

**The Making of a Radical: William Cobbett's  
Transatlantic Adventures,  
1792-1810**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for Departmental Honors in  
the Department of History  
Texas Christian University  
Fort Worth, Texas

May 08, 2023

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Transatlantic Adventures,  
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## ABSTRACT

The concerns of the working people of Britain found little voice in the early 19th century. Though the visionary poet William Blake wrote verse about such figures as “The Chimney Sweeper” (1789), this was an era before Karl Marx’s and Friedrich Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* and Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times* fixed popular attention on the plight of the working classes. In this context, one English newspaper editor and pamphleteer in the first few decades of the 1800’s stood as a precursor to the subsequent and revolutionary history of working-class literature. William Cobbett (1763-1835) wrote for and about the British working people, championing the cause of the common people in his pamphlets and newspapers. While most historical scholarship on Cobbett has focused on his later years as a prominent radical author and politician, this paper focuses instead on Cobbett's early life and his evolution into becoming a radical. Further, this paper analyzes Cobbett's unique radical politics around government reform, emphasizing the importance of his support for gradual political change to address the concerns of the working people in the aftermath of the Age of Revolutions in the Atlantic world.

## Introduction

“I am one of the greatest men in [the United States] at present; for people in general call me ‘*Cobbett*,’ though the Quakers provokingly persevere in putting the *William* before it, and my old friends in Pennsylvania, use even the word *Billy*, which, in the very sound of the letters, is an antidote to everything like thirst for distinction.”<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1763 to hop farmers in Farnham, England, William Cobbett never attended school.<sup>2</sup> Farming, gardening, and hunting, Cobbett firmly identified with the rural poor. In four different campaigns for English Parliament—Honiton, Coventry, Preston, and Manchester—Cobbett was unsuccessful. Guilty of treasonous libel, Cobbett spent two years of his life in prison. He died a bankrupt man. In many ways, the story of William Cobbett was common—he was an uneducated Englishman who neither amassed much wealth nor climbed the social ladder. Nevertheless, Cobbett became a founding father of British radicalism.

Cobbett’s poor, rural, and humble status were precisely the details about him that made his voice a uniquely legitimate one among the working people of France, America, and England. During Cobbett’s life from 1763-1835, his evolution from a poor farmer’s son to a radical political writer never changed the platform from which Cobbett voiced concerns. Common people in the three countries Cobbett lived—England, France, and America—shaped his political perspective and determined the unique trajectory of his radical politics. In the final years of his life, Cobbett authored a series of letters containing advice to the younger generations. In one of the letters, Cobbett articulately captured the precise motivation which made his perspective and political radicalism unique. In his 1829 letter, “To the Citizen,” Cobbett reflected the following:

There are always men enough to plead the cause of the rich; enough and enough to echo the woes of the fallen great; but, be it your part to show compassion for those who labour, and to maintain *their rights*. Poverty is not *a crime*, and, though it sometimes arises from faults,

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<sup>1</sup> William Cobbett, *A Year’s Residence in the United States of America* (London: Self-published, 1828), <https://archive.org/details/treatingoftheface00cobbrich/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater>, 204.

<sup>2</sup> Cobbett, while he never formally attended school, frequently wrote about how he grew up on the hop farm, learning his letters from his father. During Cobbett’s younger years in the English army, he claimed to have “read his way” to an education from the books available to him as an English soldier.

it is not, even in that case, to be visited by punishment beyond that which it brings with itself.<sup>3</sup>

Cobbett's radicalism was unique because, although he did not support a later issue of laboring people—universal suffrage—he *did* support traditional English values through reform and opposed revolution, unlike most radicals of the Atlantic world (anti-religion, anti-tradition, pro-revolution). Cobbett's early-life adventures cemented a simple idea in his mind that grew to ultimately characterize his politics and radicalism, that revolution repeatedly brought more misery to a nation's laboring people than liberty.

### **Historiography**

Following Cobbett's death in 1835, scholars of the Victorian era generally held his life and opinions in high regard. First as a champion of the rural poor in England, in his 1835 poem, "Elegy on William Cobbett," Ebenezer Elliot reflected: "And in some little lone churchyard, / Beside the growing corn, / Lay gentle Nature's stern prose bard, / Her mightiest peasant-born."<sup>4</sup> The English poet and social critic Matthew Arnold, German philosopher Karl Marx, and English writer G.K. Chesterton praised Cobbett's writing and the radical political positions he took.<sup>5</sup> These authors, primarily known for commentary and criticism of social movements and hierarchy in the later 1800s, found Cobbett's unique ability to bring politics to the poor and working people of his time a source of great inspiration and celebration well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The historical scholarship on Cobbett in the 1900s began with biographies that summarized Cobbett's life and synthesized secondary source opinions on and including criticisms of Cobbett's

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<sup>3</sup> William Cobbett, *Cobbett's Advice to Young Men, And (Incidentally) to Young Women, in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life* (London: Self-published, 1829), 342, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15510/15510-h/15510-h.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Ebenezer Elliot, "Elegy on William Cobbett," in *Every Day in the Year, A Poetical Epitome of the World's History*, ed. James L. Ford and Mary K. Ford (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1902), June 18.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Dyck, "Cobbett, William," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5734>.

publications. The first widely cited, comprehensive biography of Cobbett was G.D.H. Cole's 1924 book, *The Life of William Cobbett*. In this piece, Cole sketched William Cobbett's life in great textbook detail, and began a revival of interest in Cobbett following publication. In the biography, Cole characterized Cobbett as a man who "kept to the end, as the greatest possession of his spirit, his abounding faith in the common rightness of the common people."<sup>6</sup> Cole characterized Cobbett as a delightfully ordinary peasant, who dedicated his life to extraordinary opinions and publications with their focus on the education of poor and working people.

Only two years later, in 1926, G.K. Chesterton published a biography of Cobbett with a different perspective—though still in Cobbett's favor. In his book, Chesterton explored all the ways that Cobbett's critics had misunderstood him. Chesterton wrote, "The critics have been all wrong about Cobbett. I mean they were specially wrong about what he represented."<sup>7</sup> Chesterton's book goes on to explain how Cobbett's critics ignored him because they considered him no more than an old, God-fearing and King-loving conservative who was stuck in the past. Chesterton, in his biography, demonstrated how Cobbett was much more complex than a rural and archaic English Tory. He suggested the following to be more accurate of Cobbett's form:

[Cobbett] was fanatical, but he was not narrow. With all his fanaticism, he was really looking at things from too many points of view at once to be understood by those who wore the blinkers of a party or even a theory. He seemed to be at all extremes, because he had in some sense encircled and surrounded his whole generation. Ignorant and violent as he seemed on the surface, his spirit was like one that had lived before and after.<sup>8</sup>

Cole and Chesterton, setting up two favorable approaches to the historiography of William Cobbett, pioneered a theme in the Cobbett literature that continues today: the story of Cobbett has value

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<sup>6</sup> G.D.H. Cole, *The Life of William Cobbett*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 1924), 425, ProQuest.

<sup>7</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *William Cobbett* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1926), 13, <https://archive.org/details/cu31924013463322>.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 248.

because it constantly worked against the grain. It was Cobbett's radicalism that made him a great historical figure.

Over many years, this perspective on Cobbett's life became the essence of popular scholarly publications. In 1985, Daniel Green's biography, *Great Cobbett: The Noblest Agitator*, hinged upon the enigmatic personality of William Cobbett, and suggested that Cobbett was so fascinating because he was centrally focused on rescuing England from the growing social and economic changes that would eventually overtake Britain in the Industrial Revolution.

More recent publications have shifted from a focus on his life to in-depth studies of his opinions, politics, and style. In 1995, Leonora Natrass published *William Cobbett: The Politics of Style*, in which she demonstrated how Cobbett's politics were, indeed, conservative, yet they focused on the idea of an equitable society—and that everything good came from the working people. Natrass emphasized how Cobbett's journalism was “bombastic and irrepressible,” but also inconsistent, egocentric, and politically nostalgic in terms of his conservative romanticization of the past. However, Natrass argued that these traits of Cobbett's writing were unique strategies intended to cast a wide net of appeal to common readers of his time who may have otherwise been unengaged in political commentary. Cobbett's controversial writing strategy brought politics to readers who would not have participated in political conversations, and thus his written politics carved out a unique style in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century literature.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, James Grande and John Stevenson published *The Opinions of William Cobbett* (2013), a book on Cobbett's politics through his entire life, and an updated biography for modern readers.<sup>10</sup> Later, in 2014, Grande went on to publish an additional piece entitled *William*

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<sup>9</sup> Leonora Natrass, *William Cobbett: The Politics of Style*, Vol. 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> James Grande and John Stevenson, *The Opinions of William Cobbett* (Brookfield: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tcu/reader.action?docID=1531639&ppg=164>.

