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William Maclure

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While engaged in some researches into the origins of civilization and culture in Indiana, the writer's interest was drawn to William Maclure. The purpose in calling attention to him goes beyond his connection with the origins of Hoosier culture, however, and is threefold: First, his unusually varied and useful career merits discussion. Second, his relation to the New Harmony Movement and his subsequent influence within the state of Indiana deserve considerable notice. Third, his ideas concerning social and economic subjects are worthy of some study, in the light of contemporary developments in these fields.

The record of Maclure's life reminds one of the career of that recent hero of fiction—the cosmopolitan Anthony Adverse. Scotland, England, France, Spain, in the Old World, and Pennsylvania, Indiana, Mexico, in the New World, were each in turn his home. He was born in Ayr, Scotland, in 1763. At the age of nineteen, he came to New York seeking mercantile employment but returned at once to London where he became a partner in the firm of Miller, Hart, and Company.¹ The year 1796 found him again in the United States but in 1803 he was in England once more. He acted as a commissioner to settle the claims of the United States on the French government for spoliation during the French Revolution, in which service to his adopted country he was successful. Wherever he went he observed and collected items of natural history, especially geological specimens, and sent them to the United States.

Upon his return to America, Maclure began, entirely without help from government or any other source, a geological

¹ During this fourteen year period, Maclure became a wealthy man but no details concerning this phase of his life have been found by the writer.

survey of the United States. In this work he crossed and re-crossed the Alleghenies fifty times. Many of the people who saw him breaking rocks with a hammer thought him a lunatic.² He did much to promote state geological surveys, and those which he lived to see completed usually confirmed his findings. In this period his home was in Philadelphia. He was absent at the founding of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia in 1812, but became a member of the organization on his return. He was President of this Academy from 1818 till his death in 1840. About the time that he became its President, he gave to the Academy his library of 1,500 volumes. Later, in 1835, he transferred to it over 2,250 volumes from his New Harmony library.³ He also gave liberally in money to the Academy, about \$15,000 in all.⁴ He served as President of the American Geological Society for a number of years and was a friend and correspondent of Professor Benjamin Silliman of Yale. A genus of spiral shells, of the Silurian rocks, bears his name.⁵

In 1816 and 1817, he, with his friend Charles Lesueur, visited over twenty islands of the West Indies to collect scientific data. In 1819 he went first to France and thence to Spain. In the latter country, he purchased ten thousand acres near Alicant and attempted to found an agricultural school. But the constitutional government was soon overthrown, the land returned to the church and the money he had invested in it was lost. It was with this project for an agricultural school still in mind that he joined the New Harmony project in 1824, arriving there in January, 1826. In 1827 he abandoned Indiana and went with Thomas Say to Mexico. Although he was in Philadelphia and New Haven for scientific meetings in 1828, he returned soon to Mexico where he died in 1840. He

² He published his results in the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* in 1809. A corrected and extended version was published in the *Transactions* in 1817.

³ Many of these volumes are still in the Library of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. Since they have not been kept separate and the library now contains over one hundred thousand volumes, it was not possible to ascertain the nature and scope of the books given by Maclure. It is the belief of the present librarian that many of the books not dealing with the natural sciences were sold.

⁴ Joseph Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Philadelphia* (1931), I, 12-17. Jackson differs from Morton on the amount given. He states that \$5,000 was given to pay off a debt of the Academy and \$20,000 for a new building. The *Journal* of the Academy was begun at Maclure's suggestion in 1817.

⁵ George P. Merrill, *The First Hundred Years of American Geology*, Merrill designates the years 1785 to 1819 as the Maclurean era, although Maclure made no investigations in American Geology until 1796. It is clear that he was the pioneer in this field in America, however.

had set out for Philadelphia but ill health forced him to turn back and he died before reaching Mexico City.⁶

