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## WILLIAM COBBETT: CHAMPION OF FREEDOM

BY C. REXFORD DAVIS

C. REXFORD DAVIS, *Professor of English at Rutgers, has long had a particular admiration for Cobbett because of the tremendous vigor of this very practical man who had a lifelong interest in human freedom.*

TO MOST AMERICANS who recognize his name William Cobbett is known only as the author of *Rural Rides*, generally though quite erroneously reputed to be essays treating scenes of nature and conditions of farming in a large number of the counties of England. (Those who have read it through know that it deals chiefly with economic problems.) Some know him also as the author of *A Grammar of the English Language*, still a remarkably useful text. (Cobbett himself had never in his whole life attended school for a single day, nor had he ever received a single hour's tutoring.) But this reputation is not that of his own day. The English people of the first third of the nineteenth century knew him exceedingly well for far different reasons. They recognized in him their chief champion of parliamentary reform, the chief spokesman for the workers of England.

Moreover, in William Cobbett the Englishmen of his day found the staunchest supporter of two great freedoms for which we today have the highest regard: freedom of the press and freedom of person. (By "freedom of person," Cobbett's term, he meant the right of the writ of *habeas corpus*, which operates to prevent the imprisonment of any person without due process of law.) In behalf of the freedom of the press Cobbett served time in jail and lost a fortune. In behalf of the freedom of person he fled England in March, 1817, that fighting with his pen from across the sea he might destroy the



WILLIAM COBBETT

*From an engraving by Edward Smith  
Engraved after a drawing taken on board the Imposter, on her departure from  
Liverpool to America, March 27—1817*

tyranny of the despotic ministry, a ministry which had by enactment of Parliament suspended the right of *habeas corpus* in time of peace and when the country was endangered by no threat of war.

If it is this Cobbett who is most important to the history of England—and to the history of freedom in English-speaking lands—the letter by his hand recently acquired by the Library and transcribed below is a document of real importance, for it adds not only to the biography of this redoubtable warrior but to the story of the ever-recurring struggle for human freedom. It was written only thirty-two days after he had landed in New York, a fugitive from what he felt to be inevitable imprisonment without charges and without trial.

Good reason had Cobbett to fear an arrest from which he could not gain freedom. Seven years before, in 1810, he had felt the government's power. He had written and published a slashing attack on the suppression by German mercenaries of a "mutiny" of local English militia at Ely in June, 1809. The militiamen, recently mustered in, had been entitled to a guinea each as mustering-in pay. Their officers had pocketed the sum, and the men rioted, demanding payment. The German Legion, then encamped in the vicinity, was summoned; the riots were put down without bloodshed. BUT the five ringleaders of the rioting were sentenced by courts-martial to five hundred lashes each in the presence of the troops. Part of this punishment was indeed remitted, on the spot, simply because the victims fell unconscious early in the scourging, and their deaths, not intended, might otherwise have ensued.

When the news of the whippings appeared in the *Courier* (a government paper) on Saturday, June 24, 1809, Cobbett could not restrain himself. He had ever been the implacable foe of injustice and tyranny. Now in his *Political Register* he lashed out at the government in bitter scorn. These were the men, he cried, who accused Napoleon of sending the French into the army in manacles. How much more vile the English government, which used foreign mercenaries to scourge English citizens!

These accusations, true though they were, stung the government to action. Cobbett was tried. Foolishly acting as his own counsel, for he felt that the facts established clear vindication, he met his Waterloo at the hands of a prejudiced judge, who charged the jury to find him guilty of criminal libel against the King's government. They did so without leaving the jury box. Cobbett was later sentenced to two

years in Newgate Prison, fined £1,000, and forced at his release to post £1,000 security for his good behavior for seven years. He must also find two men who would each post bond in a like amount for his good behavior. The period for which these bonds were drawn did not expire before July 5, 1819.