*Cobbett, the Press and Rural England: Radicalism and the Fourth Estate, 1792-1835*, in which he expanded and “re-appraised” Cobbett’s journalism and radical perspective. Here, Grande specifically related Cobbett’s writing to contemporary political conversations and debates regarding the involvement of working and poor populations in politics. Cobbett’s opinion, despite receiving criticism for his self-taught education, was that he had a duty to help, to educate, and to inform people who were poor or not formally educated (like Cobbett) about the politics that affected them, the laws that hindered them, the pay that didn’t sustain them, or even the politicians who failed to represent them.<sup>11</sup>

The story of William Cobbett, from the time of his death in 1835, to the biographies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the writing of modern historical scholarship, has largely concentrated on Cobbett’s time in England. His witty press publications and scathing critiques of religion, government, popular writers, and current events were most radical when Cobbett resided in Britain. Thus, much of the historiography of Cobbett’s life and times has focused on this part of his adult life—from 1801-1835—since these decades were the pinnacle of Cobbett’s success and the height of his British popularity and English presence.

Yet the important story of William Cobbett extends further into the past than just his final decades in England. This thesis explores the six months he spent in France in 1792, the seven years he spent in the United States, and then, finally, Cobbett’s first ten years back in England. For it was in these critical decades that Cobbett grew into the radical who so captivated contemporaries and historians alike. To study Cobbett’s politics, his growth into radicalism, and the forces that tempered his critiques of government, this paper will analyze how Cobbett changed in his politics while living in France, the United States, and England from 1792-1810.

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<sup>11</sup> James Grande, *William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England: Radicalism and the Fourth Estate, 1792-1835* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).



This study is important because in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, Cobbett was one of a very few authors who voiced the concerns of working people. Cobbett stood as a precursor to the subsequent history of working-class literature, from Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's *Communist Manifesto* to Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, and he did so through the publication of his own newspaper, *The Political Register*, and the authorship of numerous essays and pamphlets. These publications, written for a common audience, are key to understanding the depth of political ignorance to working-class concerns in Britain in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. Though perhaps unremarkable in lifestyle, wealth, and social status, William Cobbett's political evolution made him a founding figure of a British tradition of radicalism that shaped the identity of the working people and paved the way for British political reform.

### **Across the English Channel**

Coming from an upbringing of farm labor in rural England, Cobbett wanted to see the world. In 1783, he attempted to enlist in the Navy; but the government, instead, stationed him to a marching regiment in Chatham, England. From New Brunswick, to Gravesend, even to Halifax, Cobbett moved and served in the army for eight years. During this time, Cobbett either read books to hone his English grammar, or—according to Cobbett—collected a pay that was too low and received treatment that was unfair, requiring the purchase of equipment and uniform accessories that were excessive and unnecessary. At the end of 1791, Cobbett obtained his discharge and, soon after, married an American-born woman, Anne Reid.

But upon leaving the army and getting married, Cobbett could not accept the situation of corrupt and unjust treatment that continued to oppress men of enlisted status in the British army. To protest and bring attention to such concerns, Cobbett tried to launch legal charges against his superior officers in the British army. When the government ignored these charges, Cobbett wrote

his first piece of anonymous commentary, *The Soldier's Friend* (1792). Thus began Cobbett's career as a voice of the lowest Private, and an articulate author of common, poor, and working people's concerns.

The repercussions of publishing *The Soldier's Friend*, as well as attempting to launch a court martial, sent William and his new wife, Anne, on a near-decade journey across the English Channel to France, and then across the Atlantic to America. Self-published in England and highly critical of the established order and high-ranking Army officers, Cobbett's pamphlet was an early act of investigative journalism. Cobbett criticized Parliament's handling of soldiers' salaries and he expressly called out the Secretary of War, Henry Knox, who had stated in the House of Commons: "The situation of the Privates had long been admitted to have been extremely hard."<sup>12</sup> As Cobbett's wit got the better of him, he suggested, "I have the vanity to think, I shall discover a little better information on the subject [of Army pay] than the Secretary at war did at his opening of it in the House of Commons."<sup>13</sup>

The heart of the pamphlet exposed how an increase in pay was really a "pretended augmentation of the subsistence of the Private Soldier." Because superior officers had begun requiring expensive forms of uniform, the increase in pay, for Cobbett, was really Parliament's way of covering up the practice of "Officers tak[ing] a delight in extorting the poor wretches' pay from them with no other view than that of merely fooling it away."<sup>14</sup> To modern eyes, this kind of journalist criticism appears to be fair game, and necessary commentary; however, in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, Cobbett's words were anything but protected under English law.

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<sup>12</sup> Qtd. in William Cobbett, *The Soldier's Friend; or, Considerations on the Late Pretended Augmentation of the Subsistence of the Private Soldiers* (London: Self-published, 1792), 5, [https://archive.org/details/bim\\_eighteenth-century\\_1792\\_8/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_1792_8/mode/2up).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 12.

For his criticism of the English government, the writing on the wall for Cobbett was that his arrest and capture for treachery against his superior officers and against the government was imminent. Cobbett fled the country, to France and then to the United States. But, as he went abroad, Cobbett brought with him a motivating idea that would continue to characterize his life's work: that, despite getting him in trouble with political adversaries, governments, and the law, it was his ability to criticize these figures using the pen that helped him create a readership among the common people.

### **France**

William Cobbett and his wife, Anne, arrived in France in March 1792. The Cobbetts remained in the country until the beginning of September 1792, when they departed for the United States. Never entering Paris, the Cobbetts settled in the rural French village of Tilques, near the northern border of France and over two hundred miles from Paris.<sup>15</sup> Cobbett later described the six months that he and his wife spent in France as “the six happiest months of my life.”<sup>16</sup> Though these were six happy months for Cobbett, they were for most French people a turbulent time.

By March of 1792, the French Revolution was in the initial stages of its progress. Unable to manage his nation's overwhelming debt-load, King Louis XVI of France faced increasing resistance from the majority of French citizens. The French laboring populations, as well as some noble and clergy individuals, had begun to meet regularly as a National Assembly by the spring of 1792. The *ancien régime*, or former government, of France, was an absolute monarchy under which all

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<sup>15</sup> A. J. Sambrook, “Cobbett and the French Revolution,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 19 (1989): 234, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3508053>.

<sup>16</sup> William Cobbett, *Porcupine's Works; Containing Various Writings and Selections, Exhibiting a Faithful Picture of the United States of America; of Their Governments, Laws, Politics and Resources; of the Characters of Their Presidents, Governors, Legislators, Magistrates and Military Men; and of the Customs, Manners, Morals, Religion, Virtues and Vices of the People: Comprising also A Complete Series of Historical Documents and Remarks, From the End of the War, in 1783, to the Election of the President, in March, 1801*, Vol. IV, London: Self-published, 1801; United Kingdom: Wentworth Press, 2016, 49.

political authority rested in the person of the King. In the three years prior to Cobbett's arrival to France, the newly formed National Assembly effectively dismantled France's absolute monarchy and created a constitution that limited the power of King Louis XVI and assured the rights of all citizens in the new French nation.

Claiming to have conversed with thousands of French peasants during his time in Tilques, Cobbett insisted that the misery the French peasantry experienced under the "old government," or absolute monarchy, caused not even ten of these French peasants to "not regret the change" of the French Revolution.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the majority of Cobbett's conversations involved rural French people who *did* regret the new changes of the French Revolution. Most notably, these changes would have included an increase in the price of bread to an unaffordable level for rural people, who relied on whole grain bread as a staple in their diet in this period of French history. Cobbett may have exaggerated, as he often did, the number of discussions with so many French peasants; however, Cobbett later wrote that his primary reason for coming to France was "to perfect myself in the language."<sup>18</sup> Conversations, in 1792, were the primary method of language learning—so thousands of conversations is not an unbelievable number, considering Cobbett's later mastery in, and teaching of, the French language in Delaware.

During the initial years of the French Revolution (1789-1793), rural French interests differed from the interests of those who lived in Paris. While the French countryside initially supported reform and revolution, extremism of the increasingly powerful Jacobin faction caused the revolutionary interests of the capital revolutionaries and the countryside peasants to diverge. A key advocate of the most radical and violent revolutionaries in Paris (the Jacobins), Maximilien Robespierre was a French lawyer who pushed for a more and more progressive revolution in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

France. Robespierre and the Jacobin Club were important to Cobbett's story because their reforms in Paris from 1789 to Cobbett's departure from France in 1792 gave rise to an urban/rural disconnect at this point of the French Revolution.

