WILLIAM COBBETT

1762–1835

by G. D. H. COLE

WILLIAM COBBETT

1762–1835

by G. D. H. COLE

THERE are certain Englishmen who, being memorable for much besides, make one think, whenever they come into one's mind, of England. Not of England as a nation, much less a Great Power, or of England as a political unit, or of England with any other special qualification, but purely and simply of England. It is not merely that these men are " so English," though they are : it is that they have in some sort the quality of being England, and of expressing in whatever they do or say something as unmistakably English as the burr of an Oxfordshire (not, be it noted, an " Oxford ") accent. They have an English burr ; and it goes without saying that, having this, they are none of your desiccated townsmen, remote from the life of field and village, but countrymen in mind, wherever they live. For the heart of our urbanised England is still in the country.

Cobbett was an Englishman in this very special sense. Carlyle called him " the pattern John Bull of the century " ; and the phrase sticks in the mind. Bluff, egotistical, shrewd, capable of meanness as well as of greatness, positive in all things and desperately wrong in some—but also devastatingly right in many more—no theorist till he could see with his own eyes the human stuff of which problems are made, quick to anger and indignation but also infinitely friendly ; didactical and often overbearing, and yet full of human sympathy ; very well satisfied with himself and ever ready to hold his own experience up as an example to others ; and therewith possessed of a singular power of identifying himself with the country he loved and the people for whom he fought—there, as nearly as I can paint it in a few words, you have the portrait of this tall, gawky, florid, exuberant farmer, who looked like a farmer, and did more than any other man to bring hope into dark places where hope was needed even more sorely than meat and drink.

Above all else, I think of Cobbett as the man who, at a wretched time in the history of the English people, put hope into their hearts, not by telling lies or painting fancy pictures, either of this world or of the next, but by good solid cursing that never degenerated into a whine or a mere vapouring of despair, but bade men gird up their loins and struggle for the right. No matter whether he was talking at the moment to a gathering of farmers in some country town on market day, or to a crowd of half-starved labourers assembled on some Hampshire heath, or to the journeymen and factory workers in one of the new industrial towns, he knew how to speak comfortable words, even if all he said was of men's wrongs and miseries, and nothing at all of their compensations. He had a wealth of righteous indignation always at command, not vamped up to suit his hearers, but coming naturally out of him—felt and swelling within him too strongly to be bottled up. There were so many things to arouse that indignation; and, if he expended some of it on the wrong objects, that mattered very little, as long as his anger flowed like a sea over the inhumanity and injustice of the times.

Yet Cobbett was not only an angry man, finding everywhere he went ample cause for his anger. If he had been only that, his passion would have been far less compelling. He was angry, exceedingly angry; but there was always love as well as anger in his words. He loved the people on whose behalf he made crusade; and, equally with the people, he loved the land they lived in—the villages and churches, the great houses with their parks of orderly trees, the birds and beasts, the downs and valleys and rivers and streams, the crops that grew out of the earth and, last but not least, the earth itself. The smell and feel of the countryside were his tonic; and, though much of his life was lived in towns, he had to be coming back always to the open country for refreshment and inspiration. In the town, he often seemed to be only guessing: in the country, he knew.

Not that Cobbett's love of the country was just like mine, or probably yours; for I at any rate am a town-dweller, and not a countryman. The country is a place to which I go, not with the sense of going home. But to

Cobbett the country was home, and his eye for it was the eye of a countryman. He wanted it to be useful, and not merely ornamental. The barren heath of Hindhead stirred no pleasure in him ; and the sight of a field full of thistles put him quite out of humour for a morning. Gentlemen's parks he could bear with, for he loved a good tree, above all if it was one of his favourite *locusts*. He had, moreover, a feeling for the old squire that never forsook him even when he was most roundly denouncing the squire's political opinions. The squire was a part of Old England : he had been there so long that, equally with the village church, he fitted into the scene. It was another matter when the park belonged to a stockbroker, or an army contractor, or any of the new-fangled money-spinning class. Then indeed Cobbett had a good look at the man's park and house, very ready to find fault. But the old squire had, if not his agreement, at least his sympathy, extended the more readily because, in Cobbett's opinion, his chance of survival was poor enough in the bad new times.

For Cobbett was one of those evangelists who see the future by looking back to the past. Maybe the past they think they see is not quite what really was ; for they are as ready to pick out from it the things they love and value as to pick out what is bad in the present. That is nothing against them ; for every age needs men to tell it in good homespun language what is wrong with it, and a touch of exaggeration does not come amiss either for stirring the imaginations of the victims or for shaking the complacency of the smug. Nor is there any harm in idealising the past, in the sense of seeing its virtues more plainly than its faults ; for that is one way of giving men heart to set about mending present wrongs. Or, if it be a fault not to see all things steadily and whole and in the correct perspective, it may be a fault that is inseparable from a certain sort of greatness. To be always cool may be a virtue ; but to lose one's temper at injustice may be a virtue too, even if loss of temper always distorts the vision.

