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COBBETT AND GILLRAY

BY C. REXFORD DAVIS

C. REXFORD DAVIS, *Professor of English at Rutgers*, has been gathering material for a bibliography of William Cobbett. While scouting for Cobbett material for the Library he found a unique set of colored caricatures of Cobbett by the artist Gillray, which he here describes.

WITHIN the last few months the Library has acquired the series of hand-colored plates entitled *The Life of William Cobbett by Himself*, executed by the great English political caricaturist John Gillray, and published at London September 29, 1809, by H. Humphrey.

The set of these plates acquired by the Library has a special significance because it comprises nine plates, not the usual eight, which are described in the bibliography of Gillray's caricatures¹ (though not in any bibliography of William Cobbett).² The usual eight plates have been reproduced in three places: in black and white (without

¹ Thomas Wright and R. H. Evans, *Historical and Descriptive Account of the Caricatures of James Gillray*. London, 1851.

² It is somewhat surprising to note the omission of these caricatures from M. L. Pearl's *William Cobbett: A Bibliographical Account of his Life and Times* (London, 1953). This work lists a considerable number of anti-Cobbett publications, but not this one. Pearl knew of the caricatures, for he says (p. 33): "Gillray chose texts from the *Life* [This is Cobbett's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine . . .* (Philadelphia, 1796).] to illustrate a series of caricatures in this way. (For reproductions see **Advice to Young Men*, 1930 edition . . .)." The only list which includes Gillray's work is to be found in William Reitzel's notes to Chapter VIII of his *The Progress of a Ploughboy to a Seat in Parliament as Exemplified in the History of the Life of William Cobbett . . .* (London, 1933). Here are listed: "Caricatures by James Gillray, published throughout the year 1809." As will appear, the eight caricatures dealt with in this article were all published by H. Humphrey on September 29, 1809. Caricatures of Cobbett did appear during this year, but Gillray's bibliographical account lists only two additional and in each of these Cobbett is only an incidental, not a main, target. These are No. 355 (May 16, 1809) and No. 357 (June 14, 1809). It is therefore something of an overstatement to say that Gillray's caricatures of Cobbett were published throughout the year.



The Life of WILLIAM-COBBETT, written by himself.
 Such and such a day in 1794 by R. B. ...

LETTERPRESS SHOWING VARIANT VERSION UNDER PLATE 7 OF GILLRAY'S
 CARICATURES OF WILLIAM COBBETT

letterpress) in Carlyle's biography; in black and white (with transcription of letterpress) in Melville's biography; in color (with photographic reproduction of letterpress on separate pages) in the 1930 edition of Cobbett's *Advice to Young Men*.³

The ninth plate in the Library's set is a different edition of Plate 7. The caricature of this plate is reproduced opposite page 1, and the letterpress opposite page 4.

It would at first appear that there are three differences between the two editions of Plate 7: (1) the state of the coloring, (2) the overall size of the impressed sheet, and (3) the letterpress.⁴ The state of the coloring, however, is not due to a difference of editions, as a comparison of several copies shows. It may be that on any given day the colorists made all copies alike as to color, but it is likely that mixing fresh batches of color, or other adventitious occurrences, produced variant colors. Moreover, the examination of the several copies of Plate 7 available shows that the colorists either were careless or did not agree among themselves as to color.

Beyond this, it is probable that the colors of some copies have altered with the passage of time. The reds, particularly, have been oxidized in some copies, whereas others are nearly as bright and fresh as they were when new. The brightest copies have probably not been exposed to light very often in the last 146 years; the others show the darkening of reds, and other changes, caused by oxidation of the pigments used. Thus, we can hardly impute differences of present color to a deliberate primary differentiation between editions.

Nor can the difference between the two editions be determined by the size of sheets. Most copies of both plates have undergone some trimming. Fortunately, however, most of the plates possessed by the Library have not been trimmed, so that it is possible to establish the fact that all plates were originally printed on sheets measuring, within 1 mm or so, 48.8 x 30.6 cm. The Plate 7 with the longer

³ See E. I. Carlyle, *William Cobbett* (London, 1904); Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Cobbett in England and America*, 2 vols. (London, 1913); William Cobbett, *Advice to Young Men*, ed. Earl E. Fisk (London, 1930).

