless dock labourers give encouragement to the house, as it is called" the investigator remarked on another occasion, "they have little chance of getting work". Finch's solution was to break the vicious circle by the organisation of a dockers' co-operative.

(14) Winskill, P. T., and Thomas, J., History of the Temperance Movement in Liverpool and District (Liverpool 1887), p. 7 and passim. Joseph Thomas was a contemporary of Finch.

(15) Report of Select Committee, 1834.
There was nothing novel about a proposal for the reorganisation of the dock labour force. The wretchedness of the dockers and warehousemen, compelled to wait at the dockside in all weathers for employment, was notorious. A wage of 2s. per day for a three or four day week was common, and the case of Irish immigrants, who, unable to obtain employment, were often denied parish relief, was desperate. As early as 6 April 1827 a letter to the Liverpool Mercury signed "The poor man's advocate" had suggested the erection, by the Corporation, of special shelters for labourers awaiting employment, and the appointment of "a steady person... to each place, who should keep a list of the names of the porters, and as they should be wanted, each might be employed in its turn". Such a scheme offered conspicuous advantages to the merchants, plagued by the endemic dishonesty of desperation, and the shoddy work of drunkenness. To apply co-operative methods to its organisation was Finch's unique contribution.

Following a correspondence on dock conditions in the Mercury a meeting was held in September 1830 in a large room over the store of a co-operative society in Greenland St., with about two hundred labourers present, at which Finch outlined his plan, and the first steps were taken towards the forming of a Dock Labourers' Society. The subsequent task of organisation was no light one. "Besides having my own business to attend to", Finch recalled in 1848, "I laboured very hard, early in the morning and late at night for 12 months in establishing this society". (16)

With the aid of professional advice from Mr. Dunman of Rathbone Bros., one of the chief merchant firms in the port, and contributions from a number of wealthy sympathisers, including Lady Noel Byron, the poet's wife, preliminaries were completed and the society set on a firm footing. (17) The docks were divided into three groups, each with a branch office, one for King's and Queen's Docks, another for Salthouse and the dry docks, and a third for George's and Prince's Docks. The offices were supplied with winches, barrows, shoots, and all other necessary mechanical equipment; they were also supplied with libraries and school equipment with the aid of which the literate dockers were to instruct their mates during slack period.

Two thousand of the six thousand dock and warehouse workers were instructed in reading and writing.

(16) Letter in Liverpool Mercury, 22 March 1848.
(17) This account of the Dock Labourers' Society is drawn jointly from Finch's evidence before the Select Committee 1834, and his letter in Liverpool Mercury 22 March 1848. See also Liverpool Mercury 27 July 1891 (notice on Finch) and Brown, W. H., A Century of Liverpool Co-operation (Liverpool 1929), p. 50.
workers were recruited, and the society began to operate the scheme with considerable initial success. At each branch office a secretary was elected to keep the books and look after accounts, while the president canvassed for work and exercised general supervision. Branch societies were further subdivided into companies of four, six or ten men under a foreman, who sat with the president, secretary, and other foremen on the branch committees. The foreman worked with the gangs and, after paying a contribution towards the Society’s expenses, divided wages received equally among the company members. The fixed wage rate was 3s. per man per day, and 6d. a week was deducted from members for Society expenses. It was estimated that abolition of the middlemen alone raised individual wages by a half, so that this was not an exorbitant sum.\(^{(18)}\)

The gravest difficulties must have arisen in any scheme of rationing work, or any attempted share-out of common earnings, and it is unfortunate that the surviving records throw no light on these crucial problems.

The sad decay, and final collapse, of the Dock Labourers’ Society were seized on, not without a kind of triumph, by temperance propagandists as evidence of the fundamental innate sinfulness of the working class. The men quarrelled among themselves, offended their employers, took the books from the libraries, “appropriated” the tools and—crowning act of depravity—pawned the school desks to buy ale. “Through the vicious habits of the labourers—principally occasioned by drunkenness”, Peter Burne’s *Teetotallers’ Companion* lamented, “all the funds were dissipated, and the Societies all ruined”.

Finch had every excuse for bitter reflections on these disillusioning events. He had accepted personal responsibility for the £36 annual rent of one of the dock offices, and expended £6 10s. 0d. on a winch, but this loss was of little significance beside the frustration of a year’s efforts. Years later, in 1848, he was able to assess the causes of failure with more detachment. “The employers,” he wrote, “looked on the society with great suspicion, as a combination of labourers against their employers; some objected to giving a fixed rate of wages; other thought 3/- per day too much, not considering that dock labourers’ employment is extremely precarious, that they have not six months work in the year on an average. Thus their friends were not sufficiently numerous, and, therefore, the

\(^{(18)}\) An attempt by a minority of the city council to establish a fixed dockers’ day wage of 3/6 was defeated in 1848, when the wage paid was commonly 2/6. Liverpool Town Books, “Report of the Special Committee on the System of Porterage”, presented 7 August 1848.
society could not get sufficient employment to enable them to pay the salaries of their officers and their other expenses; they exhausted their funds, became dispirited and heartbroken, and many fell back into habits of intemperance."

