

WILLIAM COBBETT'S *GRAMMAR* AND ITS PURCHASERS

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“GET a copy of Cobbett’s ‘English Grammar’ . . . Read it as Cobbett bids you, and in a few weeks you will know all the grammar you need. . . .”¹ With these words the journalist Robert Blatchford paid tribute to a predecessor whose work on grammar had been written more than a century earlier. Almost simultaneous with Blatchford’s praise, the great historian of the English working class, G. D. H. Cole, wrote that Cobbett’s *Grammar* was “still the best introduction to a knowledge of the language for the type of readers [working class] he had principally in mind.”² The publishing history of the book seems to confirm these enthusiastic judgments. A recent bibliography of Cobbett’s writings lists thirty-five editions of *A Grammar of the English Language*, including three published in Germany.³ The British Museum Catalogue reveals six additional editions.⁴ Sixteen years after the first *Grammar* was printed it had appeared in thirteen editions and the author claimed that more than 100,000 copies had been sold. Even this impressive statistic does not take into consideration sales resulting from uncounted pirated editions, including one printed in Madras as early as 1823.⁵

What are the reasons for the extraordinary popularity of a book which dealt with a subject often considered tedious? The answer is

¹ Robert Blatchford, *English Prose and How to Write It* (London, 1925), p. 2.

² *The Life of William Cobbett* (London, 1924), p. 270.

³ M. L. Pearl, *William Cobbett, A Bibliographical Account of His Life and Times* (London, 1953), p. 104. In 1823 “Six Lessons Intended To Prevent Statesmen From Using False Grammar And From Writing In An Awkward Manner” were added to the work and have been reprinted consistently in later editions. In 1923 a revised edition was published in London by W. Foulsham and Co., Ltd. with an introduction by the Labour Party politician, J. R. Clynes. This is the most recently published edition although a new one using the original 1818 text is being prepared.

⁴ *British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books*, 40 (London, 1966), Cols. 1064-1065. The Rutgers University Library possesses twenty-eight different editions of the *Grammar*.

⁵ Pearl, p. 106.

twofold. First, the *Grammar* is very readable and, in this respect, it is possible that no grammar of good quality has ever equalled Cobbett's. This also ensured that there would be new editions decades after Cobbett's death in 1835. The second explanation is the character of the age in which it was written. Regardless of the splendid reception of the *Grammar*, however, in the light of Cobbett's intentions it is doubtful whether he would have considered his book successful had he known the type of purchasers it would attract through the years. To Cobbett, an outspoken advocate of radical change in England, the *Grammar* was to have been a weapon against his country's system of government and its rulers.⁶ The witty examples of grammatical points had an obvious political relevance.⁷ Moreover, the readers whom he had in mind were working class.⁸ However, the *Grammar* was not designed to help the workers improve themselves but rather to fit them for power after a profound change had taken place in society.⁹ An entire issue of Cobbett's weekly journal, the *Political Register*, was devoted to explaining the necessity of effective written expression if the workers were to assume their rightful place in the life of the nation.¹⁰ The following passage contains the sense of the article:

. . . I now derive great satisfaction from the hope, that, by these my exertions, many a private soldier, and many a plough-boy, will be enabled to shine amongst those who are destined to root out from the minds of men the base and blasphemous notions, that wisdom and talent are con-

⁶ For evaluations of Cobbett's life and thought, see Cole, and John W. Osborne, *William Cobbett: His Thought and His Times* (New Brunswick, 1966).

⁷ E.g., on collective nouns: "*Mob, Parliament, Rabble, House of Commons, Regiment, Court of King's Bench, Den of Thieves . . .*," and past tense: "The people every day gave money to the tyrants, who, in return, gave the people dungeons and axes." *A Grammar of the English Language*, New York, 1818, p. 96 and p. 133. The first edition of the book was published in New York during Cobbett's two-year residence in America after fleeing likely prosecution for sedition.