Where Jacobins sought individual freedom from vestiges of the *ancien régime* and allegiance to revolutionary rule, rural French people sought a more communal freedom from the feudal (landholder/tenant) rule of the old regime *and* the new liberal rule of the French republic. In short, many rural French considered the revolutionary authority of Robespierre and the Jacobins no different from, or even worse than, the tyranny of absolute monarchy rule under the King. Many people in the French countryside fundamentally sought freedom from all higher-authority servitude. Thus, as William and Anne resided in the French countryside from March to September of 1792, Cobbett's takeaway that the peasants with whom he conversed regretted the extreme changes of the French Revolution matches up with the broader urban/rural divide in 1792, and the rural consciousness of resisting obligation to a new revolutionary authority. The people of rural France were especially upset with the revolutionary government's attack on the Catholic Church (and, thus, their religion). Further, the rural population tied the ascendancy of Jacobin extremism to the later unleashing of terror and civil war against rural areas in France that Jacobin extremists would support.

Scholars know very little about the day-to-day activities of William and Anne during the six months they spent in France. Cobbett did not publish anything during this period, nor did he necessarily have an occupation. He later wrote in the *Political Register* that he and Anne brought two hundred guineas in gold from England when they fled to France.<sup>19</sup> This amount, though difficult to translate to today's currency, would have allowed the Cobbetts to live in "tolerable

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<sup>19</sup> William Cobbett, *Political Register*, 05 October 1805, p. 523.

comfort,” as historian A. J. Sambrook wrote.<sup>20</sup> *Paper Against Gold*—a future seminal publication that Cobbett partly wrote while imprisoned in England—most certainly owed some of its origins to Cobbett’s time in France. Even with their two hundred gold coins secure in metal, currency depreciation in 1792—especially after France declared war on Austria—plummeted the value of *livres* in paper assignats to only a fraction of what the paper currency was worth in gold.

The sparse facts of Cobbett’s stay in France have led some scholars, like A. J. Sambrook, to speculate about what Cobbett *might* have experienced of the French Revolution. Sambrook wrote:

Whether or not [Cobbett] met any of the eye-witnesses to the rural terror of March 1792...Cobbett must have directly experienced more of the disorder and fear engendered by revolution than the insulting behavior of people in the streets of Le Havre. St. Omer’s Jacobin Club was sufficiently active for Robespierre to give it a testimonial in 1791, but Jacobin orthodoxy was not sufficient to prevent food shortages and lawless land riots in the St. Omer district. The ill-disciplined volunteers of the first revolutionary army probably passed Cobbett’s way, as the forward bases for the French invasions of the Netherlands in April were close to St. Omer; [Cobbett] would surely have heard of the disgraceful precipitate retreat to nearby Lille and the murder of the French general by his troops.<sup>21</sup>

Sambrook attempts to explain Cobbett’s development in France through historical details that Cobbett “must have,” “probably,” or “surely” experienced. I approach Cobbett’s time in France in a different way. Since a concern of this thesis is to study Cobbett’s growth and change into a radical political writer, this section’s research will, instead, study Cobbett’s changing political opinions and perspectives through considering his later writings containing anti-Jacobin and anti-revolutionary commentary. As we will see, the views Cobbett developed about France during the Revolution provided the first steps in his development as a radical writer.

Cobbett reflected on how his time in France shaped his politics in an article in his October 1805 *Political Register*. He wrote:

Previous to my leaving England for France, previous to my seeing what republicanism was, I had not only imbibed its principles, I had not only been a republican, but an admirer of the

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<sup>20</sup> Sambrook, “Cobbett and the French Revolution,” 237.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-237.

writings of [Thomas] Paine. I will not be much blamed by those who duly reflect. Instead of blame, I am not without hope, that the reader will find something to commend, in a person, who, having imbibed erroneous opinions, was so soon taught, by experience, to correct them.<sup>22</sup>

Cobbett changed in his opinions during his time in France, particularly from supporting the republican values of the French Revolution to opposing it—or, more specifically, deeming the Revolution illegitimate. In line with anti-revolutionary views among rural French, the French peasants fundamentally changed Cobbett’s perspective on the revolution.

Citing the “writings of Paine,” Cobbett referred to the Enlightenment perspectives of the English political theorist and eventual revolutionary, Thomas Paine. In the year prior to Cobbett’s travel to France, Paine published *Rights of Man* (1791), a radical defense of the French Revolution. Arriving to France just as Cobbett left in September of 1792, Paine became much more involved in the Revolution than Cobbett, despite not speaking French as Cobbett did. While Paine was unsuccessful in further influence on the French Revolution (Robespierre, particularly, regarded Paine as an enemy), the difference in Cobbett’s and Paine’s experiences—during the same year—suggested that these two English writers, apart from having distinctly different French experiences, also had importantly different political and social concerns. Where English writers like Paine relied on Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality, Cobbett’s concern derived directly from the practical concerns of the common people with whom Cobbett surrounded himself and with whom he identified.

Upon entering France, Cobbett was not only initially a Paine-inspired republican, but he was also a holder of English-born French prejudice. Cobbett expressed general resentment for France that was typical of many Englishmen in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. England and France had been bitter rivals for many centuries by Cobbett’s time. There was a competition for power in northwestern

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<sup>22</sup> William Cobbett, *Political Register*, 05 October 1805, p. 523.

Europe and across the globe, including most recently English victory in the Seven Years War and French revenge supporting America for its war for independence. At the time of Cobbett's travel in 1792, this long-lasting prejudice against the French was still alive between England and France. Reflecting upon his arrival in March of 1792, Cobbett wrote, "I went to [France] full of all those prejudices, that Englishmen suck in with their mother's milk, against the French and against their religion."<sup>23</sup> Despite these initial feelings, Cobbett continued, "a few weeks [in France] convinced me that I had been deceived with respect to both [prejudices]... I found *the people*, among whom I lived, excepting those who were already blasted with the principles of the accursed revolution, honest, pious, and kind to excess."<sup>24</sup> Here, Cobbett was writing about his experiences in France from Philadelphia in 1796. This bias is important to understand because—essentially—Cobbett was trying to retroactively apply his 1796 conclusions about the French Revolution being an "accursed" event to his early 1792 experiences in France, and suggest that he, even in early experiences in France, was always attuned to his eventual anti-Jacobin sentiments.

In a broader sense, however, Cobbett's own writing betrays him. His 1805 statements about "imbibing" republican and revolutionary principles, even from the radical types of Thomas Paine, particularly undermine the continuity of opinion that Cobbett perhaps wished he had maintained. Unwilling to suggest in 1796 that he had changed in his support of the French Revolution, Cobbett circled back to his attitudes in 1805 and conceded that he had, indeed, changed—though not without a great deal of evidence that a person who changes their opinions is "something to commend."<sup>25</sup> Clearly, Cobbett initially supported the republicanism of Thomas Paine and the principles of equality that began the French Revolution. However, Cobbett changed his opinion on the revolution

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<sup>23</sup> Cobbett, *Porcupine's Works*, VI, 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>25</sup> Cobbett, *Political Register*, 05 October 1805, p. 523.



as a response to the concerns of laboring and common peasants in France, which was indicative of the later radical author that Cobbett would become.

Cobbett's short time in France exemplified a process of change that partly defines what made Cobbett into a radical writer. Uniquely literate, relatively poor, and generally remaining in rural communities, Cobbett grew radical in France through anger at what he deemed to be exploitative treatment of his common peers and community equals—those among whom he lived—in the forms of the dechristianization of France in 1790, prohibiting the practice of Catholicism, or the forced mobilization of Frenchmen for the army. Capital revolutionary reforms seemed, for many rural peasants, to pass with little regard for the unequal burden or cost to rural France. Despite having initial prejudice against France, Cobbett quickly found comradeship with the rural communities he and his wife inhabited. Perhaps this occurred because he could relate to overwhelming abuse from an authority to which he did not consent—as he outlined in *The Soldier's Friend* (1792). Writing about the common population of France, Cobbett referred to these people as “the passive instruments, the slaves of a set of tyrants such as the world never saw before.”<sup>26</sup> Rather than loyalty to a particular political affiliation, Cobbett's loyalty and sense of morality evolved from what he understood to be the poor treatment and position of common populations around him.

Beginning with *The Soldier's Friend*, Cobbett's experience in France demonstrated a second example of the common population's resonance that set him apart from contemporary political writers of his time. Where prolific political writers like Paine or Jean-Jacques Rousseau were not particularly concerned with communicating to, and for, the common population of England or France, Cobbett derived his politics and opinions directly from interactions with, and as part of, the common laborers of the nations in which he lived. In France, the people “who [have] had the

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<sup>26</sup> Cobbett, *Porcupine's Works*, VI, 50.

misfortune to groan under [the Revolution's] iron anarchy"<sup>27</sup> were those who inspired Cobbett's "execration" of the Revolution in France. Rather than anger at how the events of the French Revolution affected him, Cobbett more precisely changed his opinion in rejecting the French Revolution due to the local St. Omer community reaction. In other words, Cobbett's French sojourn did not shape his political radicalism because of things he "must have," "probably," or "surely" felt from the French Revolution; rather, the change occurred because he spent six months talking with rural French people, and a majority seemed to agree that the extreme changes of the French Revolution brought them collective misery rather than liberty.