Behind the collapse of the Liverpool Dock Labourers’ Society of 1831 was the pressure of a numerous and growing free labour supply, recruited largely from the Celtic west, as a result of the North Wales famines of the 'twenties and the agrarian crisis in Ireland which was already beginning to swell the proletarian population of Liverpool with an annual influx of paupers. On the other hand, inveterate drunkenness had certainly played an important part in the catastrophe, and Finch became convinced that all social experiments must fail unless this key vice were conquered. From the autumn of 1832 he began to organise a series of Sunday temperance missionary visits to the working-class districts of Liverpool aided by a band of young men based on the Greenland St. premises, now transformed into a temperance coffee house.\(^{(19)}\) In a letter to the *Mercury* published on 4 January 1833, Finch gave an account of one such visit made, in company with Joseph Livesey of Preston, to Preston St. on 30 December. After a horrifying description of slum conditions and degrading poverty he analysed, in significant order, the causes of the endemic misery as “ignorance, want of employment, low wages, and habits of intemperance”. Ignorance could “only be efficiently removed by a national system of education which shall give to the children of the whole population the best possible training, which shall remove them from the scenes of vice and misery, and feed and clothe as well as instruct them, for since a man is altogether a creature of circumstances it is altogether vain to expect virtue and knowledge to spring up in the midst of such extreme poverty”. On another occasion Finch was to argue for a direct attack on slum conditions by a municipal housing programme of large blocks of flats with, as well as sanitary improvements, provision for a reading room, and facilities for education.\(^{(20)}\) For the moment, drastic and immediate action was required to save the children.

As early as June 1830 Finch had written to William Pare, the co-operative pioneer, of his plans to devote the profits of the Liverpool co-operative movement to the founding of a boarding school for the co-operators’ children in or near the city.\(^{(21)}\) In their mature form, his views on education, as outlined before a parliamentary commission in 1834, envisaged a

\(^{(19)}\) Winskill and Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 7 seq.

\(^{(20)}\) *Liverpool Mercury*, 27 July 1891.

national system, with a boarding school for infants near every town. Here, separated from evil domestic influences, the children were to receive instruction to the age of nine, prior to transfer to other boarding technical colleges, where they would receive training in "agricultural and manufacturing industry". Finch's models for the two types of school were Owen's famous New Lanark experiment, and De Fellenberg's Institution at Hofwyl, Switzerland, where the inmates were expected to contribute by set daily periods of labour to the expenses of the college. This revolutionary project invited inevitable criticism as an attack on family life, and the sanctity of the home. The uprooting of the children of the poor *en masse* was certainly a drastically wholesale proposition, in a period before even the middle class had become accustomed to the idea of boarding and public school education, but the situation which it was intended to remedy admitted of no half measures if anything were to be accomplished for the contemporary generation.

The second problem, that of unemployment, Finch would have solved by the organisation of productive co-operatives on the model of the Dock Labourers' Society, and the formation of a voluntary committee of gentlemen and one of ladies "to provide employment for those out of work". The problem of low wages was a personal and a moral issue for the employer. "I never think of giving less than 3 shillings per day to a man who can do a day's labour", the iron merchant remarked, "and I think that man deficient in Christian feeling who gives less, for I am sure no man can support a family in Liverpool honestly and properly unless he receives as much".

Intemperance remained: "quite as fruitful a source of misery as any of the others", and it was the campaign against drink which absorbed most of Finch's immediate energies, first in the temperance, and then in the total abstinence cause. Converted, in December 1834, by the urgings of his partner Swindlehurst to Joseph Livesey's gospel of total abstinence, he used his business trips around the British Isles to evangelise to such effect that he was credited with having gained no less than twenty thousand pledges and helped to form seventy-three societies. \(^{22}\) It was by this achievement that he earned the popular title of *King of the Teetotallers*, Swindlehurst, incidentally, being known as *King of the Reformed Drunkards*. His long experience as a Unitarian proselytiser had made Finch an inspiring preacher. According to Winskill, "wit, pure and beautiful, such as Addison abounds in, flashed through his

brilliant lecture. It told on the audience something in the same way as the pictures of J. B. Gough in his best orations. Living fire shone forth in the burning words—words such as Shakespeare employs in his great pages.” Ireland, visited annually from 1833 to 1836, (23) was the main field of Finch’s temperance activities. The wretchedness of the Irish nation was a constant theme of contemporary radicals, but the reality seems to have shocked the Liverpool visitor more, if possible, than his acquaintanceship with his own city’s slums. “I have just returned from a six weeks journey in Ireland”, he wrote to a friend in 1834, “having visited all the principal seaports in that island from the Giant’s Causeway to Bantry and Wexford; and certainly the condition of the great mass of the people in that country is as miserable as it is possible; they are filthy, ragged, famished, houseless, herding with pigs, and sleeping on dung-hills, without regular employment, and working for sixpence and even fourpence and fivepence per day.” Finch’s greatest effort was extended in a campaign in November and December 1836 when he visited both Dublin and Belfast, set up thirteen new societies, and took over 1,600 pledges. (24) “The best method of calling meetings in Ireland”, he advised those intending to follow up this work, “is to put up a few striking placards in the most public parts of the town, and send the bellman round; you will generally get both done for a shilling, sometimes for less.” At Kilrush the sympathetic fellow-socialist and local magistrate Vandeleur “sent all the police to preserve order,” but meetings so called were always lively, and often dangerously riotous where the distillers’ interest was strong. It is an index of the vigour with which Finch pursued his abstinence mission that the Irish tour was the culmination of a year in which he had already held meetings in North Wales, Anglesey, the Isle of Man, and Scotland.