Not dismayed by this defeat, Cobbett continued to write on political questions. However, because of the sword of Damocles that hung over his head, he dared not publish his *Register* longer, though he continued to write it. This meant that henceforth he had to give up the greater part of the profits to other men. But he continued to write. Early in his life, during his first days as a pamphleteer in Philadelphia in the 1790's, he had been nicknamed "Peter Porcupine" for the sharpness of his barbs. Immediately he adopted this as his pen name. After his return to England in 1800 he no longer used the name, but his barbs stung as sharply as ever. But from his conviction in 1810 he became more circumspect and prudent in his utterance.

However, in 1814 the great peace was made and with it began a most severe depression of English economic life, so that by 1817 there was extreme distress and misery among the people on all sides. Riots and other civil disturbances sprang up all over England, with such increasing frequency that the government began to dread a French Revolution in the tight little island. For these disturbances many in the government felt that Cobbett was mainly responsible. It was high time, they decided, that he was silenced.

Actually Cobbett in his *Register*, which he had founded in 1804, urged his readers not to riot but to hold open meetings and to draw up petitions to the Parliament. His appeal had great effect from the time that his two-penny *Register* began publication in November of 1816. Riots became far fewer and less severe. Petitions began to multiply. Indeed, "petitions came to the Parliament early in 1817 from a *million and a half of men.*"<sup>1</sup> When we remember that the total population of England and Wales at the time did not number twelve million persons, this is an extraordinary figure and is itself the strongest evidence of Cobbett's prestige among the people. But it is to be stressed that Cobbett's immense influence was thrown on the side of parliamentary reform and against all violent measures whatsoever.

In the end the government itself precipitated the issue, without

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Cobbett* (London, 1913), II, 79.

intending to do so. In 1816, desperately seeking increased revenue, it had placed a very heavy Stamp Duty on all periodicals selling for over two pence. This tax had forced Cobbett to increase the price of the regular edition of the *Political Register* to one shilling. This increase cut sharply the sale of this and of his other periodical publications, causing him acute financial distress. But the tax also caused him to try a new experiment, the printing of a cheap tax-free two-penny edition of the *Register*. Formerly, poor people had clubbed together to buy the more expensive edition. They no longer needed to do so. Shortly after the appearance of the first two-penny issue (Nov. 2, 1816) the circulation of this cheap edition rose to between forty-five and fifty thousand copies, an unheard-of figure for those days.

The almost immediate result was the gaining for Cobbett of a tremendous popular following. He now was the man whom the ministry feared. By every method known to the journalism of the day they sought to destroy his influence. But his single pen was mightier far than the combined pens of the most skillful and best paid government writers. Government then sought to catch him out by submitting his writings to the law officers, but the latter could find nothing in them to prosecute. So admitted Lord Sidmouth in Parliament in a speech of February 24, 1817,<sup>2</sup> when pressing for enactment of the act suspending the Habeas Corpus Act. The act was passed on March 3, 1817, to remain in effect until the following July. (This suspension was renewed twice, so that it remained in effect until the year 1819.)

The government made no immediate move to arrest Cobbett. It seems as if they were waiting to see whether he got the hint. He did. He made his plans quickly and silently, comports himself in public quite as usual. Secretly he left London for Liverpool on March 22, taking ship thence for New York on March 27.

When in his letter Cobbett speaks of carrying on the fight, he is referring partly to his continual struggle for parliamentary reform, a struggle which he had carried on since the first issue of the *Political Register* in 1804, and which he continued to wage until his death in 1832. But he is also referring to a new struggle, the fight against governmental despotism.

The first shot in the new battle was fired in the July 26 issue of the *Register*. The captions<sup>3</sup> of this issue read:

<sup>2</sup> See Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, XXXV (February 24, 1817), 554.

<sup>3</sup> *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, XXXII (July 26, 1817), col. 513.