### United States: Thomas Jefferson and William Cobbett, 1792-1799

The United States in 1792 was still a fledgling nation. George Washington was serving out his first term as America's president. In February, the Postal Service Act established the U.S. Postal Office. In June, Kentucky became the 15<sup>th</sup>—and newest—state to join the union. And then in October, the little-known British exile, William Cobbett, stepped off a boat from France with his wife Anne's hand in his and no more than a half crown in his pocket. At age 29, Cobbett began his journey as "a sojourner in the United States."<sup>28</sup> He wrote that since he was "Ambitious to become the citizen of a free state," he had "left [his] native country, England, for America."<sup>29</sup> A "free state," for Cobbett, was one that did not censor criticisms as Britain had, and one that held stability in government and security where France had not.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>28</sup> Cole, *Life of William Cobbett*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> William Cobbett, "To Thomas Jefferson from William Cobbett, 2 November 1792," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-24-02-0512>. [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 24, 1 June–31 December 1792, ed. John Catanzariti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 554–555.].

Upon settling into America, Cobbett saw that his increasingly radical writing could push even the most complex and nuanced politics of government action into the public eye, and that it could make a real difference in providing common people access to the political world and leaders who did not have the interests of common people in mind. Where Cobbett spent his previous six months in France getting a grasp on the language and, ultimately, the rural working people's perspective of the Revolution, Cobbett spent his time in the United States writing public criticism under the pseudonym "Peter Porcupine." Arriving with enough skill in English and French to serve as a tutor and translator, first in Delaware, and then in Philadelphia (the capital of the U.S. at this time), Cobbett was not making much of a decent living. In this context, Cobbett decided to write a letter, requesting patronage, to Thomas Jefferson. Cobbett wrote:

Should you have an opportunity of serving me, my conduct shall not show me ungrateful, or falsify the recommendation I now send you. Should that not be the case, I shall feel but little disappointment from it, not doubting but my industry and care will make me a happy and useful member in my adopted country. I am, with great respect, Sir, Your most obedient Servant...<sup>30</sup>

Jefferson sent his reply to Cobbett very quickly, and the letter itself was brief. With keen mistrust of Cobbett's reasons for wanting money or especially a job in the American government, Jefferson acknowledged Cobbett's letter but politely denied his request for support. Jefferson wrote, "I wish it were in my power to...be useful to you.... Public offices in our government are so few, and of so little value, as to offer no resource to talents."<sup>31</sup>

In 18<sup>th</sup> century terms, Jefferson's reply was rather sarcastic. As Secretary of State in Philadelphia, Jefferson certainly valued public office and, further, clearly had a place for "talents" in a rapidly growing government sector. Perhaps it was the rumor that Cobbett was merely a British secret agent, dispatched in pursuit of a State Department position in the United States. Such

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

allegations actually did come to light in the 1799 Pennsylvania gubernatorial election, when Cobbett's letters with Jefferson were anonymously published in line with this rumor. The later controversy forced Cobbett to publish a second, open letter to Thomas Jefferson denying such preposterous claims. Cobbett wrote in this 1799 letter:

For insinuating, that *I was sent out by the British Government* to carry on the business of *corruption*, and.... Sir, was it not strange, that the British Government should choose such an instrument as I was? Their diplomatic corps must be very weak, if they were compelled to beat up for recruits amongst the non-commissioned officers of a regiment of foot. It was equally strange that I, their chosen agent, should go to Wilmington, and there raise my cabbages and potatoes on an acre or two of rocky ground, which required more labour to clear and industry to till than had ever before been found in the parish.... Who but a stupidly suspicious Democrat will believe, that I should have passed four long years going from house to house teaching Frenchmen the English language, and occasionally bickering for a few dollars with a sharpening bookseller?<sup>32</sup>

Cobbett continued into a criticism of Jefferson:

Besides, there is another consideration, in which you, my dear Jefferson, are deeply involved: if the British Government did really send me out to prosecute the work of *corruption*, how came they to send me to YOU in particular? Your reputation was, by them, as well known then as it is now.... How, then; why, then, I say, my dear Jefferson, came the court of Great Britain to fix on your immaculate virtue as the object of their attack! They must have a very contemptible opinion of the *fortress* or a very exalted one of the *besieger*. In fact, my dear Thomas, this [allegation] has made you appear a very *little man*, or me a very *great one*.<sup>33</sup>

Failing to receive Jefferson's patronage in 1792, clearly, had a lasting effect on Cobbett, and the rejection threw Cobbett into years of conflicting views on American politics and politicians between his first letter to Jefferson in 1792 and his final letter in 1799. On the one hand, Cobbett appreciated the initial ideals of freedom that Jefferson and the Antifederalists had to offer—yet, clearly, there was a change in Cobbett's feelings during his American experience.

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<sup>32</sup> William Cobbett, "To Thomas Jefferson from William Cobbett, 5 August 1799," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-31-02-0135>. [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 31, 1 February 1799–31 May 1800, ed. Barbara B. Oberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 153–162.].

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Cobbett never clearly wrote about his reasons for initial interest in Jefferson or Jefferson's Antifederalist political faction. In his 1799 letter to Jefferson, Cobbett would acknowledge that his brief Antifederalist support occurred when he "was a young man, whose whole life (all but about nine months) had been divided between the plough and the musket, and who, of course, was totally ignorant as to matters of government."<sup>34</sup> Yet, the creation of the Antifederalists was deeply rooted in the rural and working people's identity with which Cobbett identified. Initially a collection of agrarian and working laborers among its supporters, the Antifederalist faction of the American 1790's was interested in a de-centralized government. The Antifederalists—or Jeffersonians as they later became—wanted to secure individual liberties, with attention to government official accountability and curtailing as much government corruption as possible. The 1791 U.S. Bill of Rights, for example, was primarily a compromise between the Antifederalists and Federalists on the assurance of individual liberties, where the Antifederalists refused to ratify a U.S. Constitution without the addition of the Bill of Rights.

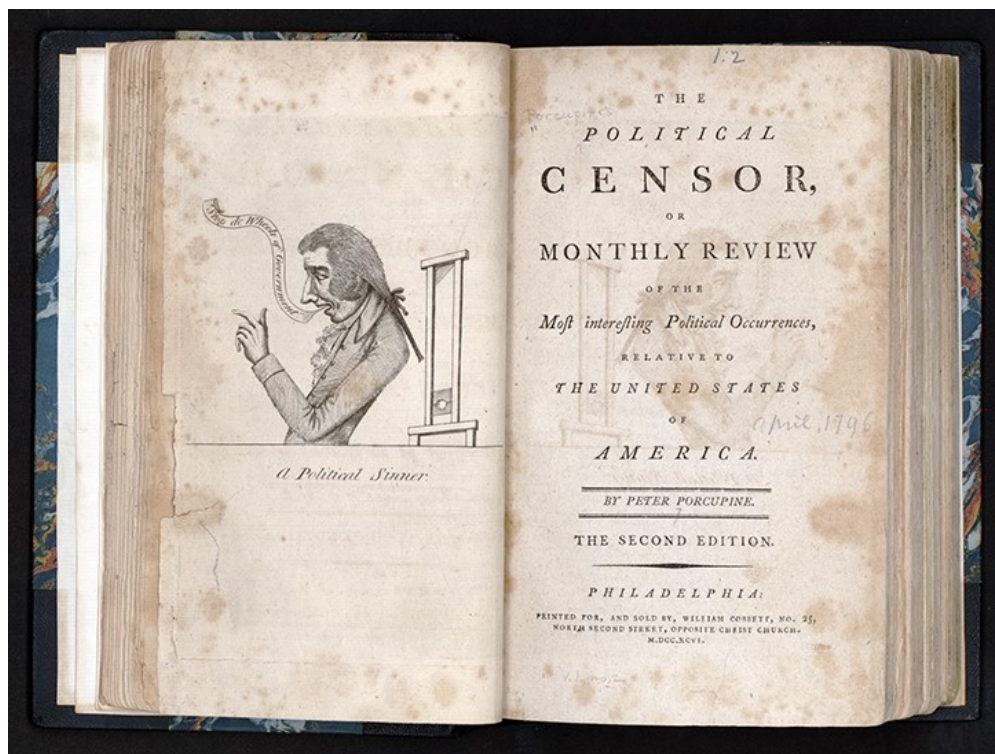
Beyond being a faction that appealed to Cobbett's strong anti-corruption position and identity as part of the rural working people, the Antifederalists were not a complete fit for Cobbett's growing British identity and anti-Jacobin persuasions. Outspoken Antifederalists, like Thomas Jefferson or Patrick Henry, were generally pro-French and anti-British regarding foreign policy. After all, at this time, the French were fighting for ultimate individual liberty—even though Cobbett saw this fight as being very costly for the well-being of France's poorer population. In fact, by now, France was once more at war with Britain!