It was typical of the Liverpool reformer that his approach to the drink problem was not restricted to the negative rhetoric and self-righteous demand for legislative repression which satisfied so many of his contemporaries. Testifying, in 1834, before the select commission to enquire into drunkenness among the working classes, he blamed the failure of the wealthy and powerful to provide any alternative amusement for the people’s


leisure. While the parks were kept shut on a Sunday, the beer-shops were thrown open. Finch advocated the opening, in all towns, of community centres devoted to recreation and the “diffusion of scientific information, moral principles, social science, and domestic economy”. The common sense of the people, aided by the growing influence of the trade unions for temperance might then be left to solve the problem without legislation.

III. ROBERT OWEN AND SOCIALISM

The programme thus outlined was closely similar in spirit and intention to Robert Owen’s new venture, the cumbrously named “Institution of the intelligent and well-disposed of the working classes for the removal of ignorance and poverty by means of education and employment”. While in London for the commission hearings, Finch attended a ball at the Fitzroy Square hall owned by the Institution, where he was introduced by Owen as a “new labourer in the field”. “New labourer” though he may have been, Finch was certainly not a new admirer of Robert Owen whose principles he defended before the parliamentary commission as “more rational, more accordan
t with the facts and with human nature and . . . better calculated to produce Christian philanthropy than those of any other writer, ancient or modern that has come under my observation”. It is more than possible that Finch had first met Owen at the William Rathbones’, where he is known to have stayed when in Liverpool. Certainly he must have become acquainted with him at the co-operative congresses of the early thirties. Now the socialist leader seems to have established the absolute personal ascendancy with which he so often intoxicated his followers. In 1836 Finch saw fit to tell a Manchester audience of his conviction that “Mr. Owen’s character and conduct answers most exactly the description of the great person pointed out by the Prophets as the honoured instrument in the hands of God for encompassing the moral revolution”, an opinion which he not only set down in print in a letter to the Liverpool Albion, but had printed and circulated in The Millennium, a highly controversial pamphlet. On a later occasion he was to address a letter to his Dear Social Father as Your most sacred highness.

The open espousal of Owenism, with its rationalist and

(26) Brown, op. cit., p. 32. In 1822 Mrs. Rathbone had offered to contribute £1,000 towards the establishment of an Owenite community on Merseyside.
(27) New Moral World, IV, p. 375.
anti-clerical implications awakened in Liverpool an enmity which the experiments of 1830-32 had failed to inspire. There began a process of isolation for Finch and his friends which culminated in 1840 in the anathema of the once sympathetic Liverpool Mercury against the supposed atheistical socialist advocates of free love.

By temperament a profoundly religious man, Finch found no difficulty in reconciling a Deist rationalism with the free teachings of his Unitarian faith, and although he did not spare his own ministers in such attacks on “the whole host of parsons as interested advocates of error” as he published in The Crisis on 5 January 1833, there is no evidence that he ever quarrelled with the Toxteth Chapel congregation which the family joined in 1836 and which eventually erected a plaque to his memory. (28)

J. H. Thom, the great minister of Renshaw St., himself a man endowed with a painful social conscience, had once written, in a discussion of Finch’s project for a slum missionary campaign: “I most truly respect your motives, and in spirit we are one. It rejoices my heart that we have a man of your warm and catholic benevolence amongst us, and more particularly that that man is in my own congregation”. (29) In the diary of George Holt, (30) another member of the Renshaw St. congregation we have an illuminating picture of Finch, as chapel committee member objecting to the practice of pew-owners arrogating to themselves the right to select the congregation’s new minister.

His fellow socialist Holyoake found Finch “irritable and irrelevant in his religious views”, and his anti-clericalism was such as to alienate many sympathisers from the movement. A personal tragedy—his mother had died worn out by religious mania—left a lasting and intense hatred of the narrow theological sectarianism all too common in the early nineteenth century. Finch’s ideal, expressed in the introduction to a curious rearranged and edited version of the Bible which he published in 1853 under the title Seven Seals Broke Open, or the Bible of the Reformation Reformed, was “Religion, based upon charity, good morals, reason and free enquiry”. In the dedication to Seven Seals he explicitly avowed himself a Unitarian, and in another publication misquoted with approval Pope’s lines:

For creeds and forms of faith let senseless bigots fight
His can’t be wrong whose life is in the right

(28) MS. copies and summaries of papers of the Ancient Chapel of Toxteth Park, by Lawrence Hall, and now in the Liverpool Record Office. John Finch Senr. is entered as a subscriber in 1836, and in 1840 he signed a letter calling on John Robberds to accept the ministry of the chapel, ff. 83, 92.

(29) The Millennium, letter one.

