

# Contemplating Cobbett

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Karl Marx called William Cobbett “the greatest pamphleteer England has ever produced” (qtd. in “He” 161). Thomas Carlyle called Cobbett “the very pattern John Bull of his century, strong as the rhinoceros, and with singular humanities and generalities shining through his thick skin” (qtd. in Osborne 191). C.S. Lewis said of Cobbett that he was “a man with a chest” (qtd. in Basney 355). While in the United States after criticism about his prickly writing style he gladly took the pseudonym Peter Porcupine. William Cobbett’s was able to describe the plight of the English labourer like no other had done before. Cobbett’s writings reflected the discontent of his time, and by capturing the hearts and minds of his working class readers he brought them into politics.

William Cobbett was born on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1763 in the Jolly Farmer Inn on Bridge Square in Farnham, Surrey (Pemberton 8). Cobbett’s father was a small hops farmer and innkeeper. His father taught him to read, and he claimed that he could never remember a time when he did not work (Raymond 10). As a youth he set off on a journey with only sixpence in his pocket. When passing through a town he noticed a second-hand copy of Jonathan Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* on sale for sixpence in a store window. Cobbett bought the book, and spent the night reading it not caring that he had no place to stay and no money to buy a meal. He later claimed that this book sparked his intellect, and it was one his most prized possessions (Osborne 192).

Cobbett served in the British army in Canada from 1784 until 1791. Upon leaving the army he returned to England and charged several officers with corruption. The officers brought counter charges and instead of facing a court martial he fled to France and eventually to America. When he arrived in America he was a Republican, but he was changed into an embittered

monarchist (“He” 161). Cobbett said, “[i]nstead of that perfect freedom [he had found] a set of petty, mean, despots, ruling by perversion of the law of England” (qtd in “He” 161). After paying a hefty fine for libel, Cobbett returned to England in 1800.

Population increases during the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century along with the introduction of labour saving machines resulted in unemployment. This time period also saw a series of wars with Revolutionary and then Napoleonic France. War with France meant an increased tax burden to support the war. After the end cessation of war the landed interest in Parliament introduced the Corn Laws. This legislation was designed to keep grain prices artificially high. Ludditism—the destruction of machinery by riotous mobs—and attacks on farmers and corn mills were widespread. (Black 200-201)

Amidst these troubled times, in 1802, Cobbett began publication of *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*. This newspaper remained in publication until his death in 1835 and was the primary way in which he was able to gain influence. From 1810 until 1812, Cobbett was jailed for sedition in denouncing the flogging of soldiers who complained about an unjust deduction in their pay (Dickinson 70). Until this time Cobbett had been in support of the Tory government; however, “his own encounter with the government repression started his conversion to radicalism” (Dickinson 70). By now England was a very different place than the England of Cobbett’s youth. He realised that even though Britain’s farms were producing enough food, agricultural workers were starving. The irony of the starving English farmers, his experiences in America, and his imprisonment are all factors that effected his political beliefs. Though he is often accused of shifting his opinions, Cobbett followed an unwavering goal: the restoration of English

country life to the way it had been during his youth free from the influence of corrupt politicians. He saw that the way to do this was by implementing reforms. Cobbett wanted a reduction of taxes by half, an elimination of the standing army, a reduction in the navy, and an elimination of paper money (Pemberton 86-87). It was clear, Cobbett believed, that the corrupt Parliament would never allow these changes, so he believed that the franchise must be extended to all adult males (Morris 37). Cobbett launched a prolonged attack of the patronage system—a system by which commercial interests would buy the votes of members of Parliament (Dickinson 70-71). He believed that his reforms would eliminate the system of patronage.