Perhaps because of this tension, or perhaps because Jefferson rejected Cobbett's request for patronage, Cobbett determined to radically shift his political purpose in the United States early on in his adventures there. He decided to oppose Jefferson and the Antifederalist faction in his scathingly

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

critical U.S. publications and did so for his entire tenure in the United States. He wrote that Jefferson was “‘a Frenchman in politics and morality’ and ‘a man as much qualified to be president as I am to be an Archbishop!’”<sup>35</sup> Cobbett prefaced the same publication with the following image of Jefferson, standing next to a guillotine, stating, “Stop the Wheels of Government.” Below the image, Cobbett included the caption, “A Political Sinner,” trying to argue that Jefferson’s support for the French Revolution was dangerous for the United States. Further, the presence of the guillotine behind Jefferson referred to France’s Reign of Terror, a period in the French Revolution which resulted in the death of thousands of French people whom French leaders deemed to be “in opposition” to the Revolution. Jefferson, as Cobbett tried to demonstrate here, was ultimately a man whose pro-revolution politics could bring such dangers as the French Reign of Terror across the Atlantic to America.



<sup>35</sup> Qtd. in William Cobbett, “Peter Porcupine’s Political Censor, April 1796” (Philadelphia: Self-published, 1796), *Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress* (090.05.00). *Digital ID# us0090\_05*).

Cobbett's disagreement with Jefferson through letters, pamphlets, and his 1797-1799 newspaper, *Porcupine's Gazette*, was certainly the most influential factor in Cobbett's politics during his eight years in America. Though initially drawn to the Antifederalists upon landing in America, Cobbett changed in his politics to generally oppose Antifederalists just as he had, earlier, changed in his politics to generally oppose the extremism of the French Revolution. Both times, Cobbett's change occurred out of personal experiences with people who either motivated his support because he saw their suffering (the rural and working French) or motivated his disdain because he saw their arrogance and dishonesty (Jefferson). This political change in Cobbett was important because it continued to underscore the broader theme of Cobbett's life: that political development occurred out of Cobbett's firsthand experience with people, and his openness to such political change made his evolving radicalism relatable and popular with readers across the United States, and later England. In his 1799 letter to Jefferson, Cobbett wrote:

The only object, intended to be answered by publishing this letter, appears, from a remark of your friend Duane, to be an exposure of what he terms my inconsistency. He accordingly points out how little reliance ought to be placed in a man, who at one time declares himself "ambitious of becoming a *Citizen* of a *Free* state," and who, at another time, asserts that he "would not accept of the citizenship of the United States, but would rather be a subject of *Russia*."— As to my saying, that I would rather be a *subject* of *Russia* than a *Citizen* of the *United States*, I am certain it is false; I am certain I never said it in this unqualified way; but, to avoid all dispute on that score, I will allow that I have said so, for I am sure I have thought as much a thousand times, and assuredly I have lately seen nothing to change my opinion.<sup>36</sup>

Cobbett did not fear his criticism for change and inconsistency; rather, he accepted it and used it to further his legitimacy as a political critic and author.

### **American Change: *Priestley Criticism*, 1794-1795**

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<sup>36</sup> Cobbett, "To Thomas Jefferson from William Cobbett, 5 August 1799."

Cobbett's vehement criticism of Jefferson was not his only political concern while in the United States. His first piece of popular journalism apart from letters to Jefferson was a critique of a British expatriate, like himself, who had arrived in America two years after Cobbett, in 1794. His name was Joseph Priestley. Priestley was like Cobbett in many important ways. First, he came to the United States from France, and before that from Britain. A radical scientist, writer, and theorist, Priestley was, like Cobbett, pushed out of England due to controversy over his radical publications. Priestley's publications related, unlike Cobbett's, to a criticism of the Church of England. Following observation of the French Revolution and experiences in being ousted from Britain, Priestley was a progressive figure who supported the French and American Revolutions and was highly critical of traditional English values. Unlike Cobbett, Priestley was a life-long English Dissenter (meaning he did not support the Church of England), and he never returned to England, as Cobbett did, after arriving in America. Prior to fleeing from England, Priestley was so radical in his dissent and radical opposition to English traditions that his views induced a series of Birmingham mob riots in 1791, targeting dissenters and Priestley's church and home. Priestley fled England because of his connection to these riots, later dubbed "The Priestley Riots," and his personal anger toward the British Government for not protecting his free speech.

Cobbett published his "observations" on Priestley's arrival to America from France (and before that, England) in 1795, and detailed the reasons he distinctly opposed Priestley's radical support for revolution and opposition to tradition. This criticism further illustrated how Cobbett felt about the American Revolution and its effects on the common people. Like his feelings on the French Revolution, Cobbett argued through this text against Priestley that revolution came at an important cost—further developing Cobbett's unique radical perspective of supporting reform before ever supporting revolution. Cobbett wrote:

Happiness being the end of all good government, that which produces the most is consequently the best; and comparison being the only method of determining the relative



value of things, it is easy to see which is preferable, the tyranny which the French formerly enjoyed, or the liberty and equality they at present labour under. If [Priestley] had come [to the U.S.] about a year sooner, he might have had the satisfaction of being not only an ear, but an eye-witness also, of some of the blessed effects of this celebrated revolution. He might then have been regaled with that fight, so delectable to modern philosopher; -- opulence reduced to misery.<sup>37</sup>

Cobbett's understanding that America's Revolution was as problematic as the contemporary French Revolution led him to a life in the United States as a different radical from his British contemporaries. Where the English radicals like Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine criticized England and supported Revolution in the U.S. and then in France, Cobbett argued the opposite. Over the next six years, Cobbett wrote several volumes' worth of criticism of American democracy, and underlined how his republicanism (meaning his desire for governments to run in the *public's* general interest while maintaining traditional values) was at odds with American Republicans (technically another name for Antifederalists at this time) because he was a "republican" who publicly supported Britain, and criticized France and the United States. For this criticism, Cobbett earned the nickname, "Peter Porcupine," since his prickly views on this issue seemed akin to a needle-skinned rodent.

Adopting the nickname as his penname, frustration at Priestley's criticism of England and Jefferson's lack of patronage motivated Cobbett to ultimately begin his own newspaper out of America's capital at the time, Philadelphia. He would name the paper *Porcupine's Gazette* and begin the company with his own coin—earned through years of tutoring in Delaware and Philadelphia. From the founding of the paper, "Cobbett continued to excoriate the [Antifederalists]

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<sup>37</sup> William Cobbett, *Observations on the emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley, and on the several addresses delivered to him, on his arrival at New-York, with additions: containing many curious and interesting facts on the subject, not known here, when the first edition was published: together with a comprehensive story of a farmer's bull* (Philadelphia: Thomas Bradford, 1795), 33, <https://archive.org/details/2546035R.nlm.nih.gov/mode/1up>.

in *Porcupine's Gazette*.”<sup>38</sup> It was Cobbett's first institutional establishment that carved out a new name for Cobbett—a new kind of “conservative”—since the paper strayed from traditional American conservative beliefs of the time, those of Antifederalists like Jefferson and Revolutionary radicals like Priestley.

**Radical Development and Quack Doctors: *Porcupine's Gazette and Benjamin Rush, 1797-1800***

Cobbett's controversial attitudes, writing, and perspective gained him popularity in the U.S. and especially back in his home country of England. Cobbett's radicalism, in other words, earned him success because controversy sold. A different kind of conservative, one who criticized the order of Antifederalists and French Revolution supporters, was new, engaging, and exciting. As the paper grew, even Joseph Priestley, the victim of Cobbett's initial criticism, suggested that Cobbett was “by far the most popular writer in [America].”<sup>39</sup> Despite lack of patronage and public popularity, Cobbett was able to launch the *Gazette* because he entertained readers with his witty, radical, and controversial commentary. What is more, because Cobbett's chosen political topics appealed to common people, he learned from *Porcupine's Gazette* that his pen and a newspaper could seriously provide something useful to people who identified just as he did: common, not formally educated, and poor.

Examples of Cobbett's publications that brought politics to common readers were his series in the *Gazette* regarding political elections and candidates, such as the 1799 Pennsylvania gubernatorial election, and particularly his series regarding the Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemics of the 1790s. Beginning in 1793, the city of Philadelphia struggled with Yellow Fever, a viral disease that mosquitoes transmitted to humans through subcutaneous infection (though doctors

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<sup>38</sup> In “Cobbett, To Thomas Jefferson from William Cobbett, 2 November 1792.” Annotations courtesy of Princeton University Press.