(30) Quoted by Holt, A., Walking Together (Liverpool 1938), p. 188.
Far from advocating atheism, one of Finch’s chief preoccupa-
tions in his writings was attempting to prove socialism scriptural. Nevertheless, a series of attacks in the local press and by pamphlet which he launched in 1836 on all the contemporary denominations, proved to be but the opening shots in a bitter feud with their Liverpool representatives, who secured, at a secret meeting in November 1837, Finch’s expulsion from the Liverpool Total Abstinence Society. It is possible that this expulsion was part of a general reaction against the Owenites, identified in the fears of their enemies with the growing radical agitation of the period, for, according to one account, “The calumniated teetotallers of Liverpool called public meetings by advertisement for the purpose of considering the propriety of acting any longer with men whose words were not in accordance with the word of God, and the offenders were expelled”. (32)

Certainly Finch made no secret of his extreme radical sympathies. In the Liverpool election of 1837 he campaigned publicly on behalf of the liberal candidates, but he did so with 800 copies of a poster, later reprinted in the Millennium, advocating the ballot, annual parliaments, and universal suffrage. Elected as one of Toxteth Park’s five guardians on the West Derby Poor Law Union, he stigmatised Chadwick’s stringent system, in a letter to the Liverpool Mercury on 28 June 1839, as a “measure more detestable in principle and more dreaded and hated by the whole, or nearly the whole of the working population of this country than any Act that ever passed the British Legislature”.

Later, in the Morning Chronicle of 29 July 1842, he publicly advocated a month’s general strike of colliers to force the abolition of the Corn Laws and the adoption of the People’s Charter.

The blow of excommunication from the temperance movement was the less severely felt in that Finch had already begun to abandon the moral atmosphere of the anti-drink movement for a more direct interest in the propagation of socialism. Thus by January 1838 he was retreading old ground through the north, this time “spreading the principles of the new system as he goes”. Ironically one of his appearances in the new rôle was at Edinburgh where he addressed a meeting to commemorate the anniversary of the local teetotal society. In his popular temperance tracts themselves Finch had long since revealed a growing preoccupation with socialism. In The Foolery of Drinking Drunkard’s Drinks, for example, written in 1836, he

had looked forward to an approaching Utopia in which "the whole population of Great Britain, Ireland, and all other countries will unite in forming joint stock companies, with from 500 to 2,000 members, each having one common capital and one common interest, living together, working with and for each other, and thus supplying themselves and each other with all the necessities, comforts, conveniences and elegancies of life. All these communities united together in a common brotherhood of interest and affection, till knowledge and virtue, peace and goodwill 'shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea'." (34)

On the local level the realisation of such a millennium meant a revival of local socialist groups and their federation in a reorganised and strengthened national body. At the May congress of the Owenite "Association of All Classes of All Nations" in 1838, six paid missionaries or agents were appointed to help this process. John Green, the agent responsible for Liverpool, arrived to find a vigorous local society extant on which to base his activities. As early as 1832 Finch and Falvey had opened in a large room attached to the co-operative bazaar in Bold Street a kind of embryo socialist group entitled the "Institution of the intelligent and well-disposed for the removal of ignorance and poverty by means of education and employment". (35) From November 1837 the New Moral World began to report Sunday social meetings of a branch of the A.A.C.A.N. at a new institution behind the York Hotel, to be succeeded by the "Social Institution" in Tarlton Street. Attendance rose rapidly from an original four hundred to over a thousand, and at the beginning of 1838 Finch, as branch secretary, collected a hundred and twenty signatures for a request to Owen to visit Liverpool. On 11 February, after considerable difficulties over the hire of a public hall, occasioned by sectarian hostility, Owen delivered an address at Tarlton St., repeated on the 16 February "on the best means of providing education and employment to the working classes". (36) On the 4th he had attended a lecture by Finch which inspired the slightly pontifical comment that the socialists should "cease discussing theological matters". The two men remained on good terms, however, for on the morrow of the 16th they travelled together to Preston for further missionary work.

(34) Finch, J., Temperance Tracts: No. 3 (Preston 1836). Of the tracts the most popular, Description of the Drunkard, sold 50,000 copies, and three others 12,000 copies between them. New Moral World, IV, p. 47.
(35) The Bee, No. 1. "Working men" were charged 3d. admission, "gentlemen and tradesmen" 6d.
By June the Liverpool socialists had begun to look round for a permanent meeting hall, for which they had obtained promises of £1,000. Some weeks later Finch announced the purchase, for £1,900 of a site near Renshaw St. Chapel, where it was intended “to erect a handsome structure with temperance coffee house, book shop, club-rooms etc. underneath and our lecture rooms above”; however, nothing further was heard of this plan, and the Tarlton St. premises continued to be used for the remainder of 1838. In November a “public festival and ball” was held in the Clare St. rooms, and an open debate on socialism between John Green and the Rev. John Bowes at the Queen’s theatre ended in a riot, only quelled when the police extinguished the gas lights.

The following year the Owenite movement underwent one of its frequent metamorphoses, and emerged, in April, as “The Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists”, under which title the socialists reached their apogee of strength and influence. One of the chief ventures of the Rational Religionists was the building throughout the country of “Halls of Science”, the temples of the new cult. By July 1840 nearly £22,000 had been expended to this end, and halls opened at London, Manchester, Huddersfield, Liverpool, Birmingham, Coventry, Bradford, Leeds, Glasgow, and other places. Liverpool’s hall, at £5,000, was the largest and most expensive, and a remarkable building by any standard. Its erection was first mooted in February 1839, when William Westwick was appointed paid secretary of the Liverpool socialists. In March Finch and his friends chose the site, and on 8 April he was able to report the issue, by the Hall of Science Building Society, of four hundred shares. On the 17 June Finch laid the foundation stone on a site in Lord Nelson Street. A temperance coffee house had already been opened by Westwick at No. 15.