The past that Cobbett saw in this idealised way was sometimes nearer, and sometimes more remote. At times, it was a past beyond the Reformation, when monasteries

recognised the obligation to care for the poor, and the tithe was a charge on property for the relief of the poor, and not itself a form of property. Under the spell of that vision he produced his *History of the Protestant Reformation*, which roused the Evangelicals to the height of fury, as he fully meant it to do. At other times the past was nearer, in the glorious days before the Bank of England, founded to help Dutch William's wars, had saddled the country with the National Debt. Or again the past would draw nearer still, to the days of his own childhood, before Pitt had ruined the country with his villainous "system," or the stock-jobbers enriched by the war had bought up the old estates, or "the Wen," London, had been swollen to its present monstrous size. Those were the days—the days when Cobbett was a boy scaring crows in a field, or weeding the garden paths at Waverley Abbey, or watching the fine gentlemen—who could afford it then—ride out to hounds. But now, he tells us again and again, all that is gone—or going. The stock-jobbers are putting up their ugly big houses all over the countryside, or shoving the old decaying gentry out of their homes: the peasants, who used to be cheery souls, with good healthy appetites and a healthy respect for the State, are shivering in rags at the gang-work set by the parish, or gone away to work long hours in the suffocating misery of the new factory towns. The old squires, where they are left, wear long faces because of the rates and taxes; and they are thinning fast. It is their fault, too, that they are being undone, because they backed up Pitt and his "system," and never lifted a hand to save the labourers from ruin. And they lived fine too, when they couldn't afford it. There's Squire Ridge, ruined with fox-hunting, and Squire Somebody-else, who tried to hold up his head among a pack of stock-jobbers, spending pound for pound. All the old glories fast departing; and in their places lords of the loom and steam engine, brokers from Change Alley, and the pestilent fellows who make the paper for the Bank to print its filthy notes on.

You would get tired of this quite soon; but suddenly, in the very middle of his tirade, Cobbett sees something else in his mind's eye, and in a minute he is off after that. Perhaps it was only the really excellent crop of Swedish

turnips he saw when he was riding past Mr. Acres' farm to-day, or perhaps it was a pretty girl in a field with whom he exchanged the glad eye. Whatever it was, you hear about it, as soon as the picture comes into his vision; and then you are in the fields with him, in sun or rain, seeing what the Swedish turnips looked like, or giving the girl the glad eye yourself. Or perhaps what comes up in his mind is a remembrance of his own life; and then too you hear about it. "When I was a soldier in New Brunswick," "when the swindling Americans robbed me of five thousand dollars," "when Pitt offered me one of the Government newspapers," "when I was in Newgate gaol"—all vastly egotistical, all much to Cobbett's honour and glory, and for an example for all good citizens in the middle way of life to follow, but withal immensely vivid, racy, diverting, and altogether human.

In *Rural Rides* you get this expansive, discursive, objurgatory, preaching, reminiscent, but above all *noticing* William Cobbett at his best. Here is writing dashed off quickly, often on the morrow of a long day's ride over the country, while the impressions were fresh, and sent post-haste up to London to be printed in that most personal of all periodicals, Cobbett's *Political Register*. Their fascination lies a good deal in this impressionistic quality, or rather in their absolute naturalness and spontaneity. As you read them, you follow his racing thought and roving eye, never knowing what either will light on next. They are the perfection of political journalism, because they weave politics into the texture of normal living; but they are also literature that has long survived our minding about many of the persons and controversies with which they deal. Cobbett rode over southern England, and as he rode he wrote; and no book was ever written that was more England's own book, getting the smell and feel and look of the English country and the English country people down in print, so that the reader can smell and feel and see as well as Cobbett. Usually I set no store by first editions; but my first edition of *Rural Rides* always seems to have a country smell. Perhaps that is only because it is a little mouldy.

Or take *Advice to Young Men—and Young Women*, for

they are both on the title page, though the book is generally spoken of discourteously without the young women. Here you get less of the vivid pictures of field and farm ; for here Cobbett is writing not a journal, but a sort of tract. You will probably not take Cobbett's advice ; for his standards and habits are not yours. You will hardly choose your wife by deciding that she is the very woman for you when, on a second meeting, you find her scrubbing out a washing-tub in the snow, in the half-light of very early morning, on a bitterly cold day, out of doors. Nor will you, probably, insist on doing your writing-work on a stone floor, or obey Cobbett's precepts about rising early and going early to bed. You will not, I think, agree fully with his views on education, or find your wife, when you get one, willing to be written about quite as Cobbett wrote about Anne Reid, though assuredly he never said anything about her that was not vastly complimentary as he meant it. But, though on many points you will not quite share Cobbett's views —for, whatever your opinion may be, it is pretty certain you have twentieth century habits of mind—I think you will enjoy *Advice to Young Men—and Young Women*, above all else the bits that are about the author's own life. If you do not enjoy it I am inclined to say, that is your fault ; for it means you do not know and like racy, redolent English writing when you meet it.

Then there is the *Political Register*, which Cobbett conducted as a weekly for well over thirty years, writing the greater part of it himself, and basing its appeal practically to the exclusion of all else on his own personality. Others contribute to the *Register* now and then : there are screeds by the old prosy Radical, Major Cartwright, who was, for all his prosiness, the salt of the earth, and whole pages of reports of current events, or important documents reprinted, or extracts from parliamentary papers and debates. But no one bought the *Register* for the sake of these : men bought it to see what Cobbett was saying now, whom he had chosen to pillory this week, what particular feature of the iniquitous " system " he had chosen this time to denounce, or perhaps where he had been riding last, and what he had seen and thought by the way. The *Register* was *Cobbett's* Register—the weekly register of Cobbett's impressions, reactions, and

ideas derived from what he had been seeing and hearing and doing during the past week. His leading articles were enormous : often they took up most of the paper. But they were read—read aloud by poor men at coffee-houses and ale-houses where other poor men gathered who could not read, or at least could not afford to buy, and read no less in rich men's clubs round Westminster ; for Cobbett's political opponents always wanted to know what he had to say this week. The *Political Register* was a power. Sometimes it barked up the wrong tree, but never up the wrong wood. And whether Cobbett chose the right or the wrong tree, men always attended to his barking. For a man cannot write like Cobbett, and not be attended to, even if he happens on occasion to be talking nonsense.

