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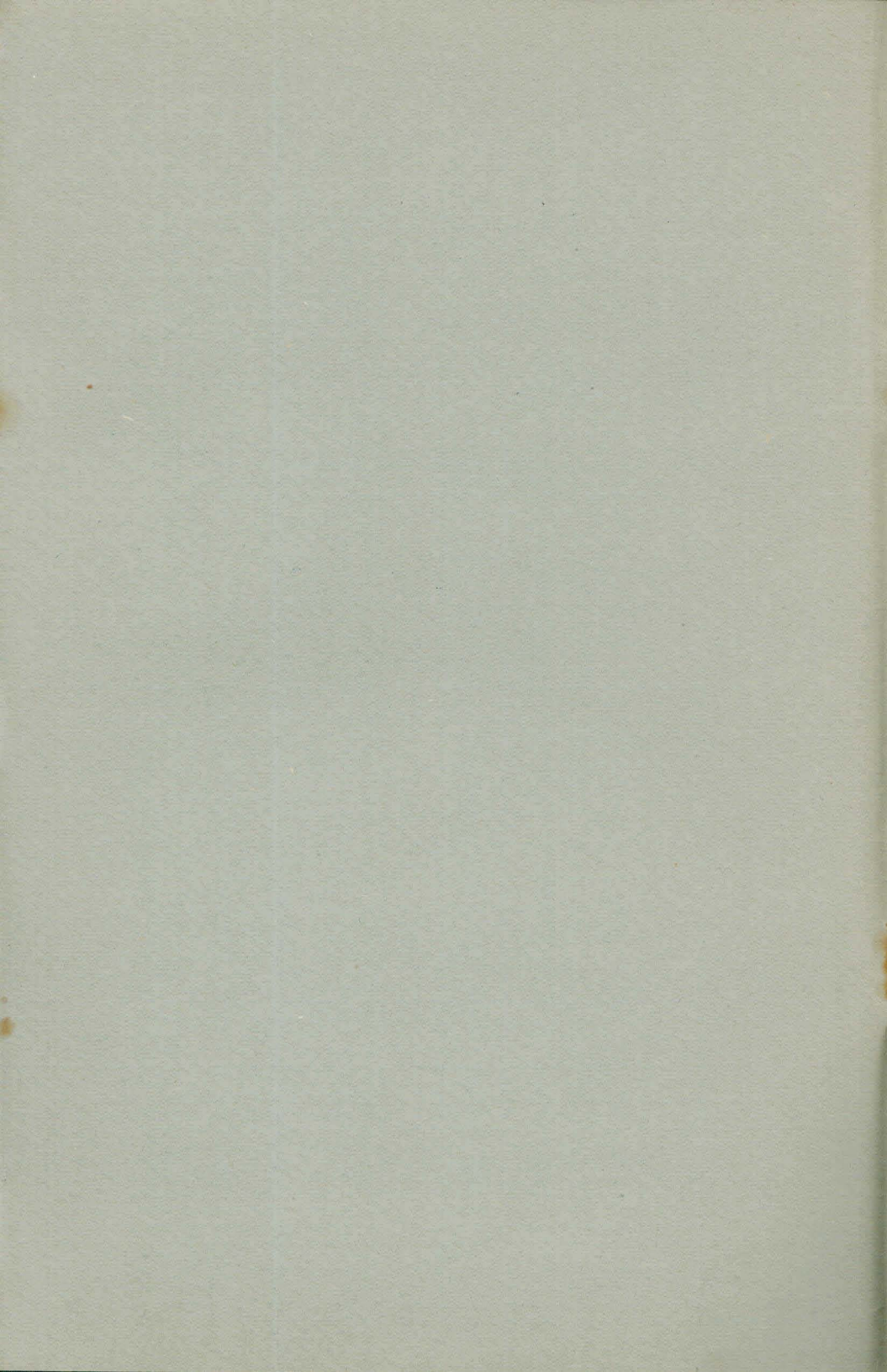
# WILLIAM COBBETT



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LONDON, T. NORTH, 162, FLEET STREET

FABIAN  
BIOGRAPHICAL SERIES  
No. 9.



Fabian Tract No. 215.

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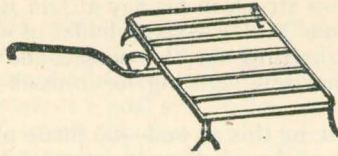
BY

G. D. H. COLE.

Biographical Series No. 9. Price Threepence.  
Published and sold by the Fabian Society,  
at the Fabian Bookshop, 25 Tothill St., West-  
minster, S.W.1. - Published June, 1925.







## WILLIAM COBBETT.

THE sign which appears above these words is a Gridiron—the sign chosen by Cobbett in his later years as the symbol of his methods of political controversy. In earlier years he had described himself as a ‘porcupine,’ and ‘Peter Porcupine’ had become, in the United States of America, by far the most redoubtable of anti-Jacobin pamphleteers. Carlyle compared him to a rhinoceros, and Heine to a hound. And Carlyle again called him “the pattern John Bull of his century.”