As the erection of the Hall progressed, so opposition to the socialists’ project began to crystallise, and, in August, Fielding Ould, a popular open-air preacher, began to organise a campaign against the infidels. A meeting was called at the Music Hall on 20 June, under the patronage of the No-Popery Association, in support of a petition to the queen which denounced Finch, the Hall, and the socialists generally. Finch,

(37) Ibid., IV, pp. 132, 140, 276 and 300.
(37a) Ibid., V, 91: Liverpool Mercury, 2 November 1838.
(38) Podmore, Robert Owen, p. 470. The London Hall cost £3,000, the Salford Hall £850. Holyoake, op. cit., I, p. 34.
(40) Liverpool Mercury, 21 June 1839.
who had the courage to be present, was seriously assaulted. The builders were not deterred, and even succeeded in obtaining seven hundred signatures for a counter-address.\(^\text{141}\) By December the Liverpool Hall of Science was complete and ready for use. The building, which still stands in 1957, offered, as originally designed and constructed by Cooper, the architect, a main lecture room, \(70' \times 54' \times 28'\), with an organ, orchestra space for 120 performers, and seating room for 1,500. Later, when used as a concert hall, the building once accommodated 2,700 persons.\(^\text{142}\) There was also a smaller suite of rooms: a committee room, a news-room, library, store room, kitchen with accommodation for 1,000 persons, and a schoolroom 40' square. There was even an observatory, on the roof.\(^\text{143}\) “Our hall”, the Liverpool leader proudly proclaimed, “is the hall of the working classes. We open it to all parties, and for all purposes strictly legal and moral.”\(^\text{144}\) It is not impossible that this included Chartist purposes, for Owen’s biographer, Podmore has it that much Chartist money went to build the halls of science. On the other hand there is no extant evidence for any political, let alone radical, activity centred on the Liverpool Hall. On Saturdays the socialists held popular temperance soirées, for one of which (27 November 1841) a playbill survives in the collection at the Liverpool Record Office. The entertainment, “under the superintendence of a committee of management, whose design is to furnish the industrious classes of Liverpool with a combination of sober and rational amusements for the smallest possible expense” was quite unpolitical, and consisted of such items as “The Blue Tailed Fly” and the recitation “Daniel versus Dishclout”. Thomas Westwick conducted the orchestra, and the stars of the evening were Mr. C. Ashort, “the celebrated nigger singer”, and Mr. Mackintosh who, after “a short scientific lecture” administered laughing gas to the audience. Such an innocuous, if not altogether sober, programme compares oddly with the recollections of the author of Fraser’s Guide to Liverpool who, in 1861, titillated his readers with an account of “Young ladies dressed in the bloomer costume” who, at the socialist hall, “‘tripped it on the light fantastic toe’ with young gentlemen who thought the laws of matrimony unnatural and tyrannical.”

A more serious aspect of the Liverpool socialists’ activities was the opening, in February 1841, of a Juvenile school of

\(^{141}\) New Moral World, VI, p. 721.
\(^{142}\) Thompson, D. P., Guide to Liverpool (1854).
\(^{143}\) New Moral World, VI, p. 1204.
\(^{144}\) Ibid., N.S., II, p. 232.
MUSICAL and SCIENTIFIC ENTERTAINMENTS, Every Saturday Evening, at the HALL OF SCIENCE, LORD NELSON STREET, NEAR THE RAILWAY STATION.

Under the superintendence of a Committee of Management, whose design is to furnish the Industrial Classes of Liverpool with a Combination of sober and rational Amusements for the smallest possible expense.

The Public are respectfully informed that arrangements have been made with

Mr. C. ASHOURT,
THE CELEBRATED NIGGER SINGER,
WHO WILL SING SOME OF HIS MOST POPULAR SONGS, AND INTRODUCE HIS NIGGER STATUES!

PROGRAMME FOR SATURDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 27, 1841.

OVERTUE
GLEE—Let Kings for Empires
SONG—Kitty Mooey—Mr. Riches
SONG—She was a Wretch of Zion—Miss Wilson
NIGGER SONG—The Little Log House—Mr. C. Ashourt
SONG—The Rose shall soon to blow—Mr. Meulling
SONG—Grable Mistle—by an Amateur
SONG—The Irish Schoolmaster—Mr. Belmont
SONG—Mr. Meulling
GLEE—Fare Hears decks

PART SECOND.

OVERTUE
GLEE—Hymn to the Brave
NIGGER SONG—Sauwer Lily Vise—Mr. C. Ashourt, in which he will introduce his NIGGER STATUES.
RECITATION—Dalton versus Dishclout—by a Gentleman
SONG—Daye Glam—Mr. Wilson
SONG—My Cock-eyed Maid—Miss Wilson
SONG—Blue-tailed Fly—Mr. Wilson
GLEE—The Fairest’s Glees
NIGGER DUET—Zip Coon and Sukey Bloom’s Nat’l
Courtship—Zip Coon, Mr. C. Ashourt; Sukey, Mr. Riches

BETWEEN THE PARTS MR. MACKINTOSH WILL GIVE A SHORT SCIENTIFIC LECTURE, AFTER WHICH THE Laughing Gas will be administered.