<sup>39</sup> Qtd. in Grande and Stevenson, *The Opinions of William Cobbett*, 153.

wouldn't know this fact until the later 19<sup>th</sup> century). Though the fever would subside after each freeze in the winter months (because the mosquitoes would die), it persisted in Philadelphia through further epidemics in 1797, 1798, and 1799. Cobbett critiqued Philadelphia officials' handling of the epidemic, primarily to expose ostensibly brilliant medical suggestions as "quackery" to the Philadelphia public who were suffering and dying in large percentages.

One of Philadelphia's leading physicians and a Founding Father of the United States, Dr. Benjamin Rush, was convinced of trying to treat the illness through what we would now consider to be the generally harmful practice of "heroic" medicine, which involved bloodletting and bodily fluid purges. Some historians believe that Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and even Rush were the victims of quicker deaths because of Rush's insistence on practicing bloodletting and purges.

At the height of the epidemic in the fall of 1797, Rush earned acclaim for remaining in Philadelphia during the epidemic, treating victims of the disease, and implementing seemingly brilliant medical treatments. Yet some were skeptical. Cobbett published several articles in *Porcupine's Gazette* that aggressively tore into Rush's handling of the epidemic. Cobbett wrote, "The times are ominous indeed when quack to quack cries purge and bleed."<sup>40</sup> Referring to Rush's practices as "medical puffing" and Rush himself as "our remorseless *Bleeder*," Cobbett openly criticized Rush's extreme use of bloodletting, and suggested that he killed more patients than he saved.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "A report of an action for a libel brought by Dr. Benjamin Rush, against William Cobbett, in the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, December term, 1799, for certain defamatory publications in a news-paper, entitled *Porcupine's gazette*, of which the said William Cobbett was editor," *Supreme Court of the State of Pennsylvania*, December term, 1799, Evans Early American Imprint Collection, University of Michigan, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N27847.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1:view=fulltext>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

Rush sued Cobbett for libel in the autumn of 1797, and in December 1799 Cobbett was found guilty, and ordered to pay a judgement of \$5,000 to Rush and \$3,000 in court costs. An \$8,000 judgement, in 1799, would be the equivalent of nearly \$200,000 in 2023. A poor man most of his life and a bankrupt one when he died, Cobbett could not afford to pay. In the end, Rush's lawsuit would send Cobbett back to England having only partially paid his judgement.<sup>42</sup> Cobbett left America for the same reason he had left England: fear of legal repercussion for his publications. Cobbett's pen, indeed, was always getting him in trouble.

### **American Reflections**

Self-determination would describe the story of Cobbett coming to America, but so, too, would robust controversy. Poor and scarcely well known when he arrived in the republic, Cobbett departed the new world much more widely known—though still poor. Through rugged self-determination, Cobbett achieved his reputation. Over the eight-year journey in the United States, he not only failed to gain patronage from Thomas Jefferson, but he also refused to support the dominating beliefs about Revolution, England, politicians, and even medical practices in the zeitgeist of the American 1790s.

Cobbett's American experience reinforced his radical discovery that, by combining critiques of political leaders, opposing revolutionary ideas, and appealing directly to an audience of common and working people, he could achieve success with the pen. In this way, Cobbett gained motivation to further develop his political persona.

Political commentary, as Cobbett learned in the U.S., was a way in which he could bring politics to a wide audience, even if his audience was not his people in England. Cobbett proudly

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<sup>42</sup> Carl Binger, *Revolutionary Doctor: Benjamin Rush, 1746-1813* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966), 239-47, <https://archive.org/details/revolutionarydoc00bing/page/n7/mode/2up>.

suggested that he was not a “citizen of the world.... It is quite enough for me to think about what is best for England, Scotland and Ireland.”<sup>43</sup> During his time in America, Cobbett tempered his determination to speak his uniquely radical perspective and recast his purpose as an English commoner who could write and critique with great effect. He would return to England after his time in America with a driving passion to write for the British commoner, but never ceased referencing how his experiences in the U.S. and France shaped his radical politics.

### **Cobbett Back in England: A Worthy Welcome Home, 1800-1801**

Returning to Britain with the American law on his tail, England’s transatlantic author was curiously welcomed back to his home country with open arms. Precisely the way in which Cobbett stood for controversy in the United States and left a criminal for not paying his lawsuit judgement, the British government changed their tune on Cobbett’s traitor, outlaw, and criminal status in England. Not least because Cobbett’s seminal American publications had drifted across the Atlantic back to England, the British received Cobbett as an expert on the New World (America), as well as an expatriate who doubled down on his honor for “God, King, and Country” in the Old World. The very reason Cobbett proved to be so controversial in America—that his politics included a pro-English and anti-Jacobin stance—ingratiated him with the British government, which found a way to forget his earlier radicalism and recruited his popular pen for the government’s cause.

The Tory (conservative) Prime Minister at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, William Pitt, offered to subsidize Cobbett’s career with an invitation to edit a state-owned newspaper, with generous pay—but with an expectation of vocal support for Pitt’s government attached. Describing his arrival back in Britain, historian Luath Ferguson of *The William Cobbett Society* suggested, “[Cobbett] comes back to Britain, the Prime Minister is waiting to see him within weeks of coming back—

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<sup>43</sup> Dyck, “Cobbett, William.”

having nearly been done for treason when he left—[Cobbett] is a dinner guest of the Prime Minister and he is offered a fortune. [Cobbett] turns it down because he *will not be anyone's man*.”<sup>44</sup> The August 1800 dinner between Cobbett, Pitt, and other “persons of rank” included such English conservative authors as George Canning, who edited the British *Anti-Jacobin* newspaper opposing the radicalism of the French Revolution.<sup>45</sup> Reflecting on this offer, Cobbett later wrote:

My answer to Mr. Hammond [George Hammond, Pitt's Foreign Affairs Under-Secretary, was the representative of Pitt's who actually extended the paper offer to Cobbett at dinner] was conveyed in reminding him of the fable of the *wolf* and the *mastiff*, the latter of which having, one night, when loose, rambled into a wood, met the former all gaunt and shagged, and said to him, ‘Why do you lead this sort of life? See how fat and sleek I am! Come home with me and live as I do; dividing your time between eating and sleeping.’ The ragged friend having accepted the kind offer, they then trotted on together till they got out of the wood, when the wolf, assisted by the light of the moon, the beams of which had been intercepted by the trees, spied a *crease*, a little *mark*, round the neck of the mastiff. ‘What is your fancy,’ said he, ‘for making that mark round your neck?’ ‘Oh,’ said the other, ‘it is only the mark of my *collar* that my master ties me up with.’ ‘*Ties you up!*’ exclaimed the wolf, stopping short at the same time; ‘give me my ragged hair, my gaunt belly, and my *freedom!*’ and so saying he trotted back to the wood.<sup>46</sup>

Clearly, independence and freedom of thought were key values for Cobbett upon returning to England, despite the fact that his first attempt at completely independent publication floundered. In 1800, Cobbett's first English newspaper, *The Porcupine*, sputtered and failed to take off. Its motto, “Fear God, Honour the King,” was telling of Cobbett's intention but not of his ultimate passion. After selling *The Porcupine* in 1801, Cobbett tried again with a new publication: *The Political Register*. From its first issue in January 1802 to Cobbett's death in 1835, *The Political Register* was Cobbett's weekly outlet and drawing board for his political radicalism. The evolution of *The*

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<sup>44</sup> Luath Ferguson, “A short film about William Cobbett,” *The William Cobbett Society* courtesy of YouTube, January 26, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRnO5WVXVn0>, 1:11-1:26.

<sup>45</sup> Cole, *Life of William Cobbett*, 70.

<sup>46</sup> William Cobbett, *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, Vol. XXXII, No. 01, January 04, 1817, [https://archive.org/details/sim\\_cobbetts-weekly-political-register\\_1817-01-04\\_32\\_1/mode/lup](https://archive.org/details/sim_cobbetts-weekly-political-register_1817-01-04_32_1/mode/lup).

*Political Register* demonstrated how Cobbett grew during his last three decades of life: toward the concerns of common people, rural England, and the working people.

### **Reform Not Revolution: Cobbett and Parliamentary Reform, 1800-1810**

William Cobbett established his legacy in English history as a champion of the rural poor through his radical pamphleteering. Yet, what makes his radicalism unique is a lack of consistency. Upon leaving England the first time, Cobbett criticized the “old establishment” and its corruption in *The Soldier’s Friend*—so, perhaps he was a progressive political figure. But then, Cobbett lived in France and denounced the French Revolution as “accursed” and tyrannical, so perhaps he was a conservative political figure. But then, Cobbett lived in the United States and had to flee for criticism of the established medical practices of U.S. founding father, Benjamin Rush, so perhaps Cobbett was a populist political figure. All of these, it would seem, described the evolution of Cobbett’s politics.