⁴ These prints, of course, were produced in stages. Gillray drew the originals and etched the caricatures. Some other hand probably etched the letterpress. At any rate two copper plates were used for each print, for all prints show the pressure lines for two copper plates, a larger one above, for the drawing, and a smaller one below, for the letterpress. The presswork produced black and white copies, after which other hands colored the several drawings.

letterpress has a narrower margin at top and bottom (2.9 cm for each), whereas the other Plate 7 has margins measuring 5.9 cm at both top and bottom. The copper plate used for the letterpress measures in one case 14.6 cm high, in the other 8.6 cm high.

That the difference between the two editions must be considered solely a matter of letterpress is borne out by an examination of the strokes made in forming the letters and of the actual shape of the letters themselves. It is easily demonstrated that the same hand executed all the plates except the edition of Plate 7 with the shorter letterpress, but that the latter was probably executed by another hand. It may be further observed that the former (which we shall call hereafter 7a) has the following at the very bottom: "Vide My own Memoirs in the Political Register 1809." The latter plate (which we shall call 7b) has in the corresponding place the following: "See my own Memoiree in ^ey Political Register 1809." Now Plates 1-6 and 8 all begin this line with "Vide" and use "the," not "^ey," so that it is most likely that Plate 7a was executed at the same time as Plates 1-6 and 8. Why Plate 7b was later substituted for Plate 7a is a matter for conjecture only. It is possible that the etcher was following copy and that when it was later determined that letterpress in this print tended to dominate the drawing, as it did not in the other prints, a decision was taken to substitute a shorter letterpress which would bring Plate 7 into consonance with the other prints artistically. Or Plate 7a may have suffered damage and required replacement later. One would like to believe that the substitution was made not from necessity but from taste.

At any rate it is certain that Plate 7a was issued first and later replaced by Plate 7b.⁵

⁵ For the sake of comparison I give below a transcription of the letterpress of Plate 7b: I did not look behind me, 'till I got to S^t Omer's—& thence fled to America;—here I offer'd to become a Spy for the English Government, which was scornfully rejected;—I then turned to Plunder and Libel the Yankees, for which I was Fined 5000 Dollars & kicked out of the Country!—I came back to England (after absconding for Seven years)—& set up the Crown & Mitre to establish my Loyalty! accepted from the Doctor £4000—to print & disperse a pamphlet [*sic*] against "the Hell fire yell

of Reform",—but applied the Money to purchase an estate at Botley, and left ^ey Doctor to pay the Paper & Printing—being now Lord of the Manor, I began by sowing the Seeds of discontent through Hampshire; I oppressed the Poor, sent the Aged to Hell, & damned the Eyes of my Parish Apprentices before they were open'd in the morning'—& being now supported by a band of Reformer's, I renewed my old favourite Toast of 'Damnation to the House of Brunswick!'—& exalted by the sale of 10,000,

It would be wrong to leave these caricatures without explaining how they fitted into the times. It was this year of 1809 when Cobbett so sharply broke with the government that every means of discrediting him was taken. In the *Political Register* of July 10, 1809, Cobbett attacked the government for a flogging of local militiamen in the Isle of Ely by soldiers of a German regiment there stationed. If flogging were merited, it should have been inflicted by Englishmen upon Englishmen. The act as it occurred was an affront and an indignity to the English character. The language of Cobbett's indignation was unbridled, and the government decided to bridle him by charging him with criminal libel. However, the case was not brought to trial for nearly a year, being tried on June 15, 1810.

In the meantime there broke forth a rash of anti-Cobbett publications. During all of his life Cobbett was fair prey for those who sought to charge him with inconsistency, and the list of anti-Cobbett publications shows few gaps from the time of his first American pamphlet, published in Philadelphia in 1794, to the day of his death in 1835. But never in his life before or after was he subjected to such continual and concentrated attack. James Reitzel (*op. cit.*, pp. 302-303) lists nine anti-Cobbett publications in 1809. (There had been only one in 1808; there was to be only one in 1810.) To these Pearl (*op. cit.*, p. 83) adds a tenth, *The Life of William Cobbett by Himself* . . . (London: Purday, 1809). There were still others, not listed in present bibliographies. It must be regarded as virtually certain that it was no mere coincidence that these numerous publications appeared *after* Cobbett's "libelous" publication. It must be that the government sought to discredit him with the public before trying him. Otherwise, why delay the trial so long?

To the other anti-Cobbett publications must be added Gillray's eight caricatures, doubtless similarly inspired. Gillray's title has been taken directly from the work published by Purday, but Purday

Political-Registers every week, I find myself the Greatest Man in the World!—except that Idol of all my Adorations, his Royal & Imperial Majesty, NAPOLEONE!—See

my own Memoiree [*sic*] in ^e Political Register 1809.