An INSTRUMENTAL BAND is engaged.

A VARIETY OF REFRESHMENTS ARE PROVIDED AT THE LOWEST CHARGE.

Admission, 6d., Reserved Seats, 6d. Doors opened at Half-past Seven, and to commence at Eight precisely.

Plate 15. A PLAYBILL IN THE LIVERPOOL RECORD OFFICE COLLECTION.
Science. School began at the Hall with only thirty pupils, but within six weeks the attendance had risen to 108, and separate infants' and boys' and girls' departments had been created. There was a full-time master, and a married woman to look after the girls, and fees were charged on a graduated scale: 2d. a week for infants, 3d. for children from six to eight, and 4d. for those above eight years. How long the school survived, and what were the subjects of its curriculum, it seems impossible to discover. The socialists themselves ceased to use the Hall in May 1842, although it was not until November 1843 that the premises were disposed of to the Oddfellows for £4,600.

About the failure of the Liverpool Hall of Science there clings the atmosphere of farce which seems to have been inseparable from the collapse of any Owenite project. On the socialists' withdrawal in May 1842 the Hall was renamed the Nelson Assembly Rooms, and let on a normal commercial basis. A gathering volume of complaints began to appear in the press correspondence columns about the rowdiness of patrons, and their late hours, and the Building Society Committee was soon forced to ban the sale of drink at functions. Nevertheless, in March 1843, William Westwick was summoned before the magistrates and fined for letting the Rooms to a brothel keeper, and "allowing bad characters to assemble".

General factors, such as dissatisfaction with Owen's leadership and the financial exactions of the socialist community at Queenwood played their part in the national decline of the socialist movement, but purely local events made the collapse at Liverpool catastrophic. At the beginning of 1840 Finch denounced, in the socialist periodical, the New Moral World, a serious secession from the Liverpool group, led by John Moncas, founder of the dissident apocalyptical "Society of United Friends". The seceders soon left to found a private communist Utopia near Trawsfynydd in Central Wales. Even more serious was the prolonged absence of Finch himself at the official Owenite colony.

In October 1839 the Rational Religionists had acquired a site at Queenwood, Hampshire for a socialist experiment. The history of Harmony Hall, as this community was called, has

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(45) Ibid., N.S., II, pp. 118, 232.
(46) Liverpool Mercury, May 1842—November 1843. From Liverpool guides and directories it is possible to trace the subsequent history of the building. After 1847 it was used as a concert hall until 1895 when it was acquired by Cope's Tobacco Works. It has since been occupied by several commercial firms. In the 1870s the large room beneath the hall was the meeting room of the Parliamentary Debating Society.
(47) New Moral World, VI, pp. 1204, 1215, 1246 etc.
been authoritatively summarised in Podmore's biography, and it is clear that Finch’s part in the inspiration of the project was considerable. Not only was he one of the original trustees of the property, but the September 1839 congress of the Rational Religionists also appointed him one of the three organisers of the community. Finch was appointed acting governor, and Heaton Aldam of Whalley director of agricultural operations.

The two men were constantly hampered by the meddlesome and financially unrealistic intervention of Owen, the settlers soon proved incapable of the kind of labour demanded by an agricultural regime, and quarrels were endemic in a situation in which the handful of colonists were denied any part in the government of the settlement. Of the acting governor’s influence on affairs in these trying times we have a valuable account in the memoirs of Lloyd Jones, a socialist personally acquainted with both Finch and the problems he faced. “Mr. John Finch”, he wrote, “who was appointed deputy governor, was a very excellent man, full of honest purpose, and good intention; but rather deficient in insight and tact. He was kindly in spirit, and prepared to do all in his power for the comfort and welfare of the people with whom he had to deal. He had, however, a half joking way of saying unpleasant things which made him rather unpopular, and though the differences that occurred between the people and the deputy governor seldom involved anything which was not referable to faults of temper on one side or the other, they constituted an unfitness that rendered Mr. Finch’s withdrawal desirable. A severe illness rendered it necessary to Mr. Finch himself, and it therefore took place without any unpleasantness”. (48) This resignation occurred in May 1840. Aldam, who had not been ill, resigned in the same month, and the third organiser, Frederick Green, followed him a few months later. The Community was left in Owen’s sole hands. By August 1842, the situation had exhausted even Owen’s abundant optimism, and on his resignation Finch returned as governor in a last desperate attempt to set the Community’s affairs in order. This new régime lasted until the early summer of 1843, when the national congress of the Rational Religionists finally broke into open revolt against the disastrous policy of pouring all resources of money and energy into Harmony Hall, to the neglect of the branches. Finch, proposed by the Glasgow and Oldham delegates, was elected as chairman of congress, a deliberate affront to Owen, who quarrelled with the society and, soon after, resigned the presidency. Serious community life at Queenwood ceased in

1843, but the buildings, and a few obstinate occupants remained the responsibility of the unfortunate trustees. In 1846 it became Finch's melancholy duty, acting on legal advice, to evict the last occupant and his family.\(^{(49)}\)