The connection of William Maclure with the New Harmony experiment has received less attention than it deserves. It is possible that the attention centered by historians upon Robert Owen may have tended to obscure the achievements of Maclure. Clearly Maclure was not so important to the colony as was Owen, but he was a financial partner with him in the enterprise, and was second in importance only to him. Maclure, like Owen, was a successful business man, a philanthropist, and a social theorist. Unlike him, he was not a socialist, but a man of utilitarian tendencies and a believer in democracy. His interest in the colony was aroused because it offered an opportunity to introduce the Pestalozzian system of education, which he had observed in Europe, and in which he was a thorough believer. He considered the educational experiments to be the most important part of the New Harmony program.⁷ Maclure was about eight years older than Owen, whose friendship he had gained by a visit to New Lanark, Scotland. When Owen came to America, he met Maclure in Philadelphia and secured his promise of coöperation, which was forthcoming in several ways, even to the investment of about \$150,000 in the New Harmony project, a sum comparable to that supplied by Owen himself.⁸ To Maclure must go the credit for inducing the more prominent members of "the boat load of Knowledge" to join the movement. Thomas Say, Gerard Troost, Charles Lesueur and Constantine Rafinesque were younger men of Maclure's acquaintance who like him were pioneer students of natural science. Maclure also secured the services of Joseph Neef, a pupil of Pestalozzi, as teacher in his school. It was the later influence of these men in science and education that made the New Harmony effort of permanent importance despite its lack of success in achieving the primary purpose of its founder. Robert Owen's permanent influence, it is true, was manifested in the careers of three of his sons, who remained in Indiana. Yet it is worth noting that two of them were geologists,

⁶ Samuel George Morton, *Memoir of William Maclure*. Read before the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia on July 1, 1841, and published by the Academy in 1844. Morton's account of Maclure's life, as set forth in this pamphlet has been followed in this paper. Morton was Maclure's successor as President of the Academy. The work is dedicated to Alexander and Anna, brother and sister of William Maclure.

⁷ George P. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, 186.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

which was Maclure's great field of endeavor, while Robert Dale Owen's greatest work was in connection with the establishment of free public schools in Indiana, which was Maclure's *sine qua non* for a successful democracy.

Maclure and Robert Owen quarreled because the latter started a separate educational experiment.⁹ No evidence has been found by the writer to indicate that any blame should attach to Maclure for the failure of the experiment. He remained at New Harmony for some time after this, having purchased a considerable amount of land. During this interval, he petitioned the state Legislature for the incorporation of a "New Harmony Educational Society," but his plea was rejected.¹⁰ In 1827 he founded a seminary where each student paid his way by seven hours of work daily, there being no charges whatever.¹¹ He also edited the New Harmony *Disseminator*, writing especially on political economy and advocating many reforms, some of which have since been adopted.¹²

William Maclure's brother Alexander and sisters, Margaret and Anna, lived at New Harmony for a number of years. Sir Charles Lyell, who stopped at New Harmony on March 27, 1846, mentions that "The brother of Mr. Maclure lends books to the citizens."¹³ The records of the United States Census for 1850 show that in that year, a decade after William Maclure's death, there resided at New Harmony an agent for his estate, which was valued at \$50,000.¹⁴ By the terms of his will \$500 was to be given to any association of workingmen formed for mental improvement and mutual instruction. One hundred and sixty different communities, were thus provided with libraries at a time when libraries were scarce in the West.¹⁵ It was through the example of this system that Robert Dale Owen was led to provide for the township school libraries when the state school system was organized. Maclure's activity in this line was one of far

⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 251-2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 252.

¹³ Sir Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States* (1849), I, 202-209.

¹⁴ Seventh Census of the United States (1850), Harmony Township, Posey County Manuscript, Census Bureau, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ Lockwood, 259. The New Harmony "Workingmen's Institute and Library," founded at Maclure's suggestion and endowed by him in 1838, was the prototype.

reaching consequences in the state of Indiana.¹⁶ There is a considerable body of opinion which holds that it was responsible for the state's productivity in a literary way in later times. While the evidence on this point is not conclusive, there can be no doubt that the knowledge of many a frontier town was increased and that the classics were made familiar to many boys and girls of studious inclinations. Thus was the influence of New Harmony felt in a lasting way over all the Hoosier State. Thomas Riley Marshall, whose early years were spent in the northern part of the state, was undoubtedly speaking from personal experience when he attributed the Hoosier "literary fecundity and facility of speech more to the traveling library than to any other cause."¹⁷ A present day historian says, with reference to the township libraries: "It became traditional in Indiana that such collections helped the literary talent and the intelligence of the reading public of that state."¹⁸ If there is any validity in this tradition, the ultimate credit should go to William Maclure.

