

William Cobbett

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William Cobbett (9 March 1763 – 18 June 1835) was a radical politician, agriculturist and prolific journalist. He was born at Farnham, Surrey. He thought that the reform of Parliament and the abolition of the rotten boroughs would help cure the poverty of the farm labourers. Cobbett constantly attacked the borough-mongers, sinecurists and "tax-eaters". He



William Cobbett, portrait in oils possibly by George Cooke around 1831. On display at the National Portrait Gallery, London

opposed the Corn Laws, a tax on imported grain. Through the many apparent inconsistencies in Cobbett's life, one strand continued to run: an ingrained opposition to authority and a suspicion of novelty. Early in his career, he was a "loyalist" supporter of King and Country; later, he joined (and successfully publicised) the radical movement which led to the Reform Bill of 1832. He is best known today for his book *[[Rural Rides]]*, 1830.

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Childhood

[William Cobbett]

<http://www.williamcobbett.org> was born in Farnham, Surrey, on 9th March 1763, the son of a tavern owner. He was taught to read and write by his father, and first worked as a farm labourer.

Early life (1783-1791)

On May 6, 1783, on an impulse he took the stagecoach to London and spent eight or nine months as a clerk in the employ of a Mr Holland at Gray's Inn. He enlisted in the army in 1784, and made good use of the soldier's copious spare time to educate himself, particularly in English grammar. His regiment was posted to New Brunswick and he sailed from Gravesend to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Cobbett was in Saint John, Fredericton and elsewhere in the province until September 1791. He rose through the ranks to become Sergeant Major.

He returned to England with his regiment, landing at Portsmouth 3 November 1791 and obtained his discharge from the army on 19 December 1791. On 5 February 1792 he married Anne Reid in Woolwich: he had met her whilst in Canada.

France and the United States (1792-1800)

He had developed a disdain for the corrupt officer class, gathering evidence while in New Brunswick, but his charges against officers were sidetracked. He fled to France in March 1792 to avoid retribution. Intending to stay a year to learn the language he found the French Revolution in full swing and the French Revolutionary Wars begun, so Cobbett sailed for the United States in September 1792.

He was first at Wilmington and then Philadelphia by the Spring of 1793. Cobbett initially prospered by teaching English to Frenchmen and translating texts from French to

English. He became a controversial political writer and pamphleteer writing with a pro-British stance under the pseudonym ***Peter Porcupine***.

A disastrous lawsuit led to his financial ruin in 1799 and he returned to England in 1800 sailing from New York, via Halifax, to Falmouth.

Return to England

Cobbett was greeted warmly by the British establishment on arrival but refused all offers of reward for his propagandising in the United States.

Three years later he started his newspaper, the *Political Register*. At first he supported the Tories but he gradually became more radical. By 1806 he was a strong advocate of parliamentary reform.

He began publishing the *Parliamentary Debates* in 1802. This unofficial record of Parliamentary proceedings later became officially known as Hansard (see [External link](#))

below).

Cobbett stood for Parliament in Honiton in 1806. He was unsuccessful as he refused to bribe the electorate by 'buying' votes; it also encouraged him in his opposition to rotten boroughs and the need for parliamentary reform.

Prison (1810-1812)

Cobbett was found guilty of treasonous libel on June 15, 1810 after objecting in 'The Register' to the flogging at Ely of local militiamen by Hanoverians. He was sentenced to two years in Newgate Prison. While in prison he wrote the pamphlet *Paper against Gold*, warning of the dangers of paper money, as well as many Essays and Letters. On his release a dinner in London, for 600, was given in his honour, presided over by Sir Francis Burdett, a strong supporter of parliamentary reform like himself.

By 1815 the tax on newspapers had reached 4d. a copy. As few people could afford to pay 6d. or 7d. for a newspaper, the tax restricted the

circulation of most of these journals to people with fairly high incomes. Cobbett was only able to sell just over a thousand copies a week. The following year Cobbett began publishing the Political Register as a pamphlet. Cobbett now sold the Political Register for only 2d. and it soon had a circulation of 40,000.

Cobbett's journal was the main newspaper read by the working class. This made Cobbett a dangerous man and in 1817 he heard that the government planned to have him arrested for sedition.

United States (1817-1819)

Following the passage of the Power of Imprisonment Bill in 1817, and fearing arrest for his arguably seditious writings, he fled to the United States. On Wednesday 27 March 1817 at Liverpool he embarked on board the ship IMPORTER, D. Ogden master, bound for New York, accompanied by his two eldest sons, William and John.