The *Political Register* went through strange metamorphoses. It was founded as an extreme patriotic journal, to back up Pitt and the French war policy, to denounce Jacobins and Radicals and to shout down the demagogues on the other side. Within a few years it was shouting down the very groups that had supported its establishment, and Cobbett was bellowing as loudly for Radical Reform as he had bellowed against it. He did not change sides again ; for he had found out by then where his allegiance really belonged. But the *Register* went through many queer changes after that. For two years Cobbett edited it from Newgate Gaol, where he had been sent for saying libellous things about the flogging of soldiers. For two more he edited it from the other side of the Atlantic—in days when there were no telegraphs or steamships, and letters could come only as fast as a sailing ship could travel. That was when he had fled to the United States partly from Lord Sidmouth's " Gagging Acts " of 1817, but also from his creditors, who had become far too pressing in their attentions. At different times the *Register* was sold at the most varied prices—from a shilling or more down to twopence, according to the changing exigencies of the Stamp Duties—those " taxes on knowledge " which were deliberately used to hamper the activities of Radical journalists. Its appeal was widely different from year to year. At one time it was full of appeals to the farmers, and plainly addressed to them as its principal audience. That was

when Cobbett had gone a-crusading among the farmers to raise up support for an " equitable adjustment " of the monstrous burden of the National Debt, as well as for Radical Parliamentary Reform. At other times, it was written to and for the agricultural labourers—victims of a Poor Law which condemned them to semi-starvation and to serf-labour under the Speenhamland arrangement. Or again, it would be filled with *Addresses to the Journeymen and Labourers* of the towns, adjuring them to join manfully in the cry for Radical Reform, and painting a lurid picture of their exploitation by the financial power. Whatever the direction of the appeal might be, there in the *Register*, week after week, you had Cobbett talking about every conceivable sort of thing that wanted doing or undoing, in language that even the plainest readers could readily understand. Perhaps Cobbett's predilection for stone floors helped him to write fast. Assuredly he did write fast : so that no other journalist, save Daniel Defoe, has ever approached his output, and certainly none has ever sold a paper for more than thirty years, almost exclusively on the strength of his own personality. The circulation of the *Register* ebbed and flowed with changes in political interest or tension. But no other paper on the same side ever came near equalling the influence of Cobbett's weekly diatribe.

This account of the *Political Register* has taken me back to Cobbett's early days when, so far from upholding the cause of Radical Reform, he made his bow as the most violent of all the anti-Jacobin pamphleteers. Cobbett's first published work, unless we accept the view that he had a hand in an earlier pamphlet written to uphold the rights of the common soldier, was a violent diatribe against that estimable Radical Reformer, Dr. Joseph Priestley, whose house had been burnt down not long before by the Birmingham mob. Priestley, finding liberty at a discount in an England at war with France, had come to look for it in the brave New World that had so lately flung off the tyrant's yoke. He had landed in the free United States, to a salvo of congratulatory addresses from American Societies, whose members, fresh from singeing the King of England's beard, were eager to wish the Jacobins the same good hunting. Cobbett himself was in the United

States because of a little disagreement with the powers that were in England; for he had used his experience as sergeant-major in the British army to collect imposing evidence of corrupt practices on the part of his officers, and this excess of zeal had made England too hot to hold him. But Cobbett in exile was very much the Englishman; and the revolutionary Societies' addresses to Dr. Priestley were altogether too much for him. His *Observations on Dr. Priestley's Emigration* were neither polite nor profound; but they were undoubtedly pungent, and the British diplomatic representatives in the United States were not long in seeking out so doughty a champion. During the remaining years of his sojourn in America Cobbett, not without encouragement from official quarters at home, laid about him with a will, defending the British cause through thick and thin, and lavishing upon the American people a wealth of home truths and home untruths that made them at all events sit up and take notice.

Philadelphia, where Cobbett was living, was strongly pro-French. Cobbett opened a bookseller's shop there, after a series of entertaining quarrels with the regular booksellers; and, just to teach these rebel dogs their place, filled his shop-window with all the things most calculated to annoy the American public. Pictures of his Sovereign Lord the King, George III—not an American hero—a fine battle-piece of Lord Howe routing the American fleet, and so on. As Lewis Carroll said, "He only does it to annoy, because he knows it teases." That was always apt to be Cobbett's way. His *History of the Protestant Reformation* was written in just that spirit.

That was not the end of Cobbett's American escapades. He accused Dr. Rush, who was not only a famous physician, but also a political figure, of bleeding George Washington to death; and there were unpleasant consequences of the libel, especially as Cobbett went on to say just what he thought about the judge who tried the case and, in *The Rushlight*, to devote a whole periodical to further unpleasantness about Dr. Benjamin Rush. Cobbett had gone to America because he found England too hot to hold him; he returned to his native country because the American continent also blistered at his presence.