Of particular interest are Maclure's beliefs in regard to education, economics, and government. He viewed these subjects with a breadth altogether too seldom encountered among men of science. In fact, he may be regarded, as one of the earliest sociologists. He entertained many opinions, not widely countenanced in his day, which have a familiar sound to us today. He is another of those men so often met in history who lived before his time.

Maclure was an early adherent of the Pestalozzian system of education. He wished to include only subjects of practical value; utility was his guiding principle. Subjects of special value he believed to be Natural History, Mineralogy, Geology, Botany, Zoology, Arithmetic, Mechanics, Natural Philosophy, Geography, Astronomy, and to a lesser extent, Drawing and Chemistry. In keeping with his utilitarian views he argued that teachers should be paid according to their success. He was especially outspoken against romanticism in literature which he held to be responsible for false modesty and sickly sentiment. He pointed out that "of all the animals, man is the only one that is ashamed of his own body."

¹⁶ Burton Alva Konkle, letter to the author, 1932. Mr. Konkle, in his youth was a librarian of the remnants of the Maclure collection in Albion, Noble County, Indiana.

¹⁷ Thomas Riley Marshall, "Recollections."

¹⁸ Arthur C. Cole, "The Irrepressible Conflict" (1934), 217.

He referred to "an exaggerated sentiment in females, [which] causes them to tremble at the death of insects; while regarding the real miseries of their fellow beings with sang-froid; they are shocked at the indelicacy of a word or the mention of an indispensable piece of clothing."¹⁹ Such a man would, it seems, have been more at ease in the present era than a hundred years earlier, when he actually lived.

He decried the unreasoned discipline existing in the colleges of his day, and the mechanical habit of committing to memory without regard to content. He believed the self-educated man to be the most useful, comparing time serving in colleges to the apprentice system of the middle ages.²⁰ It may be noted that the educational leaders of today have discarded the disciplinary theory, and that the recent report of the Carnegie Foundation on college education has much to say in condemnation of time serving and credit getting. He believed that children should be taught positive facts or truths not speculative. His objection to religion was on account of its speculative tendencies.²¹

A very penetrating observation concerning the "snail paced progress of all moral and political reforms . . . contrasted with the rapid movements of physical and mechanical improvements" is as true today as it was then. Maclure characteristically applied it to a concrete situation, pointing out that "under a government of universal suffrage, there is not a free school in the [western] country, though the means of defraying the expenses have been eleven years at the disposal of the rulers."²²

He praised Sweden and Switzerland for their industry and morality, feeling it to be largely the result of birth control as practiced in these countries.²³ He would not agree with Hitler's idealization of the Nordic peoples today, for he says: "It is the monopoly of property, knowledge, and power that has supported the assumed superiority of whites over the colored

¹⁹ William Maclure, *Opinions on Various Subjects dedicated to the Industrious Producers* (New Harmony, Indiana. Printed at the School Press, 1831. 2 Vols. A third volume appeared in 1838), I, 58-59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*, I, 93-99.

²² *Ibid.*, I, 84-86. Elsewhere (p. 108) Maclure points out that Indiana came near providing for township schools on Jan. 31, 1824. He praises the schools of New England. It may be noted that of the two men in the vanguard of the fight for public schools in Indiana, the one, Robert Dale Owen, has a direct connection with Maclure; the other, Caleb Mills, was a product of the New England system admired by Maclure.

²³ *Ibid.*, I, 151-154.

people in all European countries."²⁴ His interest in Mexico, in which he anticipated Stuart Chase, was the result of this confidence in the inherent ability of downtrodden peoples and the desire to open opportunity to them by the door of education.²⁵ He condemned the sweat-shops of his day in bitter terms, being fully cognizant of their unsocial results, as the following passage will show:

In our large commercial towns, sewing which is woman's work is reduced so low by the great competition that their wages will not put them on a par with the starving manufacturers [workers] of Great Britain; at or under ten cents for making a man's shirt can not maintain a single woman! and what must be the forlorn state of those who have children? It is lamentable that the tyranny of our sex should reduce the weaker to such a deplorable situation.²⁶

His sympathy with the working class was large and genuine, an attitude not commonly found among self-made business men, in which class Maclure may be placed. He frequently speaks of the "industrious millions." His social program may be illustrated by the following from one of his essays:

Ignorance is perhaps the only devil that has ever been on earth The only thing belonging to the millions, that the unproductive few are interested in augmenting, is that part of their production which the few live upon; to increase which. . . . [they] leave the productive classes in ignorance, that they may be more peaceable, and better hewers of wood and drawers of water. Whence are the millions to expect aid or assistance? From themselves—from the only class, that is interested in their welfare. . . . Knowledge has long been considered as power.