But the deeper thread of Cobbett’s politics became clear upon his homecoming to England in 1800. Cobbett and his family found the English nation in fear of revolution. Between 1776-1821, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, the United Irish Rebellion, and the Spanish Revolution engulfed the Atlantic world. By 1800, England had lost its war in America, encountered insurrection in Ireland, and faced fears of invasion from Napoleon’s France. In this context, Cobbett developed consistency in his journalistic purpose and in his political aims. Though he demonstrated conservatism and progressivism, and though he was frequently charged with revolutionary intent, Cobbett’s initial years in England served to combat fear of revolution with increasing bipartisan commentary—political views which eventually united under Parliamentary Reform.

Never in lockstep with Tory (conservative) or Whig (progressive) politics about Parliamentary Reform, Cobbett's political commentary regarding the reform of Parliament helped illustrate the reasons why his politics were particularly indefinite. The passage of the 1832 Reform Act would occur only three years prior to Cobbett's death and, still, prove to be extremely controversial. In broad terms, Parliament's problem lay in its unequal representation and corruption. Tories felt that changing Parliament was too radical, and Whigs felt that changing Parliament was necessary for a more modern and democratic nation.

Cobbett transcended both these views and was supportive of reform for curbing corruption but not necessarily for extending universal representation. The push for universal suffrage in Parliament would not come until much later in British history (into the 20<sup>th</sup> century), and, despite Cobbett's radical support for the concerns of the common English people, he did not rise to the level of supporting their universal vote. Yet, ultimately, Cobbett's shift in political interest toward the reform (albeit limited reform) of English Parliament was important because it revealed how his radical politics were distinct from those of his more traditionally radical contemporaries, like Paine or Priestley. These figures suggested the extreme solutions of war and revolution for the improvement of the English nation; Cobbett, on the other hand, suggested that the only necessary changes were those which expanded representation or deterred corruption, but generally maintained the traditions and values of the British nation for the sake of the laboring people's welfare. Cobbett's evolving ideas about reform dominated his first ten years back in England and illustrated the continuing importance of the common touch to his political persona.

### **The Evil of Reform: Cobbett's Initial Stance on Reform, 1794-1800**

During his time in America, Cobbett's controversial 1794 attack on the English dissenter, Dr. Joseph Priestley, showed how he initially rejected parliamentary reform. For early Cobbett,



parliamentary reform was unpatriotic: after all, was England not the “mother of parliaments” that bequeathed representative government to the modern world? To Cobbett and many other conservatives, the idea of rebuilding Parliament, an essential prop of British liberty in a revolutionary world, seemed like an inherent rejection of one’s nationality. Further, Cobbett’s view in 1794 was that reform of any kind was inherently dangerous, particularly because of his equating reform to revolution. If reform and revolution were equally dangerous, and Cobbett’s experience in France showed him how the literal cost of revolution burdened and hurt common people the worst, then reform only had promise to hurt the common people, too. He wrote:

The Doctor [Priestley], and his fellow-labourers [...], have been continually bawling out: “A reform of Parliament.” The same visionary delusion seems to have pervaded all reformers in all ages.... They have no calculating principles to direct them to discover whether a reform will cost them more than it is worth or not.... If the reformers in France had sat down to count the cost, I do not believe they were villains enough to have pursued their plan as they did.<sup>47</sup>

Considering this publication was the first controversial piece of writing that Cobbett widely published, his perspective is quite firmly set against parliamentary reform, and reform of any kind, in 1794. While Cobbett clearly saw the failures of the old regime in England, particularly illustrated through publications like *The Soldier’s Friend* or myriad articles in the *Political Register* regarding the failures of Prime Minister Pitt’s government, he was a life-long British patriot who saw reform as a slippery slope that would erode his homeland’s stability and strong history. As Cobbett would remind readers in a later publication: “The people of England have been famed, in all ages, for their *good living*.... The old sayings about English roast beef and plum-pudding, and about English hospitality, had not their foundation in *nothing*. And, in spite of all refinements of sickly minds, it is *abundant living* amongst the people at large, which is the great test of good government, and the

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<sup>47</sup> Cobbett, *Observations on the emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley*, 28-29.

surest basis of national greatness and security.”<sup>48</sup> Simply put, Cobbett believed that if one could alter Parliament, one could, and *would*, also destroy it. In Cobbett’s initial view of reform, its potential propensity for destruction of a nation that offered “abundant living” and “the surest basis of national greatness” was foolish, indeed. Further, writing his observations on Priestley’s emigration to America only a few years after leaving France himself, young Cobbett was aware of the changing loyalties, patriotism, and violence brought about by reform, and how reform easily slid into revolution. Cobbett wrote:

Before the [French] Revolution there were only *two* state prisoners, there are now above *two hundred thousand*. Do these people calculate? Certainly not: They will not take man as they find him, and govern him upon principles established by experience; they will have him to be “a faultless monster that the world ne’er saw,” and wish to govern him according to a system that never was, or can be brought into practice.... Thus it happened in England in the reign of Charles the First; and thus has it happened in France. Some trifling innovation always paves the way to the subversion of a government.... That a parliamentary reform was the handle by which the English revolutionists intended to effect the destruction of the constitution.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, when Cobbett returned to England in 1800, he viewed parliamentary reform as a gateway to revolution, and revolution as both a historical and contemporary tool to destroy the English Constitution. Famously, Britain was the first nation to force their monarch to accept a document limiting his powers as King, the *Magna Carta* in 1215. What Cobbett saw in reform was a more insidious method to achieve the “subversion of a government,” and he believed that supporters of parliamentary reform like Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine served only to oppose the rule of law and undermine the stability of government during a time in western history where the general fear of revolution and government upheaval was strong. He wrote: “It is clear that a parliamentary reform was not the object: an after-game was intended; which the vigilance of government, and the natural good sense of the people, happily prevented; and the Doctor [Priestley], disappointed and

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<sup>48</sup> William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy: to Which is Added The Poor Man’s Friend*, (London: Conner & Cooke, 1833), <https://gutenberg.org/files/32863/32863-h/32863-h.htm>. 7-8.

<sup>49</sup> Cobbett, *Observations on the emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley*, 29-30.

chagrined, is come [to America] to discharge his heart of the venom it has been long collecting against his country [England].”<sup>50</sup> In this instance, Cobbett uses “the good sense of the people” in reference to the 1791 Priestley Riots, when many English citizens violently ousted Priestley and his supporters from England.

### **Slow Change: Cobbett’s Hesitancy in Reform Support, 1806**

But these views on parliamentary reform began to change shortly after his return to England in 1800. Cobbett lived for six years under Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger’s administration, until Pitt’s death in January 1806. The general sentiments against Pitt’s government were that, although Pitt successfully consolidated the powers of his office, he failed to enact the important domestic agenda with which common English people were concerned. Unresolved issues such as Catholic Emancipation, abolition of the slave trade, and, of course, parliamentary reform, plagued the Pitt administration and upset the common English people who were unsatisfied with lack of domestic progress. It did not help the government that the primary demands of those who supported reform were to improve representation and target corruption. If Parliament could change to govern with more democratic practices, supporters of reform felt that Parliament could make right the failures of Pitt’s government and truly improve England’s welfare. Following Pitt’s death, Cobbett published an article in the March 15, 1806 *Political Register* that demonstrated how, though he was still convinced reform would not sufficiently aid the English people, there were nevertheless desirable elements to the reform agenda if England could ever free itself from corruption and prevent revolution. Cobbett wrote:

Of what has been denominated *Parliamentary Reform*, I have always disapproved; because I never could perceive, in any one of the projects that were broached, the least prospect of producing a *real reform*.... I should be glad to hear the reasons...[that] the evil of leaving the making of laws in the hands of men of mere money, who have little or no connection

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 31.

with or feeling for the people...is to be gotten rid of. To me, it appears, that, while the present means of acquiring such immense fortunes, at the expense of the people, remain, there can be found out no effectual cure for this evil. I cannot, with the above facts before my eyes, perceive any ground for hoping that any practical good would, while the funding system exists in its present extent, result from the adoption of any of these projects, which have professed to have in view what is called *Parliamentary Reform*.<sup>51</sup>

Cobbett's perspective in 1806 did not yet show his support for Parliamentary Reform; however, it did mark the point in his politics when his view of reform began to slowly change. The difference in Cobbett's tone suggested that he no longer dismissed the idea of parliamentary reform because he saw that many common English people were talking about reform and wanted real change. Twelve years earlier, Cobbett had seen parliamentary reform as a destructive tool for subversion and revolution; now, in 1806, Cobbett rejected parliamentary reform only on the grounds that Pitt's government was too corrupt for proper reform to be effective. Cobbett even admits that he has "always disapproved" of reform since he could not yet see "real reform" that avoided even further corruption or harm to the people of England. In essence, Cobbett concluded in 1806 that reform, far from being a "visionary delusion" or "trifling innovation," was a series of projects that could not bring practical good because corruption "in its present extent" was too rampant.