In 1816, Parliament placed a high tax on all newspapers. In order to continue reaching a wide audience, Cobbett created a twopenny edition that would escape the newspaper tax by removing all news items. Cobbett's detractors referred to this paper as the twopenny trash. (Morris 36) An editorial entitled "Address to the Journeymen and Labourers of Great Britain and Ireland" in the first edition of *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register* that available in twopenny form caught wide-spread attention of the working class and brought the United Kingdom's attention to William Cobbett. Over 200,000 copies of the *Register* were sold in one month. Cobbett himself said that the effect on the minds of the workers were "prodigious" (qtd. in Morris 36). These claims of the impact are supported by other contemporary accounts (Pemberton 96-97). In this address, Cobbett states that the cause of the suffering of the labourer is the "enormous amount of taxes" (qtd. in Morris 36). Cobbett states the remedy to the problem of the enormous amount of taxes is reform of the Parliament, and encourages labourers to "attend every public meeting within their reach" and to "assist each other in coming at a competent knowledge of all public matters" (qtd. in Morris 37). It

is important to note that Cobbett never advocated violent means for bringing about Reform.

Harriet Martineau, a contemporary author of Cobbett, remarked that “never had any writer in England wielded such power” (qtd. in Pemberton). Cobbett’s use of language caught the attention of readers: “[i]t was Cobbett’s ability to explain the dangers of corruption in vivid and dramatic language that accounts for his growing influence with the farmers, shopkeepers, and tradesmen who read his *Political Register*” (Dickinson 71). W. Baring Pemberton claims that working men assembled each week to await the arrival of the next issue of Cobbett’s *Register* (Pemberton 99). Pemberton adds more insight into the effect of Cobbett’s writing:

Now that a man of Cobbett’s reputation had proved polemical ability and had adopted Reform as his immediate objective, a new, powerful and co-ordinating impulse was given popular discontent, which hitherto had been economic rather than political, sporadic and local rather than sustained and national. Under Cobbett’s teaching the working man began to develop a political consciousness. From the moment the movement towards Reform gathered irresistible momentum.  
(100)

Cobbett’s writings clearly had an impact on the minds of the working men of the nation.

Another measure of Cobbett’s popular success is the reaction of the ruling class. The *Tory Quarterly* demanded to know why this “convicted incendiary” was allowed to publish (Pemberton 101-102). Government censors could find nothing in Cobbett’s articles on which to convict (Pemberton 103). A contemporary of Cobbett’s noted that his opposition

consisted of “20,000 parsons, 4,000 or 5,000 lawyers, the two Universities, the two Houses of Parliament, many thousands of magistrates, many hundred writers of pay” (qtd. in Pemberton 103). The ruling class of the United Kingdom was solidly against Cobbett. In 1817, Parliament repealed the Habeas Corpus Act. Fearing arrest, Cobbett fled to America.

The decision to leave the country was possibly the biggest mistake of his career. It is unlikely that the government would have imprisoned Cobbett because the government had every reason to believe that any such action could touch off large-scale riots or even revolution (Pemberton 104). Though the *Weekly Register* continued to be printed, Cobbett was absent from the English political scene, and if he would have been present he, perhaps, may have been more able to harness the discontent of the working class after events such as the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. The Whig party became identified with reform in Cobbett’s absence (Pemberton 103). When Cobbett did return to England in late 1819, his influence has greatly waned.

Cobbett tried to regain his following, but was unsuccessful. In 1820, Cobbett stood for Parliament in Coventry, but was soundly defeated. This time with backing of Norfolk Squire Sir Thomas Beevor, Cobbett stood for Parliament in Preston in 1826. Under other conditions Cobbett might have won; however, “threats, intimations, and malpractice” discouraged voters (Pemberton 134). Cobbett supported the Reform Bill of 1832, which eliminated the rotten boroughs and more than doubled the electorate. In 1832, Cobbett stood for Parliament in both Manchester and Oldham. He was returned in Oldham and served in Parliament until his death in 1835. Cobbett’s career in Parliament was unspectacular, and he never gained the respect of other members of Parliament (Pemberton 165).

Cobbett's close attention to the changes in English society caused by the industrial revolution provided the basis for his political ideology, and his unique writing style awoke the British working class to politics. Cobbett sought a return to the way of life that he knew during his youth. He never accomplished this goal, but he was responsible for his own revolution by bringing the world of politics to the working man. The foundations of all of the working class movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century lay in Cobbett's writing. Once the working class was inspired to believe in Reform, they did not rest until their goals had been met. Though Cobbett lost his personal impact on society, the impact of his writings on the minds of the working class helped to change Britain forever.

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