He came back, however, in the odour of political sanctity, to be greeted by Tory politicians in search of a journalist with enough punch to put the lousy Radicals in their place. The anti-Jacobins put up enough money to start the *Political Register* as an organ of the extreme right. It was to set about all Radical traitors in the same spirit as Cobbett had shown when he blackguarded Dr. Priestley or wrote his scurrilous life of the "impious" Tom Paine. The *Register* began in that spirit; but, if the spirit lasted, the heroes and the villains soon exchanged rôles. Cobbett did indeed damn the Peace of Amiens up hill and down dale: he had his windows broken for refusing to illuminate in celebration of the peace. But before long he was causing his backers serious anxiety; and in a few years they became well aware that they had received a serpent into their bosom. Cobbett began by taking a rooted dislike to Pitt, and probing inconveniently into the financial abuses of what he began to call "the Pitt system"—the very last things which even Pitt's political opponents wished to have exposed. He was then still all for war with France; but he wanted the war to be run cleanly, without pandering to stock-jobbers and handing out pensions and sinecures to the cousins and aunts of the important people. What a hope!

In 1806 Pitt died, leaving behind him an unresolved ambiguity about his dying words. Some say they referred to the fate of England, and others that they were about pork chops; but there was no doubt that Pitt left behind him a fair microcosm of the National Debt in the form of private obligations of his own; and these debts a grateful nation, eager to honour "the pilot who died without weathering the storm," elected to pay. Cobbett celebrated the occasion by some candid words about Pitt, following his own maxim "*De mortuis nil nisi verum*—and then some." But when his own friends, including William Windham, succeeded to office, there was at least a lull in hostilities. The Ministry of All the Talents—except Cobbett's—was to be given a chance. Cobbett only remarked that Fox was not quite such a scoundrel as he had hitherto always made him out to be, and offered a few simple proposals for the new Ministry's acceptance. For

example, Windham, now at the War Office, might begin by cleaning up military corruption.

William Windham thought otherwise—for, like most politicians, he regarded public corruption as an " act of God." Cobbett admonished, expressed pained surprise, threatened, and finally fulminated. Of a truth, the new lot was as bad as the old. New minister was but old Pitt writ large ; and within a year of Pitt's death, Cobbett was decisively of the Opposition, clamouring for Radical Reform to end the " Pitt system," and, before long, as determined to end the war that bred corruption and national decay as he had been a while before to pursue it to the bitter end. The infidel Tom Paine had been right after all. Cobbett soon loved to quote his *Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance* against the transgressors. Soon, he was rubbing salt into the wounds of orthodoxy by quoting with approval irreligious pamphlets that followed up the ideas of Paine's *Age of Reason.* He did not abandon the Church ; but he loved to quote a refutation of orthodox Christianity, and fling out a challenge to the parsons about it. " Answer that if you can, you lazy, tithe-eating dogs. What are you paid for, if not to answer ? "

This political Odyssey of Cobbett's needs a word of explanation. In his American exile, during the years that followed the Revolution in France, Cobbett was, as we have seen, the extremest of anti-Jacobins. How does that square with his later attitude ? I think the answer must be that, almost from a boy, he had seen little of England. Still a youth, he had fled from his incarceration in a lawyer's office to go for a soldier ; and his years of service in the army had been spent in Canada, largely among those " Yankee Loyalists " who had settled there after the War of Independence. From them he had doubtless learned to think of the Americans as a pack of rebels. His *penchant* for attacking corruption in high places and for defending the weak had been with him already ; and on his return to England he tried hard to bring the officers of his regiment to book for defrauding the soldiers. But while he was in England his " case " occupied all his time, except what he spent courting Anne Reid ; and though he had cause to find himself " agin " the Government over the court-

martial proceedings, he saw nothing of the country, and found no reason to modify his general political outlook. Failing to get a fair chance of proving his case against his officers, he fled to France, then in the throes of Revolution, but not yet at war with England. But he did not go to France for politics, or to a part of the country where political excitements ran high; and it seems likely that when, on the outbreak of war, he escaped from France to the United States, he carried with him no clear political convictions at all. He was not a man who theorised easily: it needed actual sights and experiences to stir his mind to thought.

In America, he found himself surrounded by anti-British feeling, strongly on the side of France. John-Bullishly, he revolted in exile against the abuse of his country, and became by reaction a fervent patriot. In his vigorous pamphlets denouncing and trouncing Priestley and Tom Paine, there is not a trace of political thinking. They are simple scurrility, carried off by the sheer vigour of the writing. Having found his trade, Cobbett stuck at it; but he developed no new ideas except by reaction against his American surroundings. He came back at length to his own country, knowing nothing of it, except the Farnham of his youth.

Plunging at once into English journalism as a writer on the patriotic side, he was kept hard at it in London for some years, writing with plenty of vigour, but developing few new ideas. Stuck in London and seeing nothing of the countryside, which alone he thoroughly understood, he found nothing to stir his imagination, or to make him think, until his own friends came to office in 1806, in the Ministry of All the Talents. Then he expected things to begin to happen; and when they did not, he was in a mood to look at the situation for himself, and form an independent judgment. Moreover, after years cooped up in town, he felt the longing for the country coming upon him; and he began to go and look again at the places he had known in his youth. He was shocked, appalled. He saw everywhere signs of the intense misery which high prices and economic change had wrought upon the country people; and at once his reaction against the "Pitt system" turned into a full-

blown Radicalism. He rallied to the defence of his own people against their oppressors, and learnt a new hatred of the stock-jobbers and war financiers whose great houses he found everywhere scarring the country. Their opulence seemed to him to affront the misery of the starveling labourers. His case against "Pitt finance" became in an instant not merely an intellectual case, but a belief charged with intense emotion. These were the devils who were responsible for the labourers' miseries: down with them and all they stood for to the nethermost hell!