A HISTORY  
OF  
THE LAST HUNDRED DAYS OF  
ENGLISH FREEDOM,

*Ending with the passing of the Absolute-Power-of-Imprisonment Act, in the Month of March, 1817,*

ADDRESSED TO

MR. JOHN GOLDSMITH OF HAMBLEDON, AND MR. RICHARD HINXMAN, OF CHILLING,

WHO WERE

*The Chairman and Secunder at the Meeting of the People of Hampshire on Portsdown Hill, in the Month of February 1817, to petition for a Redress of Grievances, and for a Reform in the Commons House of Parliament.*

This history Cobbett published in the form of three letters, each of which occupied a separate number of the *Register*. It is not proposed to give an analysis of the history here. But it is not amiss to quote from the first letter Cobbett's words about that act of Parliament which caused him to flee England and to live in exile for over two years and a half:

. . . Acts passed by this same House of Commons . . . have taken from the people all liberty of the press, all liberty of speech, and all the safety which the law gave to their very persons.<sup>4</sup>

Cobbett emphasizes that

the Absolute-power-of-imprisonment Act does not call itself *an Act to Suspend the Act of Habeas Corpus*. . . They call it an Act to "empower *His Majesty* to imprison any persons that *he* may *suspect* to be guilty of treason, or treasonable practices." . . .

It is clear, then, that . . . by this one act, *all* the fundamental laws of the land are effectually put an end to, seeing that it places every one's person at the absolute disposal of the Ministers. . . .<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 515.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 517.

When the act was not renewed in 1819, Cobbett began making plans for his return to England, where he landed (at Liverpool) on November 22, 1819, after an absence of two years, seven months, and twenty-five days. He never left England again. But he did not desert the cause of parliamentary reform, nor did he abate his efforts to improve the lot of the lower classes. So long as he drew breath, he persisted in his efforts.

A few words should be devoted to other matters touched on in this letter. Cobbett, born and bred on a farm rented by his father at Farnham in Surrey, was ever a farmer at heart and throughout his very active life devoted a considerable share of his tremendous energies to improving agriculture and the lot of the farmer. (Another letter by his hand just purchased by the Library, and bearing more closely upon agricultural matters, will be discussed in an early issue of the *Journal*.) His taking of Hyde Park Farm (located near North Hempstead, Long Island) may be seen not only as a thrifty plan but as a desire to operate in America a farm resembling his equally extensive, though much more pretentious estate of Botley, five miles from Southampton.

The letter transcribed below, written in a small neat hand, covers five crowded quarto pages; how crowded will appear from its length. Every effort has been made to save space. On the first four pages there are no paragraph indentations, the several paragraphs being indicated by long dashes. In the transcription which follows, these dashes are omitted and the paragraphs are indicated as Cobbett himself would have put them in type. On the fifth page the formal close and signature are crowded at the bottom. Here again they are reproduced as Cobbett would have had them.

The address on the outside of the fifth sheet, there dated 7 June 1817, follows:

To

Mr. William Jackson,  
at Mrs. Lee's, No. 6 East Herding Street,  
Gough Square,  
London.

This was Jackson's residence. We know that in the year 1817 and the first six months of 1818 Jackson published *Cobbett's Weekly*

*Political Register*, but the bibliographies do not record that he published any other of Cobbett's works. In 1816 the *Register* was published by William Cobbett Jun., and in August, 1818, Thomas Dolby began a brief career as its publisher. We may speculate that Cobbett was dissatisfied with the financial returns which came to him from Jackson. A quarrel no doubt ensued, but we have no record in present biographies. At any rate, sanguine and trusting by nature, Cobbett required no security from any avowed friend, but at the same time he unreasonably expected that friend to produce results that only he himself, with his unbounded energy, might have secured. The present letter is evidence of his trust in Jackson. The early severance of their connection is evidence of his disappointment. But it is time for the letter itself to speak:

Hyde Park, Long Island, State of  
New York. 7. June 1817

My Dear Sir,

Your letter of the *8th of April* (which is the only one I have yet had the pleasure to receive from you) gave me very great satisfaction, in many respects: first, that it proved to me that my leave-taking Address had been published; Second, that the printers and publishers had behaved well in the matter; and, above all, that you were determined to proceed in publishing my future pamphlets.

The other parts of your letter, relating to Parliamentary Debates<sup>6</sup> and other inferior matters I perfectly agree in the opinions which you there express.

My first American pamphlet,<sup>7</sup> was sent you, under cover to a friend about a fortnight ago, by the *Euphrates*. A printed copy of it I enclose you now, along with the manuscript of the *second*, which is a thumping letter to our old friend Sidmouth.