This expresses clearly his belief that democracy is a practical form of government if the masses are educated to the realities of life, a belief also enunciated by Thomas Jefferson. Maclure would hardly consider our present mode of government very close to his conception of democracy. An interesting anticipation of the recent act of Nebraska in establishing a unicameral legislature is found in his belief that "one house of legislation. . . comes nearer to that equality which is the result of universal suffrage. . . ."²⁷

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 289.

²⁵ A large number of the essays are devoted to his observations on various phases of Mexican life.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 480.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 72-73.

Some of his economic views are equally remarkable for foresight and practical analysis. For example, his opinions on the impolicy of indirect taxes. He objected to taxation of this nature for these reasons: it burdens the millions unduly; expensive machinery is necessary to collect it; it is uncertain, and fails when most needed; there is too much graft in collecting it; it does not fall on actual property. He advocated a tax on bank shares, and dividends from roads, canals, insurance, and chartered or incorporated companies.²⁸ He expressed doubts in 1831 that canals would pay their costs and a few years proved that he was largely right. His attack on the banks, as promoters of inequality would be as applicable today as then: "All the one hundred banks that have already failed have been ruined by dividing their capital and the money they received for their notes, by way of profit," he wrote in 1831, and continued: "whether the greatest part of the banks of the Union are not now dividing their capital by too high dividends by way of profit, time must and certainly will show."²⁹ We need only to recall the ensuing panic of 1837 to note how soon events substantiated his views.

By an analysis of the war of 1812, Maclure demonstrated that the rich gained by it and the poor paid for it eventually though indirectly. He questioned the right of government to carry a national debt for this purpose. "In an elective government, where the millions pay punctually both principal and interest, . . . it may be a query, whether any number of citizens have a right to bind the rest to the payment of a debt contracted towards their fellow citizens, for the benefit of those who expended it. . . ."³⁰ The same query has arisen in our own day in connection with the activities of the international bankers and the World War.

He very clearly saw the dangers to a free press of control by moneyed interests:

Pay for the announcing and advertising of the fruits of speculations in our large towns, constitutes the most certain support of our gazettes. . . . By this unfortunate organization of circumstances, most of our newspapers advocate the interest of the few against the many, and oppose every reform that can add to the comfort and happiness of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 155-157.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 455.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 454-455.

the millions; which is an anomaly not easy to be accounted for, under an elective government of universal suffrage. . . .³¹

On another point, he anticipated the program of Senator Huey Long, though it is evident that he would scarcely approve of his methods. He writes in praise of the jubilee year remission of debts, practiced by the ancient Jews, but says that Christians have not followed it, preferring "to protect priests and property." In regard to the public lands, he wrote: "We have preferred selling them wholesale to the moneyed aristocracy, that they might exact an exorbitant price from the poor laborer who had the justest claim to them."³²

The variety of his interests is shown by a citation of some of the topics on which he expressed his thoughts: Industrial schools, the tariff, taxes on income, good qualities of the Mexican people, canals and railroads, inequality as a source of crime, paper money, wrongs and rights of women, long-winded congressmen,³³ relation of climate to government, the millions the last to benefit by revolutions, necessity of curtailing the patronage of the executive, bank monopolies, the duty of studying men as they are, inequality of property as the cause of inequality of knowledge, cruelty to negroes, neglect of the exact sciences, national debts as the supports of wars, men's ignorance of their real interests, the inequality existing in civilization as contrary to nature. The list is certainly long and varied, and indicative of a thoughtful, active, and practical mind.

His connection with two American centers of thought in his day, Philadelphia and New Harmony, testify to his importance in intellectual history and we may not only render William Maclure some degree of justice, but also a service to ourselves, by a revival of interest in his life and teachings.³⁴

³¹ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 476-477.

³² *Ibid.*, II, p. 552.

³³ He figured that congressional speeches cost \$4.50 per minute!

³⁴ The question of the source of Maclure's ideas is one that the writer has been unable to solve. To some degree they were original, but his reading must have influenced him. If the library at the Academy of Natural Sciences had remained intact, the question might be answered. It is possible that he came under Benthamite influence during the London years, and developed from that his independent course.