Thus Cobbett, converted, became the foremost of Radical agitators—foremost, because he was so like in mind to those on whose behalf he stood forward that the poor people readily recognised him for their own, as no merely intellectual leader of revolt could ever have been. Cobbett was a luckier, cleverer, more forcible peasant, who, thanks to his luck and brain and force of character, was able to stand forward to present the poor men's case. Knowing their own, they acclaimed him. Knowing that the English poor had at last found a representative leader, the wiser heads among the enemies of the poor were alarmed, and took counsel together against him.

It took but four years or so after Cobbett's full conversion to Radicalism to land him in Newgate gaol. There, cooling his heels not uncomfortably, he had time to get ready for a fresh onslaught on the "thing." For gaols in those days were not as gaols are now. A prisoner with money in his pocket could do well enough in gaol, living in a hired apartment of his own, much to the gaoler's profit, writing pamphlets and articles which he could send out and publish freely, having his family to stay with him in the prison, receiving visits of sympathy from one of His Majesty's judges, dressed in his full robes in order to mark his protest at the sentence, and last but not least entertaining his friends, whenever he chose, with steaks and porter within the precincts of the prison. It was not so bad to be gaoled in those days, provided only that you could afford to pay through the nose. Cobbett paid, and lived in Newgate like a fighting cock; but his publishing business and his farm at Botley went to rack and ruin the while, and a few years later he paid the penalty with his bankruptcy.

The occasion of Cobbett's gaoling need not much concern us here. He had written in the *Political Register* an article about the flogging of English soldiers on which the Government was able to base a successful charge for sedition; and for this he was put in prison, after a tangle of negotiations in the course of which he decided at one point to stop publishing the *Register* altogether, as the price of being let off. But the negotiations fell through, and the *Register* went on. Cobbett was able to write its main article regularly from prison, though he had to be careful not to provoke a further prosecution, which might have ruined him once and for all. To this circumstance, and to the opportunity for thinking things over that his term in prison afforded him, we owe his *Paper against Gold*—the first of his long series of books published in parts and, apart from the *Register*, the first of his Radical writings of importance. From this time paper money is seldom long out of Cobbett's mind. It becomes for him the symbol of the " system," and by his denunciation of it he becomes the first of the long line of English popular monetary reformers, or shall we say, " currency cranks " ?

The root idea of *Paper against Gold* Cobbett got from Tom Paine, whose pamphlet, *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*, he never wearied of quoting with the strongest approval. A large part of the sorrows of England was to be scored up against the wretched Bank of England; for the foundation of the Bank had been also the origin at one and the same time of the accursed National Debt and of paper bank notes, the twin plagues that were dragging the country down. The Debt was piling up to such a height that it would be impossible ever to repay it, and ruinous even to meet the interest charge; and as the Debt grew, the curse of paper money grew with it, for how else could the Debt grow? These were the days of the famous Bullion Committee, which demonstrated plainly, despite the Government's denials, the depreciation of the Bank's paper in relation to gold, as a consequence of the attempt to finance the long war by borrowing instead of taxation. Pitt had chosen the easy way of inflation because he wanted to make the war popular among the swindling fraternity of stock-jobbers and speculators, who profited

handsomely by the manipulation of government loans. The paper money had meant high prices, and starvation conditions for the unfortunate agricultural labourers, who were unable to raise their wages. It had meant temporary prosperity for the farmers, who had taken to new-fangled habits on the strength of it—buying pianos and educating their daughters to behave like gentlefolk. It had meant high rates for the landlords, but high taxes as well, as the burden of the poor rates increased, and as the long war had to be financed more out of taxes, even to meet the annual charges of the mounting debt. The landlords had profited for the time, like the farmers; but both these classes were beginning to pay, and for both there was coming a real day of reckoning, when they would be called upon to meet the postponed costs of the war. Only the money-spinners were in clover, with their ceaseless jobbing of inflated money-values. Only they throve and multiplied as the mass of paper money grew greater and greater with each year.

Holding these views about the curse of paper money, Cobbett might have been expected to be found on the side of the "sound money men" when the war was over, and the sages were once more urging the return to the gold standard. But not a bit of it! Cobbett, the arch-enemy of paper money, took the field as the strongest critic of the Bank Bill of 1819, under which the restoration of the gold standard was finally carried through. He did so without abating one word of his denunciations of the paper system, but arguing that it was manifestly unfair and ruinous to repay in gold a debt which had been contracted in inflated paper money, and that before a resumption of cash payments could properly be allowed steps ought to be taken to scale down the debt, and the interest on it, to a figure corresponding to the changed value of money. Cobbett demanded an "equitable adjustment," by which he meant a lowering of the interest burden of the debt, by means of a forced reduction in the rates of interest, as a necessary preliminary to putting back the gold standard.