This letter to Sidmouth was published yesterday at New York, and, upon second thoughts I will send you the printed copy with a small post-script which I will add here before I have done this letter.

You will easily conceive how I have been pressed for time. It is

<sup>6</sup> *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates* he had edited from his founding of the project in 1804 through the publication of Vol. XXI in 1812. Since then they had been edited by his erstwhile partner John Wright, with whom he had quarreled after discovering that Wright had cheated him out of thousands of pounds. Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 64-68.

<sup>7</sup> The bibliographies of Cobbett list nothing recognizable as this pamphlet nor as the letter to Sidmouth. I have been unable so far to trace either, although they certainly must have been published at New York.



not but two days over one month since we landed at New-York. We have, in that time, got into a country House, eighteen miles from that city; we have taken the place for a year; we have broke up the foundation of a large garden gone wholly into ruins. We have cleaned it and sowed it from one end to the other; and all that I wish in the respect of that garden is, that my beloved family, my Lord,<sup>8</sup> Hinxman,<sup>9</sup> Walker<sup>10</sup> and you, might be here to taste some of the melons that will grow in it.

We have got goods into the House, and we have slept in it three nights, though it has been deserted and haunted for years. We have two yoke of oxen at plough, under the hands of an Englishman and a Scotchman. In short, a month of such industry and bustle even I never passed before in all my life. Therefore, it is not to be wondered at that I have not been able, this time to get of [*sic*] the manuscript [*sic*] to England before it was published at New York. But, here we are now seated in a very nice room, looking out before the most beautiful avenues of trees that ever were seen. We have nothing to disturb us, and nothing to apprehend. Our whole time will now be devoted to the cause, and I will not doubt, ~~but~~ that we shall be mainly instrumental in producing success to that cause. I shall now get forward with Registers in manuscript, and hasten them away to you by every channel that appears to me likely to be successful. So that I will take care that four Registers<sup>11</sup> shall be gone off to you at the moment that the first of the four shall have been published at New-York. I am aware that the distance, by producing a lapse of time, will diminish the interest of these publications; but, on the other hand, the whole will consist of original matter; and that mat-

<sup>8</sup> Lord Cochrane, who in 1831 became Earl of Dundonald but who at this time was a naval-post captain. He was ever one of the staunchest of Cobbett's supporters and one of the most feared Radicals of the time. We have records of his visiting Cobbett in Newgate. Later the visiting was reversed, for he, like Cobbett, suffered for his presumption in powerfully opposing Lord Castlereagh's government. In 1814 he was tried on what he claimed to be a trumped-up charge, found guilty, and sentenced to an hour in the pillory, a year's imprisonment, and a fine of a thousand pounds. In his later career he was a famous soldier of fortune, serving with great distinction the infant nations of Chile, Brazil, and latter-day Greece in succession. Only in 1832, however, did he win the right to return to England with honor.

<sup>9</sup> See the captions on page 5.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Walker, one of the two men who became guarantors for Cobbett's good behavior after his release from Newgate Prison in July, 1812. He then became liable in the amount of £1,000 for any breaches of good behavior by Cobbett. The other guarantor was one Timothy Brown, of Peckham Lodge, Surrey.

<sup>11</sup> These were Nos. 15-18 (July 12, 19, and 26, and August 2, 1817). The number previous to these was No. 14, the issue of April 5, 1817, published after Cobbett's departure for America.

ter put upon paper, too, with all the boldness, which a perfect consciousness of perfect safety, as well as a consciousness of integrity of intention and soundness of reason can give.

As to a *division of the profits*, it is an object with me, because money is absolutely [*sic*] necessary to my family. But my dear Sir, having confided to you implicitly implicitly [*sic*] my writings and my reputation as a writer, I can surely have no hesitation [*sic*] in relying implicitly upon your honour as to all matters connected with money.

I intend, in the course of a very few months, to forward to you the manuscript of a little book to be entitled "*Information and Advice to persons emigrating from England to America.*"<sup>12</sup> This I intend to be of a size to sell for about half-a-crown. If I find that the villains, either through Mr. Tippers<sup>13</sup> means or any other means, have suppressed the sale and circulation of "*Paper Against Gold,*"<sup>14</sup> I will dress up a small book which shall wholly supply its place, to sell, also, for about half a crown. The copyrights of these also I shall leave for you to take out as your own in the same manner as you do that of the weekly sheets.