⁸ The full title of the book is: *A Grammar Of The English Language, In A Series Of Letters. Intended for the Use of Schools and of Young Persons in general; but, more especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-boys.*

⁹ Cobbett's objections to both general literary cultivation and self-improvement schemes were stated repeatedly in the strongest possible fashion. Objects of his derision included The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Mechanics Institutes and proposals for public education. See, for example, issues of the *Political Register* dated November 15, 1823, February 2, 1825 and May 25, 1830.

¹⁰ *Political Register*, November 21, 1818, cols. 249-80. The article was addressed to the "Blanketeers," a group of hungry workers in the Midlands, whose pathetic attempt to march on London in order to petition Parliament for a redress of their grievances was broken up by troops.

fined to what is called high-birth, and that the few possess a right divine to rule, oppress and plunder the many.¹¹

The twentieth century socialists, Blatchford and Cole, both believed that, as Cobbett intended, most of the purchasers of the book were working class. This assumption is evidently shared by M. L. Pearl¹² and its acceptance by W. Baring Pemberton in his brief, popular biography of Cobbett¹³ indicates general agreement on the matter.

Yet, despite the large sales of the *Grammar*, Cobbett failed not only to achieve the social change he demanded, but his book was probably not even read by the type of reader he preferred. It is more than likely that the majority of buyers were ambitious members of the lower middle-class plus some relatively well-off artisans. Both of these groups had little appetite for drastic social change but, instead, wanted to get ahead in the world in the manner celebrated decades later by Horatio Alger and Samuel Smiles—hence, the importance of the time when Cobbett wrote. Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, unprecedented opportunities existed for a humbly-born but able person to advance himself. A vast lower middle-class was beginning to develop as clerks and skilled mechanics could take advantage of the fact that more careers were opening to talented men. It was the needs of the age which insured the success of a work that abounded in humor and simple, topical illustrations, while providing sound instruction in the rudiments of the language.¹⁴

Certain factors make a large working class readership of the *Grammar* unlikely. First, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, "New books were more expensive than ever before . . ." because of the high cost of labor and materials and the continuance of hand methods of book production.¹⁵ Coupled with low wages for the unskilled,¹⁶ book prices were a formidable impediment in the way of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, col. 269. Almost entirely self-taught, Cobbett had been as a youth both plough-boy and soldier.

¹² *William Cobbett*, p. 105.

¹³ *William Cobbett* (Harmondsworth, 1949), pp. 120-121.

¹⁴ The recent claim by E. P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1964) that there was a widespread, militant, class-conscious radicalism during the early nineteenth century is lacking in convincing proof and does little to alter the established view that the average worker was generally apathetic toward politics.

¹⁵ Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader, A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 260, 262.

¹⁶ Members of the largest class of workers, the agricultural laborers, frequently

an ambitious common laborer in his search for knowledge. Secondly, no more than two-thirds of the English population were literate, with considerable variation according to geographical location and social rank.¹⁷ These statistics suggest why, in all probability, few copies of the *Grammar* were bought by the ordinary toiler in the field or factory.¹⁸ Overworked and beset by the problem of earning enough money to stay alive, most workers were not suited to any type of instruction.¹⁹

The texture of English life was to alter within the next few decades. But this change was to be a cautious, Whiggish one and the basic structure of society was to remain intact. The fact that *A Grammar of the English Language* helped countless men to advance within their society places the author in the unintentional position of a prop for a system which he loathed and renders ironic his declared purpose in writing the *Grammar*: "to create numerous formidable assailants of our insolent high-blooded oppressors."²⁰

earned less than ten shillings a week. Cobbett's *Grammar*, priced at two shillings and sixpence, was inexpensive by the standards of the time but still a costly investment.

¹⁷ R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790-1848: Literacy and Social Tension* (London, 1955), p. 22.

¹⁸ J. F. C. Harrison discusses some of these problems and also points out the lack of a popular demand for education. See *Learning and Living 1790-1960. A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (Toronto, 1961), p. 40.

¹⁹ As Cobbett himself recognized when he demanded on their behalf bacon to eat instead of Bacon to read. *Political Register*, May 2, 1825, col. 349.

²⁰ *Political Register*, November 21, 1818, col. 256.