To this struggle we owe Cobbett's famous "gridiron" prophecy. If he were wrong in predicting that a return to the gold standard without an "equitable adjustment"

would mean collapse, he gave leave to Lord Castlereagh " to put me on a gridiron and broil me alive, while Sidmouth stirs the fire, and Canning stands by making a jest of my groans." Cobbett always claimed that his prophecies had come true, on the ground that, though the gold standard was put back, and the interest on the Debt was not reduced, the events of the financial crisis of 1825, when the Bank was compelled to reissue the small notes abolished a few years earlier, justified what he had said. He held, in 1826, his " Feast of the Gridiron," to celebrate his rightness ; and he developed a habit of putting a gridiron as a sort of crest at the top of the front page of the *Political Register*. The " gridiron " became a recognised symbol among the Cobbettites : it turned up again in Chartist days as the motto of John Cleave's Cobbett Club. Cobbett himself lived long enough to offer strong opposition to Attwood's paper money projects when they were put forward by the Birmingham Political Union, and to conduct at Birmingham with Attwood one of those prodigious debates to which huge audiences seem to have been ready in those most enduring times to listen all day and most of the night. On this occasion Attwood spoke for four and a half hours, and his supporter, Charles Jones, for I forget how long, before Cobbett got a word in. Cobbett then went at it for two hours, and Attwood took two more to reply. There were giants in those days.

This discussion of Cobbett's views about currency has taken me far away from his enforced residence in Newgate from 1810 to 1812, when he was still only at the beginning of his career as a Radical leader. His great period as a leader did not come till the war was over, and the great wave of economic distress which followed the peace had swept over the industrial districts. Till then the *Register* had been read mainly by gentlemen and farmers : it had hardly reached the working class. But in 1816 Cobbett, conscious of the rumblings of unrest all over the new industrial areas, suddenly altered his appeal and began to talk directly to the working classes in the north of England. Knowing the country far better than the town, he had till then been far more alive to agrarian than to industrial grievances and hardships ; but now, in his *Addresses to*

the Journeymen and Labourers, he began to make a vigorous call to the miners and factory workers to rally to the cause of Radical Reform. In order to do this, he started producing off-prints from the *Register*, containing no news that would have subjected them to the Newspaper Tax, for sale at a penny and twopence a time ; and these special off-prints, started as purely occasional pamphlets, soon turned into a regular twopenny edition of the *Political Register* for popular consumption. The success of his vigorous appeals was immediate. It is said that, at the height of their popularity, Cobbett was selling sixty thousand copies a week. Undoubtedly Cobbett's cheap *Register*—called " Twopenny Trash " first by its enemies, though he joyfully adopted the name—had a great deal to do with bringing over the factory workers to the cause of Radical Reform of Parliament. " At this time," writes Bamford, the Lancashire weaver, " the writings of William Cobbett suddenly became of great authority : they were read on nearly every cottage hearth in the manufacturing districts . . ." Bamford attributed to Cobbett's influence the abandonment of rioting, and the creation instead of an organised Reform movement among the weavers. Whether that be true or not, certainly Cobbett leapt of a sudden to an outstanding position anong the leaders of the working class.

He had soon to pay the penalty of his success. Sidmouth's " Gagging Acts " of 1817, followed up by the Six Acts of 1819, suppressed his cheap *Register*, by imposing upon it the high newspaper tax, and so making cheap publication impossible. Moreover, knowing the Acts of 1817 to be largely aimed at him, and having also serious private embarrassments of his own, Cobbett escaped the prison which was the fate of most of the other working-class leaders by flight. In 1817 he took ship secretly to the United States ; and there he stayed for the next two years. He was accused of cowardly desertion of his post in the hour of danger ; and there is no doubt that he did run away. Whether he should have stayed, to face gaol for debt, or sedition, or both, is a moot point. We at any rate can afford to be grateful for his flight ; for with it begins the sequence of books by which he is best remembered. Away from

the constant battle of journalism and political agitation, Cobbett found leisure to sit down and write books—though, with his passion for the land, his first thought when he reached the United States was to get land to farm as well as a political asylum. For two years he farmed, and wrote ; and when, late in 1819, he came back to England to face the repression, just as the Six Acts were being passed into law, he brought back with him the stock of ideas that went to the making of a whole series of books that will not easily die.

Two of these books, *A Journal of a Year's Residence in the United States of America* and *A Grammar of the English Language*, appeared while he was still away from England. Cobbett's *Grammar* is, I think, still an admirable grammar, for the sort of person for whom Cobbett meant it. I have tried it on grown-up students to whom their teachers had omitted to teach their native language at school, and the results of using it have been excellent. Nor is it worse as a grammar for being at times a political tract as well. For just as in *Rural Rides* Cobbett mixed his politics with the affairs of the countryside, till the Swedish turnip became a political weapon, so in his *Grammar* he bombarded his political adversaries unmercifully with the parts of speech. " The nominative is frequently a noun of multitude ; as *mob*, *parliament*, *gang*." " The gang of borough-tyrants *is* cruel, and *are* also notoriously as ignorant as brutes." " Amongst a select society of empty heads, ' moderate reform ' has long been a fashionable expression ; an expression which has been well criticised by asking the gentlemen who use it, how they would like to obtain *moderate justice* in a court of law, or to meet with *moderate chastity* in a wife."

In 1819, despite the Six Acts, which intensified the repression, Cobbett came back to England, and resumed his place among the outstanding Radical leaders. Thereafter his books followed one another in quick succession. *The American Gardener* appeared in 1821 ; and in that year he also began publishing his series of *Rural Rides* in the *Political Register*. His *Sermons*, including one on *The Sin of Drunkenness*, pointedly directed at George IV, followed in 1821, in the midst of the Queen Caroline case ; and

Cottage Economy appeared the same year. Part I of his *History of the Protestant Reformation* followed in 1824; and a succession of lesser books led up to *Advice to Young Men* in 1829, and the first collected issue of *Rural Rides* in 1830. Cobbett's best books are thus the work of his middle age. He was nearing sixty when he began *Rural Rides*, and sixty-six when he published *Advice to Young Men*. Like Defoe, who alone can dispute his claim to be the greatest of English journalists, he wrote all the better as he grew old.