The Hall of Science a failure, Harmony Hall, the socialists' greatest venture a mockery, his idol, Robert Owen, discredited, and perhaps personally estranged, Finch took refuge in a trip to the United States, where he seems to have restored his faith in socialism by a series of visits to the Shaker and German communities. It was in the course of this tour that Finch visited the Mormon capital at Nauvoo, Illinois, and, from a wagon drawn up outside the temple, lectured Joseph Smith and his people on "English socialism".\(^{(50)}\)

In the period of advance and hope before the beginning of the socialist débâcle, Finch had been inspired to publish, under the title *Moral Code of the New Moral World*\(^{(51)}\), a pamphlet guide to socialist aims and practice. In this work, authorised, in a preface, by Owen himself, we find the clearest exposition of the author's moral and political beliefs. The *Moral Code* is at the same time an illuminating summary of socialist tenets in the 'thirties. Its theoretical basis has nothing in common with the Communist Manifesto of 1848; its affinity is rather with the French Utopians of the eighteenth century, with a leaven of Benthamite doctrine. "The earth contains on and under its surface an inexhaustible supply or means to produce an inexhaustible supply of all the materials for man's happiness, requiring only the due cultivation, proper direction and free exercise of his faculties to convert them to his use." The driving force of society is a "God implanted incessant desire for happiness", a happiness, however, "unattainable in any other state of society than one consisting of the union of many families working for and assisting each other". Finch believed it to be self-evident that "Man is made for society, and was as much intended by the Author of his being to live in a state of society, with united exertions and union of interests as the bee, the ant, or the beaver". The *Moral Code* derived from an optimistic view of the manifest abundance of Providence, the "Natural right of every useful member of society to a full and

\(^{(49)}\) Podmore, *op. cit.*, pp. 557 seq. A protracted legal wrangle between the original trustees and later "assignees" was not finally decided until 1861.

\(^{(50)}\) *Liverpool Mercury*, 27 July 1891. The newspaper account may imply a later date, but the Nauvoo settlement, founded in 1839, dispersed after the lynching of Smith in 1844.

\(^{(51)}\) Finch, J., *Moral code of the New Moral World, or Rational State of Society; containing the Laws of Human Nature, upon which are based Man's duty to himself, to society, and to God* (Liverpool 1840). It was also published in Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham and London.
equal share of all the physical, intellectual and moral advantages and enjoyments society can confer”.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the English socialists to socialist thought has been the view of equality epitomised in the slogan “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need”. Finch added to this principle the gloss of the rationalist view of the formation of human abilities which differentiates it from a simple call to Christian charity. “It is imperative upon every human being capable of sufficient physical or mental labour to return to society by such labour as much as he or she takes from society. But, as the character, powers, and capacities of every human being are formed for them and not by them, it is the duty of Society to provide for the wants of those who, from physical, intellectual or moral incapacity, are unable to provide for themselves”.

There is, in the Moral Code, no call to class-war, nor even an attack on the pampered few in the name of the poor such as Godwin launched in his Political Justice. Even Finch, one of the few contemporary socialist leaders with a working-class origin, envisaged the founding of the new moral world not as the result of a political and social revolution, but as a moral revolution permeating all ranks of existing society. It is interesting to speculate on how far the welfare state is a development of this particular stream of socialist thought.

IV. THE LAST EXPERIMENT: A CO-OPERATIVE FOUNDRY

Despite the double failure of the country to respond to the experiments of the 1840s, and of the experiments themselves, Finch remained convinced of the practicability of socialism. Only a few years after the final collapse of Harmony Hall, events were to offer him the opportunity of a final grand attempt to vindicate his faith, in the establishment of a foundry organised and controlled by its workers. About 1850, though previously concerned solely with the merchanting of iron, the Finch family business obtained a controlling interest in an important Liverpool ironworks, the Windsor Foundry, Smithdown Lane, formerly the property of Smith and Willey. How the change was accomplished is not clear, though it was probably connected with the marriage of Thomas Willey to one of Finch’s daughters. The firm first appears as Finch and Willey in Gore’s Directory 1851, the new partner being Edward, Finch’s younger son. (52)

(52) Finch and Willey, Windsor Works, together with both John Finch, subscribed to the first edition of T. Baines’s History of Liverpool in 1852. Edward Finch died at Chepstow in 1873. The Finch memorial in Toxteth Chapel refers to
Shortly afterwards, in March 1851, Willey died, and Finch himself appears to have taken control of the business. It was promptly offered for sale to the newly-formed Associated Society of Engineers, whose executive, under the influence of William Newton, was known to favour the establishment of co-operative workshops. In July 1851, when the union executive first considered the offer there were five hundred employees, and outstanding orders for £30,000, largely with railway companies in England, on the Continent, and in America. Begun in 1843 with a capital of £7,000, the foundry was said to have made, in the years 1844 to 1847, a net profit of £33,155. £50,000 was asked for the premises and stock.

The Operative, the engineers’ journal edited by Newton, published a draft prospectus for a Windsor Co-operative, “to test the feelings of our members”, and letters of approval were not slow in appearing; but money was, and nothing concrete had been achieved by January 1852 when the A.S.E. became involved in a catastrophic strike and lock-out struggle with the employers, which absorbed all its energies and exhausted its funds.