As to upon what principle these are to be published, and how the proceeds are to be applied, those will be matters to be settled hereafter, and, probably, my son will have to send something to Mr. Clement,<sup>15</sup> which shall compensate him for any arrears that may be due from my son to him.

The state of the case is this. As to any profits from *publications in America*, they are too precarious to be at all *relied upon*. Something *may be* produced by them; but, as nothing will satisfy the people here short of an abandonment of England; short of a reprobation of the country and the people as well as of the *government of England*,

<sup>12</sup> Not published until 1829, and then in London by Cobbett under the title *The Emigrant's Guide*.

<sup>13</sup> Wm. Tipper, a printer, one of Cobbett's creditors at this date, as he later acknowledged. At this time he seems to have suspected everyone who had any action, justified or not, against him or impending against him.

<sup>14</sup> Originally printed in part as numbers of the *Register*, which he continued to write during his years in Newgate. Later he expanded the material from the *Register* and printed it under the title *Paper Against Gold and Glory Against Prosperity*. In two volumes, it was advertised to sell for "20s in Paper-money." The work was not suppressed. In 1830 Cobbett was advertising it to sell for 5s. "One hundred and fifty thousand copies of the *Paper Against Gold* were sold by July 12, 1817." Melville's note, *op. cit.*, II, 89.

<sup>15</sup> According to Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 144, one W. I. Clements had been publisher of the *Register*. This must have been in 1816—no other date fits all the facts—when the *advertised* publisher was William Cobbett, Jun.

my writings will never be very popular, here, and that I was so well assured of before hand, that I told my friends at Liverpool that this would be the case. They thought the contrary; but, they had no idea that my determination was so fixed as it was and as it is, never, upon any account whatsoever, to separate [*sic*] my character and my fate from the character and fate of my countrymen, whom I do like better, and whom I will always say that I like better than any other people in the world. They certainly are less kind than the people in this country are. They have numerous faults [*sic*], which the people here have not. But dog likes dog better than dog likes deer or sheep. At any rate, I am determined to stick fast, and no man shall ever say of me that I turn my back upon my country, or that I wish to shift from me any part of the evil that fairly belongs to the place of my birth.

This feeling, however, will have the effect, as to a want of great popularity which I have above described. Some people will say, that I am an obstinate, hardened Englishman. But, none of them shall ever say, that I flattered foreigners at the expence of my own country for the sake of popularity or of gain.

I shall stand in need, in the space of one twelvemonth from this time, of about three thousand pounds sterling, from England. I know well what I can do with that. If I had that sum now in my pocket, I could say to my family, come, and here you may be, all with the certain prospect of good fortunes without my ever writing another line as long as I live. The place that I am now living at contains 400 acres of land, 50 acres of woods, another 50 of fine pasture. There are about 400 apple, pear and cherry trees; a large and good garden; a spacious house, easily put into excellent repair; spacious and good out-buildings; and all this to be sold for 10,000 dollars. I have stocked it already, and have got a tolerable deal of furniture in the house, besides having lived at an Inn for a month, with my 2,000 dollars that I brought out with me.<sup>16</sup> For, when I said that I brought nothing with me but my family, did the bloody thieves [*sic*] suppose

<sup>16</sup> Cobbett's enemies accused him of fleeing the country to escape his creditors, whom he was said to owe £32,650. The real sum was £12,650, the balance being represented by a mortgage on his estate at Botley and thus amply secured. Nevertheless he did sail secretly lest his creditors cause his arrest and thus deliver him into the hands of the government, by whom he expected arrest shortly. He had ample resources to meet all debts, but he could not stay for liquidation of the assets. Indeed, the \$2,000 which he here says he brought out of England was the proceeds of the £500 which he borrowed from Thomas Hulme, "whom he repaid out of the profits of his books." See Melville, *op. cit.*, II, ch. xv, *passim*.