All this time he was vigorously pursuing his political campaigns. In 1820 and thereabouts he became absorbed in the case of Queen Caroline—the best of all sticks for beating a reactionary Ministry and a profligate King. Cobbett, who was perhaps induced to espouse the Queen's cause mainly for this reason, became Caroline's most devout champion, writing her manifestos for her in most uncarolinian prose, and building up behind her an immense popular agitation throughout the country. When the Queen's death knocked away the foundations of the movement, Cobbett was ready for a new cause. During the next few years he headed a revolt of the farmers against high taxation, working up among them a big movement in favour of Radical Reform. But returning agricultural prosperity caused the tide of agrarian unrest to ebb for a time; and the circulation of the *Register* went down till the country, now under milder and more hesitant Ministers, began to warm up for the struggle over the Reform Bill.

Into this struggle Cobbett put the whole of his energy. He felt a profound distrust of the various groups of parliamentary reformers—from Whigs bent on "moderate reform" to the "feelosophical villains" from north of the Border who were determined to transfer power to the middle classes in such a way as to leave their working-class allies out in the cold. Throughout the campaign he denounced the Whigs and Lord Brougham with impartial vigour, urging the working-class Radicals to get control of the Political Unions throughout the country, in order to press forward their own nominees to Parliament and so dish the Whigs. In this contest, Cobbett's followers were

usually worsted, and the Whigs and " feelosofers " between them captured most of the nominations. The Reformed Parliament of 1832, when it came at last, contained Cobbett, as member for Oldham. But he had only a handful of followers to face a powerful Whig majority with which the Tories were usually ready to make common cause when really Radical measures were at issue. It was said by his parliamentary contemporaries that old Cobbett did not make much of a politician, and never demeaned himself as a proper " House of Commons man." He has, however, apart from his violent attacks on Peel and on the Speaker, at any rate one very memorable House of Commons speech to his credit. He spoke it in the course of the debates on the Factory Bill of 1833. Though it has been quoted often, I feel I must quote it again—the one longish quotation from Cobbett's writings I have introduced into this paper :—

" Sir, I will make but one single observation upon this subject, and that is this : that this ' reformed ' House has this night made a discovery greater than all the discoveries that all former Houses of Commons have ever made, even if all their discoveries could have been put into one. Heretofore, we have sometimes been told that our ships, our mercantile traffic with foreign nations by means of these ships, together with our body of rich merchants —we have sometimes been told that these form the source of our wealth, power and security. At other times, the land has stepped forward, and bid us look to it, and its yeomanry, as the sure and solid foundation of our greatness and our safety. At other times the Bank has pushed forward with her claims, and has told us that, great as the others were, they were nothing without ' PUBLIC CREDIT,' upon which not only the prosperity and happiness, but the very independence of the country depend. But, sir, we have this night discovered, that the shipping, the land, and the Bank and its credit, are all worth nothing compared with the labour of three hundred thousand little girls in Lancashire ! Aye, when compared with only an eighth part of those three hundred thousand little girls, from whose labour if only we deduct two hours a day, away goes the wealth, away goes the capital, away go the resources, the power, and the glory of England ! With what pride and what pleasure, sir, will the right hon. gentlemen opposite, and the honourable member for Manchester behind me, go northward with the news of this discovery, and communicate it to that large portion

of these little girls whom they have the honour and the happiness to represent!"

Cobbett was not destined to have a long or distinguished parliamentary career. He was an old man when he was elected; and, proud as he was of being there to represent the common people, the House of Commons was by no means his spiritual home. He sat assiduously through the debates, though the late hours did not suit him and he had very little respect for most of the proceedings of the "honourable House." But his letters show him pining for the country and for his farm; and he was happiest when Parliament was in recess, and he could get back to his crops. For throughout his life, whatever he was doing—and that was usually a great deal—he was never really happy without a patch of land to look after. He made one farm after another—his Botley farm, on which he lavished many years of labour, only to be ousted as a result of his bankruptcy, his farm on Long Island during his two years' exile in the United States from 1817 to 1819, his seed farm at Kensington, his farm at Barn Elms, and in his last years Normandy Farm, Ash, near Aldershot. There he made his agricultural experiments, with acacia trees or *locusts*, as he called them, with Cobbett's corn, Swedish turnips, straw plait, and a host of other things; and he was always eager to pass on his knowledge to his fellow-farmers and labourers. He wrote and edited agricultural manuals, from Jethro Tull's famous *Horse-hoeing Husbandry* to his own *English Gardener*, *The Woodlands*, and *A Treatise on Cobbett's Corn*. Farming and education were blended together in his mind. He must always be turning over land, and tilling the soil of other men's minds as well.

Yet for formal educational systems he had for the most part a great contempt. His references to Oxford are uniformly derogatory: he loved nothing better than to see a professor caught out; and his most outrageous diatribes were poured out against the "feelosofical villains" like Brougham, who set out to teach the poor the blessings of the new industrial system. He had no use for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Brougham's favourite, which Thomas Love Peacock aptly nicknamed "The Steam Intellect Society." The kind of education

he believed in firmly was the sort he had got himself, and was ready at every opportunity to impart to others—the kind a man picked up not at school, but by sitting over Cobbett's *Grammar* or Cobbett's *History* or even Cobbett's *Register* before or after a hard day's work. If you read *Advice to Young Men* you will soon realise that the young men who set out to follow it were not in for an easy time. They had to be up early, and abed late. They were to live sparingly; and plenty of hard work was recommended as a means to keeping fit. Beer they might have—especially home-brewed; but they had better keep off other intoxicants, and certainly off such noxious brews as tea. Cobbett had learnt in a hard school; and he was thoroughly well satisfied with the results. Let others go and do likewise, if they wanted to make their way in the world.