In the meantime, however, the scheme had attracted the support of the Christian socialist group associated with the names of Hughes, Ludlow, and Neale. Ludlow and Hughes toured the northern counties in the autumn of 1851, and it is more than likely that they then visited Finch at Liverpool, for his name appears with theirs, and those of Neale, W. Coningham, and B. Fothergill of Manchester on a second, and official prospectus for the Windsor Foundry, issued in September. This revised prospectus provided a detailed plan for initial operation and gradual extension of workers’ control. In the first instance management was to be vested in a partnership of experienced business men, one being chosen as general manager. Contributors of the £50,000 capital required would be represented by a board of trustees, approved by the A.S.E. executive, who would act generally as directors. The foundry workers, chosen from A.S.E. members, were, after a year’s service, to be eligible for selection (by the managers and trustees), as associates, not less


B. M., Furnivall Tracts, II, No. 8, in which Finch is described as a former partner.

The Operative, 12 July 1851. For the attitude of the A.S.E. see Jefferys, J. B., The Story of the Engineers (London 1945), passim. Compare the figures in The Operative with Raven, C. E., Christian Socialism, 1848-54, p. 236 (“The Windsor Ironworks had failed owing to reckless speculation during the absence of the leading partner”), and with Prospectus of the Windsor Iron Works Company, Liverpool (1851) in the B.M.
Plate 16. THE WINDSOR FOUNDRY, SMITHDOWN LANE, 1859
From a watercolour by W. G. Herdman, in the Liverpool Public Libraries’ Collection (424·13. SMI.6). The chimneys are those of the Windsor Foundry, part of the entrance to which may be seen near to the lamp standard.
than forty such to be appointed within the first seven years. After seven years the managers would resign, and the associates would elect their successors, subject to the approval of the trustees.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of this plan is the extraordinary lack of confidence which the organisers of the A.S.E. seem to have felt in the immediate capacities of their rank and file, but even the earlier and more conservative stages do not appear to have received a fair trial. After their major defeat in 1852 the engineers revived an interest in co-operation as a second best to militant industrial action, and on 15 May The Operative announced the formation of a “Co-operative Investment Society”. But despite the decision of the engineers’ executive to set aside £10,000 for the establishment of a workshop, there is no conclusive evidence that the Windsor Foundry was ever worked on a co-operative basis, and the engineers soon abandoned co-operation as a solution of industrial difficulties in favour of emigration. In 1853 Thomas Milner acquired the Windsor site for his safe manufacturing business, and the experiment, if experiment there had been, was at an end. We can only speculate on the way in which the foundry was managed by the Finches from 1851 to 1853.

The Windsor Foundry was the last major political venture with which the elder Finch was associated, although, a mere week before his death, in 1857 the hardy veteran was collecting signatures for a repeal of the paper tax.

“No man, having lighted a candle putteth it under a bushel” was the motto which John Finch once chose for himself. Certainly the three successive evangelical missions, for Unitarianism, for abstinence, and, finally, for socialism, to which he devoted himself evince an astonishing energy and an unquenchable enthusiasm. The effect of his teetotal preaching, measured in terms of thousands of pledges and multiplying local societies, was immense; his impact, local and national, on Unitarianism and on socialism is not so easy to calculate. As a Unitarian layman he was not without local standing; in the councils of the socialist movement, though dwarfed by the giant figure of Owen, his election as chairman of the 1843 conference in defiance of the Social Father himself is testimony to the

(55) The Operative, 28 February 1852.
(56) Institute of Mechanical Engineers, Liverpool Meeting 1934: paper on Milner’s Safeworks, Topographical cuttings, Liverpool Record Office.
(57) Liverpool Mercury, 27 July 1891.
(58) Autograph dedication in a copy of Seven Seals Broke Open, presented to the Unitarian Association and preserved in Dr. Williams’ Library, London.
confidence which he inspired among the rank and file. Nor were his beliefs a parrot echo of Owen’s teaching. He could cite in defence of socialism the historical experience of the Essenes, the Paraguay Mission State, the Rappites, and the Shakers.\(^{(59)}\)

As well as the New Lanark settlement he was personally acquainted with the other two major contemporary attempts at practical social planning, by Vandeleur at Ralahine, and by William Thompson at Glandore, both of which estates he had visited on a trip to Ireland in 1833.\(^{(60)}\)

Like the other Utopians Finch retained an unshakable belief in the proximity of the Social Millennium, and an incredible optimism. Of one of his wildest and least likely projects, to turn the Church of England, bodily, into a secular educational institution, making every parson a schoolmaster, and every bishop a don, he could remark that “reflecting minds will readily perceive the simplicity, and perfect practicability of the scheme”.\(^{(61)}\) It would be unfair not to add that common sense and practical experiment were more characteristic of Finch’s socialism than visionary eccentricity. His tragedy lay in his (hardly unique) inability to solve the dilemma of Owenism: how, with men formed in the mould of the bad old society, to build the new environment alone capable of producing perfect men and socialists.

The resulting social experiments were always discouraging, and often catastrophic. Yet much can be learned, even from catastrophe, and it is in the pioneering efforts of John Finch and his contemporaries that the English labour and socialist movement has its deepest roots.

\(^{(59)}\) The Millennium, letter 6.
\(^{(60)}\) For Ralahine see New Moral World, IV, p. 182 etc.: for Glandore, Pankhurst, op. cit., p. 6. Finch was a trustee of Thompson’s will.
\(^{(61)}\) Finch, J., A Reformed Established Church (Liverpool 1841).