that I meant to cast myself upon the shore without the means of buying a supper, when I left behind me property to the amount of fifty thousand pounds? Any other man than me would have spent the two thousand dollars before he would have been able to invent the means of gaining one single penny. And this would have been the case with me if I had not instantly quitted New York, and resolved to go to live where nobody else would think of being. When my writings were bringing in ten thousand pounds a year, was it too much to get a thousand pounds upon the copy-rights of those writings which were worth twenty thousand pounds. For myself, beggary was nothing; but was my numerous family to be beggars too, in consequence of those execrable laws, which by an expose-facto [*sic*] operation stript me of my means? The idea is so unjust and so wicked as to be entertained by nobody but a Boroughmonger,<sup>17</sup> or by some thief<sup>17</sup> [*sic*] who lives upon the taxes. My answer to every one who talks about debts or about any failure in any pecuniary engagement, on my part, is, that despotism suddenly introduced into the country, took from me ten thousand pounds sterling a year, and took from me copyrights, which, had it not been for that despotism, would, in the space of five or six years, have brought to my family thirty or forty thousand pounds.<sup>18</sup> However, that is swept away, for the present; and I must think now about a decent provision for my family, while I and my sons are labouring for the restoration of the liberties of my country, I cannot here enter into the detail to show you how that decent provision is to come out of so small a sum as three thousand pounds sterling, but I know the fact; and If I can accomplish that object, and thereby set my mind at rest as to my family, I shall then have nothing before me but the great object of destroying the despotism. One of two things *must* happen: the despotism will cease, or it will not. If it does not cease within a few years, or if it relaxes its grasp; that is to say, if there be any thing like freedom of the press and safety of the person restored, then my writings re-assume their unbounded range. In short, I can take no possible view of the mat-

<sup>17</sup> Cobbett's principal target in his campaign for parliamentary reform had been the borough-mongers, proprietors of "rotten" boroughs, who sold seats in Parliament. The "thief" he refers to is the do-nothing who lives upon the inherited right to levy some local tax from which he alone profits. He had been campaigning for the abolition of these taxes.

<sup>18</sup> Cobbett was forced, while in Newgate, to liquidate many valuable copyrights which he could not exploit from prison. He was forced also to give up publishing, with all the profits which he had been making from it. His income now came as author only, in England.

ter which does not convince me that I have taken the only possible step which could have been taken, consistant [*sic*] with prudence as well as with patriotism.

I have now given you as clear a statement as time will permit me of all my intentions and my views. Every thing that I send for publication, I leave you to alter, to correct (for they will stand in need of it sometimes), and, in short, to manage at your discretion. I, who write here in safty [*sic*], ought not to wish you to put yourself in continual jeopardy. You will, therefore, alter and correct according to your own taste and judgement. I am sure I never shall be guilty of any act which a true Englishman and a faithful subject of the king ought to be ashamed of; and, I am also sure that I shall write nothing which the laws of England, as they stood in January last would not fully authorize any one to print and publish. I hold all the recent laws to be nugatory. In fact, they are not laws, for no act of Parliament is a law, if it be contrary to the fundamental laws of the land, and this is a doctrine held by all the great men who have written upon the laws of England.

The *little books*<sup>19</sup> which I shall send to have published will be of a nature not to come within the superintending grab of the despotism, unless it establishes its censorship at once. They will probably have a very considerable sale; and, in the mean while I shall be going on with the Register, which will produce one of two effects. It will drive the despotism to deeds of desperation, or, it will take its course through the country. I do not know which of the two is to be preferred. If, before they seperate [*sic*], they pass some Act, which shall totally and entirely prevent the sale or distribution [*sic*] of my writings, the effect will be a monstrous increase of desire to see them, and we will find out some means of printing here and sending thither, that shall alarm the despots exceedingly. In short, the course shall stick to them in one way or another as long as I live, unless they do the people justice, and if they do that I need take no care about fortune. I am afraid I have tired you, and have only to add that I remain

Your sincere friend

Wm Cobbett.

<sup>19</sup> Apparently none were forthcoming, for the bibliographies record no London publications after April, 1817, and before Cobbett's return to England.