This egoism of Cobbett's is everywhere in his work. I can imagine that his contemporaries often found it offensive as well as laughable. Certainly they were always on the look-out for weak points in his armour, of which there were not a few. It is laughable still, because of its *naïveté*; but it is no longer a source of offence. For it is only the prig, like Marcus Aurelius, whose self-satisfaction continues to offend when the possessor is centuries dead and gone. Cobbett's self-satisfaction is not priggish. It rests not on an interest in saving his own soul, but on an assertion that he is as good a man as anyone else; and it is preserved from self-centredness because he also made it an assertion of the rights and claims of the common people from whose ranks he had come. "Hate me, hate my class," Cobbett seemed to be always saying; and it was to a great extent his egoism that enabled him to go on throughout his life thinking and feeling as one of the country folk among whom he had been born, and thus able to speak to them, far more than any of his contemporaries, as one of themselves. The common people of England have not had so many interpreters that they can afford to forget Cobbett.

When Cobbett died, in 1835, the *Times*—the "bloody old *Times*," as he had often called it—said that he was an "episode." The *Times* meant that, with all his doing and saying, he had never understood or formed part of the main stream of the development of English life. He had lived,

battling against an unwelcome and unintelligible present in the cause of a romanticised past. Therefore, it was predicted, he was destined to have no successors. On that last point the *Times* was right; for Cobbett was the last—and indeed also the first—articulate voice of that English countryside, which, even in his own day, the rising tide of industrialism was swiftly drowning. He belonged to an age that was dying; and, as he saw the sufferings and injustices that the birth of the new age brought upon his own people, it was natural for him not only to revolt, but to look romantically at the ages that had been swept away. This explains his attitude to the old squires; and it also explains his views of the Protestant Reformation.

It was fitting that Cobbett's last crusade should be made on behalf of the village labourers for whom he had been fighting hard the best part of his life. In the agricultural troubles of 1830-1, which Mr. and Mrs. Hammond have called "The Last Labourers' Revolt," he stood up manfully on behalf of the unfortunates whom the Whig Government was putting down with so savage a severity. He was put on trial himself, on the charge of responsibility for fomenting the revolt; and doubtless his speeches about the labourers' wrongs had helped to stir up the spirit of resistance in them, though Cobbett had certainly not incited them to actual rioting. He was acquitted, for the jury disagreed; and his acquittal was regarded as a bad blow for the Whig Government. But the labourers, though they had behaved with a singular absence of violence, were put down ruthlessly; for the Whigs were determined to show that, though they were parliamentary reformers, they were as devout upholders of law and order as the Duke of Wellington himself. Cobbett's hatred of the Whigs was greatly fanned by the events of 1831; and his last crusade was against a further Whig blow at the rights of the poor.

In 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed, to sweep away the "Speenhamland" system of poor relief in aid of wages in the rural areas, and to make an end of outdoor relief for the unemployed in the industrial regions. In the early months of 1835—he died in June, 1835—Cobbett was trying to stir up the whole country to a revolt against the new Poor Law, which he had fought hard, with

only a handful of supporters, while it was before the House of Commons. His last articles are a summons to this crusade to preserve the right of the poor to maintenance. But he died just as the new Poor Law Commissioners were beginning their work; and in fact the agricultural labourers had been too heavily beaten down four years before to have strength left to respond to his appeal. The response came in 1837 among the industrial workers, when the "Three Bashaws of Somerset House," having completed the introduction of the new Poor Law into the agricultural areas, turned to applying it to the industrial districts. The outcome of that response was the Chartist Movement. But before the advent of Chartism Cobbett was dead; and Feargus O'Connor was left to lead it.

Whether Cobbett was an "episode" or not, he was certainly an Englishman. I know of none so English, so much of that England which was not a nation of shopkeepers, but a nation of farmers and sailors and adventurers over the face of the earth. Not that Cobbett scorned shop-keeping. He kept shop for many years, first in Philadelphia, and latterly at his shops in London. In the Strand and at Bolt Court he sold not only books and newspapers and pamphlets, but also seeds and trees, and even patent fire-grates of a type which he was trying to introduce from the United States. Cobbett kept shop; and he had a very good idea of the value of making money, though he never mastered the art of keeping it for long. But for him shop-keeping was an incident; and the wares he sold were mostly of his own making. He delighted in making things, and was never happy unless he had plenty of work on hand. Whatever he was doing, his day was like a farmer's day. I have a diary of his, written at the end of his life, in which jottings about the crops and the weather appear all mixed up with notes about Parliament and politics and family affairs, and anything that happens to need noting down. Its jumble of activities gives an extraordinarily clear impression of the ceaseless round of doing and making that was Cobbett's life.

Much of that round I have left out—far more, indeed, than I have put in; for this is an essay, and not a biography. But I have at least tried to suggest the sort of man William

Cobbett was. If you want more, I have written a life of him. But, best of all, go to his own books, and of these, above all others, to *Rural Rides*. For there you will find Cobbett himself, talking about all manner of things as he rides over the country he loves and seeing in it only too much to hate. *Rural Rides* is Cobbett; and it is also a not inconsiderable part of England.