In Cobbett's years in England, a reference that his readers would have been very familiar with was his mention of "the funding system" in "its present extent." In addition to characterizing Cobbett's more populist side of radical politics, the "funding system" or "the THING," as many conservative writers in England called it at the time, was a reference to a politically charged notion that the financial system corrupted the government. In Cobbett's later financial writings, such as *Paper Against Gold* in 1815, he criticized a government that seemed to expand on the basis of credit, which, for Cobbett, was a dishonest way to prop-up one's finances. In his chapter, "Beyond

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<sup>51</sup> William Cobbett, *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, Vol. IX, No. 11, March 15, 1806, , [https://archive.org/details/sim\\_cobbetts-weekly-political-register\\_1806-03-15\\_9\\_11/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/sim_cobbetts-weekly-political-register_1806-03-15_9_11/mode/1up).

Left and Right: A Cobbett for Our Times,” historical sociologist Craig Calhoun succinctly wrote, “It was false patriotism, Cobbett suggested, that would imagine expansion produced by debt to be a real form of national strength.”<sup>52</sup> For Cobbett, reform was a nice ideal that, at the moment, could not occur in the midst of financial corruption. It was later that Cobbett would conclude that government reform must occur *because of* government corruption.

### **Honiton Election: Cobbett’s Incentive to Support Reform, 1806-1810**

As England’s government went through unexpected changes following the death of Prime Minister Pitt, Cobbett took interest in getting involved with Parliament by running for office in Honiton, Devon, England, in the summer of 1806. At the time, Honiton held only about 400 electors, with many of them being quite poor.<sup>53</sup> Open bribery in elections was commonplace in the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century English system, and the 1806 election was no different from the rest. Cobbett’s opponent, Mr. Cavendish Bradshaw, was seeking re-election in what Cobbett deemed to be the continuation of Pitt’s corrupt government administration. Where Bradshaw was willing to play the role of bribing politician, Cobbett publicly denounced bribes and declared his campaign would not accept such corruptions. In his *Political Register* of June 7, 1806, Cobbett began his front-page article, “To the Electors of Honiton,” with a quote from the book of Job: “‘Fire shall consume the tabernacles of bribery.’ -Job. Cap. xv.”<sup>54</sup> The article went on to criticize politicians who accepted bribes (especially Cobbett’s opponent, Bradshaw), and ended by

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<sup>52</sup> Craig Calhoun, “Beyond Left and Right: A Cobbett for Our Times,” in *William Cobbett: Romanticism and the Enlightenment: Contexts and Legacy*, ed. James Grande and John Stevenson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 157-171, 167.

<sup>53</sup> Grande and Stevenson, *The Opinions of William Cobbett*, 63.

<sup>54</sup> William Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*, Vol. IX, No. 23, June 07, 1806, , [https://archive.org/details/sim\\_cobbetts-weekly-political-register\\_1806-06-07\\_9\\_23/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/sim_cobbetts-weekly-political-register_1806-06-07_9_23/mode/1up).

suggesting that politicians sneer at their “bribed and perjured constituents, as Satan is said to have sneered at the reprobate with whom he had bargained for his soul...”<sup>55</sup>

Cobbett’s call to moral action, despite its vigor, ultimately failed to win him the seat in Honiton; however, the election outcome was significant for what it changed within Cobbett. Of course, bitterness may have gotten the best of Cobbett for a time after the election, becoming angry with election fraud and, once again, condemning the practice of bribery in elections. But it was the nature of the election’s bribing with the few hundred voters in Honiton that would actually alter Cobbett’s perspective on parliamentary reform, and further, also alter his politics from a largely conservative radical political writer to a much more mixed and even progressive radical.

Following the Honiton election, Cobbett noticed that the men who accepted bribes for their vote were so accustomed to such corruption, that they actually *relied* on the bribes and insisted that they could not survive without the money.<sup>56</sup> Now Cobbett was interested, not because he wanted to further contest the election, but because the state of corruption left these common Englishmen no choice but to concede their voice in politics for financial survival. In a subsequent *Political Register*, Cobbett wrote:

[The bribed constituents] tell you, flatly and plainly, that the money, which they obtain for their votes, is absolutely necessary to enable them to live; that, without it, they could not *pay their rents*; and that, from election to election, the poor men run up scores at the shops, and are trusted by the shop-keepers, *expressly upon the credit of the proceeds of the ensuing election*; and that, thus, the whole of the inhabitants of the borough, the whole of the persons who return two of the members to every parliament, are bound together in an indissoluble chain of venality!<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Grande and Stevenson, *The Opinions of William Cobbett*, 65.

<sup>57</sup> William Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*, Vol. IX, No. 26, June 28, 1806, [https://archive.org/details/sim\\_cobbetts-weekly-political-register\\_1806-06-28\\_9\\_26/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/sim_cobbetts-weekly-political-register_1806-06-28_9_26/mode/1up).

After this election, Cobbett saw how reform to ameliorate exploitation of the working people and common man was not only the solution to the nation's bribery and election ills, but reform was also a tool that might get the concerns of poor English people into government law.

Cobbett's experience in this election crucially informed his changing stance on support for reform. For his entire life, Cobbett opposed the extreme revolutionary ideas of his contemporary English radical writers. However, Cobbett's evolutionary brand of radicalism maintained that government must consider the voice of common people and that the method for effective consideration should rely on true reform and not revolution. Cobbett's later publication, *The Poor Man's Friend* (1829), and his later rebranding of the *Political Register* as "Politics for the Poor" in 1830, suggested that Cobbett did steer his life and purpose toward a focused action: advocating for the common man's perspective in reforming Parliament.

The forces of observing revolution and its fallout among the poor and working people of France, the United States, and seeing corruption and lack of reform in Great Britain, grew Cobbett's radicalism to stand apart in his lifetime. Cobbett's radicalism ultimately sought to force his government to respond to concerns of those with little money, status, or influence, through effective reform of Parliament, whose lack of reform was responsible for the "true cause" of English suffering. In a comment on Cobbett's reform writing becoming so popular with working English, a contemporary radical writer in England, Samuel Bamford, wrote in 1816:

At this time...the writings of William Cobbett suddenly became of great authority; they were read on nearly every cottage hearth in the manufacturing districts of South Lancashire, in those of Leicester, Derby, and Nottingham; also in many of the Scottish manufacturing towns. Their influence was speedily visible. He directed his readers to the true cause of their sufferings—misgovernment; and to its proper corrective—parliamentary reform.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Qtd. in Cole, *Life of William Cobbett*, 211.

As Bamford demonstrated, Cobbett had found a way to appeal to the working people whose labor had made Britain great, but whose voices the people in a rapidly industrializing nation had yet to hear.

## **Conclusion**

And so, we leave William Cobbett on the cusp of his true fame, when he became the champion of reform and of the urban and rural poor. His radicalism would get him into trouble, again and again, as it had done before; he was charged with seditious libel throughout his adult life and even thrown into prison from 1810-1812. But his radicalism would also set up his later career. What this thesis has shown is how the Cobbett most people know—the Cobbett of *Rural Rides* (1830) and Parliamentary Reform—was himself the product of two decades of traveling, living, and writing in the revolutionary Atlantic world. A keen reactionary radical, Cobbett evolved with a foundation that was unwavering compassion for the circumstances, experience, and plight of working people. As Cobbett saw the condition and circumstances of the working people change in his life, he observed, he learned, and he especially changed his political shape and radical perspective. In essence, Cobbett was brought to radicalism in his politics as a life-long learner of laboring people's concerns.

There are always men enough to plead the cause of the rich; enough and enough to echo the woes of the fallen great; but, be it your part to show compassion for those who labour, and to maintain *their rights*. Poverty is not *a crime*, and, though it sometimes arises from faults, it is not, even in that case, to be visited by punishment beyond that which it brings with itself.<sup>59</sup>

This quote exemplifies the critical character trait that made Cobbett significant: “compassion for those who labour.” Though an imperfect man and historical figure, as all humans are, William

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<sup>59</sup> Cobbett's *Advice to Young Men, And (Incidentally) to Young Women, in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life* (London: Self-Published, 1829), 342, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15510/15510-h/15510-h.htm>.



Cobbett's uniquely radical politics shaped the identity of British working people and would go on to inform the development of a working class, and their concerns, as the western world embraced the Industrial Revolution.

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