For two years Cobbett lived on a farm in Long

Island where he wrote *Grammar of the English Language* and with the help of William Benbow, a friend in London, continued to publish the *Political Register*.

A plan to return to England with Thomas Paine's remains for a proper burial led to the ultimate loss of his predecessor's remains. The plan was to give Paine a heroic reburial on his native soil, but the bones were still among Cobbett's effects when he died over twenty years later. There is no confirmed story about what happened to them after that, although down the years various people have claimed to own parts of Paine's remains such as his skull and right hand.

Cobbett arrived back at Liverpool by ship in November 1819.

England (1819-1835)

William Cobbett arrived back in England soon after the Peterloo Massacre. Cobbett joined with other Radicals in his attacks on the government and three times during the next

couple of years was charged with libel.

In 1820 he stood for Parliament in Coventry but finished bottom of the poll.

- *Cobbett was not content to let the stories come to him, he went out like a good reporter and dug them up, especially the story that he returned to time and time again in the course of his writings: the plight of the rural Englishman. He began riding around the country on horseback making observations of what was happening in the towns and villages. Rural Rides, a work which Cobbett is best known for today, first appeared in serial form in the Political Register running from 1822 to 1826; it was published in book form in 1830*

- extract taken from the Biography

In 1829 he published *Advice to Young Men* in which he heavily criticised the *Principle of Population* published by Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus.

Cobbett continued to publish controversial

material in the *Political Register* and in July, 1831, was charged with seditious libel after writing a pamphlet entitled *Rural War* in support of the Captain Swing Riots, which applauded those who were smashing farm machinery and burning haystacks. Cobbett conducted his own defence and he was so successful that the jury failed to convict him.

Cobbett still had a strong desire to be elected to the House of Commons. He was defeated in Preston in 1826 and Manchester in 1832 but after the passing of the 1832 Reform Act Cobbett was able to win the parliamentary seat of Oldham. In Parliament Cobbett concentrated his energies on attacking corruption in government and the 1834 Poor Law.

From 1831 until his death, he farmed at Normandy, a village in Surrey.

In his later life, however Macaulay, a fellow MP, remarked that his faculties were impaired by age; indeed that his paranoia had developed to the point of insanity.

He was a gifted journalist, though later generations have taken offence at his some of his apparently anti-Semitic and racist views. He is considered to have started as an inherently conservative journalist and later became increasingly more radical and sympathetic to social ideals. He provides an alternative view of rural England in the age of an Industrial Revolution with which he was not in sympathy.

Standing for Parliament

In his lifetime Cobbett stood for parliament five times, four of which attempts were unsuccessful:

- 1806 Honiton
- 1820 Coventry
- 1826 Preston
- 1832 Manchester
- 1832 Oldham (elected)

External links

- Biography
- Brief history: gives additional reference to *The Political Register*
- History of Hansard
- Biography at the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*
- "Prickly protester" article on the life and writings of William Hone by Kelly Grovier in the *Times Literary Supplement*
- William Cobbett and his home town of Farnham

Publications

- Works by William Cobbett at Project Gutenberg
- *Cottage Economy* ISBN 0-9538325-0-3
- *Rural Rides* ISBN 0-14-043579-4
- *Advice to Young Men, and (Incidentally) to Young Women, in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life*
- *A History of the Protestant Reformation In England and Ireland* ISBN 0-89555-353-8
- *Rural Rides* - full text at A Vision of Britain through Time.
- *Rural Rides* - Chapter on Hertfordshire,

and Buckinghamshire: To St. Albans, Through Edgware, Stanmore, and Watford, Returning by Redbourn, Hempstead, and Chesham. - June 1822.

- *The Poor Man's Friend; or, Essays on the Rights and Duties of the Poor.* (1829) at The McMaster University Archive for the History of Economic Thought
- *A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason and Other Crimes and misdemeanors: from the earliest period to the year 1783, with notes and other illustrations*, vol. 4 of 21, compiled by Thomas Bayly Howell, London : T.C. Hansard for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816. - Google Books
- *The Life of Andrew Jackson, President of the United States*, New York: Harper & Bros., 1834.

"A Year's Residence in the United States of America" Printed by B. Bensley, Andover and published by the author, 183 Fleet Street, London, 1828 (based on his life in 1818 USA)

References

- G.D.H. Cole, *The Life of William Cobbett*, (1924).
- G.K. Chesterton, *William Cobbett*, (1925)
ISBN 0-7551-0033-6
- Richard Ingrams, *The Life and Adventures of William Cobbett*, (2005)
ISBN 0-00-255800-9

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