(This letterpress appears in the set of plates in the collection of the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University. The earlier letterpress appears in the sets owned by three other libraries: The Huntington Library, the Boston Public Library, and the Library of the University of Illinois.)

Plate 7th. —

I did not look behind me till I got to St Omers; but this being still too near the scene of my detection, I fled to America. There I offered, to become a Spy for my most gracious Sovereign, this being scornfully rejected, I contented myself with Plundering & Libelling the Yankees, for which I was fined 5000 dollars, and kicked out of the Country. — Seven years had elapsed since I absconded from England, so I thought that my exploits there might be forgotten, and ventured to return. — I set up the Crown and Mièrre, under cover of which, I abused the Church and State, very comfortably. — my Loyalty being thus established, I accepted from the Doctor (so I always call the Right Hon^{ble} Henry L^d. Visc^t. Sidmouth) £4000, which was to be expended in printing & dispersing a pamphlet against the "Hell Fire Yell of Reform!" — with this money I paid my debts, I purchased a pretty bit of Land at Botley, and sat quietly down to enjoy the the fruits of my honest industry. — A thousand applications have been made to me, to refund or account for some part of this enormous Sum, but, blast my Eyes! I will see the Doctor damned, and all such Fools as the Doctor, before I open my mouth on the Subject! — At Botley my natural bent returned, but upon a larger scale, for being now Lord of the Manor of Botley, & in the receipt of Five Thousand pounds a year from the sale of my Weekly Register, therefore not caring a single God damn for Public Opinion, I reacted the peccadilloes of my youth, & with maturer mischief began by sowing dysenteries thro' the whole County, I kicked the Sick & the Infirm Labourer into the Street. — I oppressed the poor; I sent the Aged to hell; — I damned the Eyes of my Parish Apprentices before they were opened in a morning, and being nobly supported by a legal band of Reformers, I renewed in our Orgies my old-favourite Toast of "Damnation to the House of Brunswick" — thus exalted in glory & popularity I found myself on the point of becoming the greatest Man in the World, except that Idol of my thoughts, that object of my Adorations, his Royal & Imperial Majesty NAPOLEONE. —

Vide — my own Memorium the Political Register — 1869 —

had got his title by paraphrasing Cobbett's own title of 1796. The full title then was: *The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine, with a Full and Fair Account of all his Authoring Transactions; being a Sure and Infallible Guide for all Enterprising Young Men Who Wish to Make a Fortune by Writing Pamphlets*. The 1809 title chosen by Purday is: *The Life of William Cobbett. By Himself. Intended as an encouraging Example to all Young Men of Humble Fortune; being a Proof of What can be Effected by Steady Application and Honest Efforts*.

There is no certainty that Purday's publication was intended as an attack on Cobbett. It is taken directly from the *Life of Porcupine* with only slight abridgement. However, it is certain that Cobbett had no hand in the work, for it was not printed by his printer nor published by an associate. Moreover, it was the custom in this year to quote Cobbett against himself. This had been done rather effectively in a work entitled *Elements of Reform* (London, 1809), in which Cobbett, now a radical, is faced with ultra-conservative writings of the past. The *Life of Cobbett by Himself* may well have been intended to produce a like result.

Be that as it may, Gillray adopted the title for his caricatures and pretended to quote Cobbett against himself. How he did it will appear from a reading of the letterpress for Plate 7a. But it should be emphasized that Gillray's letterpress only calls itself Cobbett's words. The words are not quotations but a most clever parody. The parody indeed was swallowed whole by Pearl, who says (*op. cit.*, p. 33) that the words used by Gillray were "tendentiously selected extracts." They are nothing of the kind. But if Pearl, at a remove of 144 years, is deceived by Gillray's footnote ("Vide My own Memoirs in the *Political Register* 1809."), what must have been the reaction of Londoners who bought the prints?

The fact of course is that Cobbett's *Life* did *not* appear in any form in any issue of the *Political Register* for 1809. Purday's edition of his *Life* *did* appear in 1809. These coincidences are too effective, too pat, to have been matters of chance. This great series of caricatures, then, appearing as parodies on Cobbett's own words, were designed to discredit him once and for all. That they failed does not reflect on the art of Gillray; it is rather a tribute to William Cobbett.