A suggestive crop of metaphor—suggestive at least of the man in his public dealings, and as he appeared to the outside world. He was forever grilling his enemies on the gridiron of his invective, or sticking them with his quills of ridicule and contempt; trampling them down like a rhinoceros, and as insensitive to the blows they dealt him back; swift on the scent as a hound, and as tenacious of the chase; and, above all, the John Bull in the china shop of Tory, Whig and Radical alike.

Not merely the bull, observe, but the John Bull! Everyone who has written of Cobbett with sympathy has recognised in him an essence peculiarly English, something typical of England itself. He is not merely English; in a real sense he stands for England. He is “the pattern John Bull of his century”; but his century is not the nineteenth, in which the best part of his work was done. It is more the eighteenth, still more the seventeenth, yet more again the sixteenth. His roots are deep in the historic past of England; the further back one goes, the nearer one seems to come to the age in which he belongs. Yet one never reaches it; for the England Cobbett typifies is not the England of any one century, but a deep-seated tradition—a tradition whose swift destruction in his own day called forth his most righteous anger.

Cobbett was a peasant. He came of a peasant stock, and was reared as a peasant, in the heart of a people of peasants. Despite all his experiences, as lawyer’s clerk, soldier, teacher, journalist, agitator, Member of Parliament, to the end of his life he thought and felt as a peasant. He did not need to sympathise with the people and their wrongs; he was one of the people, and their wrongs



were his. Every blow struck in his day at Old England—and not a minute passed without a blow—was a buffet of which he personally felt the impact. In fighting for the people, and returning blow for blow, he was all the time fighting for himself and for his own people.

He was a peasant in this as well—he made no abstract theories. His judgments were all based directly on what he saw and felt and knew from personal experience. The appeal to first principles never moved him one iota, and he seldom even employed it as a weapon in controversy. ‘Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity’ left him cold. Robert Owen’s Utopian Socialism provoked only his contempt. He became a militant Radical, not because he had any love for Radical principles, but because he saw around him positive abuses and crimes against the people which called for radical remedies. The ‘feelosophical’ Radicalism of Bentham and Brougham he hated far more than the Toryism of Eldon or Wellington. He could not abide Francis Place.

All too seldom in history has the peasant been able to speak his mind with an eloquence to command the world’s attention. Occasionally, he has made himself known by burning villas or *chateaux*, by some blazing terror that has swept swiftly over the countryside. Far more often he has had to leave others to speak for him; and those others have woefully misinterpreted his meaning. It is the peasant’s tragedy that, when at last he found his voice in Cobbett’s plain and forcible prose, his defeat at the hands of plutocracy was already assured. England had chosen the path of industrialism before Cobbett began to speak; and his was a voice crying in the great wilderness that was soon to be called “the workshop of the world.”

William Cobbett was born in 1763, and died in 1835. He was born just when the forces of economic change, active for some time before, were gathering that swift momentum which, in a single generation, destroyed the villages of England and created the noisome factory towns. Enclosures and the rise in the cost of living were then just beginning their swift expropriation and pauperisation of the peasantry; and the dispossessed peasants and the pauper ‘apprentices’ were being made the basis for the concoction of the modern factory proletariat. Most of the phases of this great degradation of the people passed before his own eyes. He saw the peasantry being driven from the land, and the ugly towns rising in the North and Midlands. And as the peasants declined, the new rich rose to power and place. Country seats passed into the hands of bankers, stockjobbers, merchants; and, when at length Reform came, it only enthroned the new lords of the people in the seats of the old. Cobbett’s last years were spent in a criticism of the Reformed Parliament fully as sweeping and vigorous as any he had pronounced against the Rotten Boroughs of pre-Reform days. His last articles were written to denounce the new Poor Law of 1834, the measure in which the Reformed Parliament applied its Malthusian faith to the solution of the

social problem. He died before, in the Chartist Movement, the factory workers gathered up their forces for a mass protest against the new order—a last protest preceding the triumphant march of Victorian Capitalism towards a goal still undefined.

Cobbett's life thus covers the most critical period in modern history. He saw the two revolutions in industry and agriculture transform the whole social structure of English life, creating at once a new rich and a new poor—the 'Two Nations' of Disraeli's *Sybil*. He heard from afar the thunder of the Revolution in France, which brought the old European State system crashing down in ruins. He lived through the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and through twenty years of the social struggles which followed them. For thirty-five years he was a powerful, for twenty years by far the most powerful, journalist in England, unrivalled as a writer of strong simple English, unrivalled too in his knowledge of the mind of the English people. He was arrogant, egoistic, intolerant, quarrelsome, in public affairs; he was often inaccurate in matters of fact, and often wrong in his minor conclusions. But in the big things he was right, the more right because he judged not by principles, but by the direct evidence of his senses, always ready to call a spade a spade, and to give tyrants and hypocrites the names of their vices. Above all, he could always talk in a language the people knew. This was the secret of his power; he talked and wrote like the people, because he felt and thought like the people.

Cobbett was born at "The Jolly Farmer," Farnham, Surrey, in the heart of the prosperous hop country. It was an appropriate birthplace for a man who, all his life, looked and felt like the jolly farmer who is the traditional John Bull. He was seventy years old when J. S. Buckingham describes him as having "a ruddy countenance, a small laughing eye, and the figure of a respectable farmer." To Hazlitt, he recalled "a gentleman farmer of the last century."

Cobbett's father was indeed a small farmer, who combined farming with the business of an innkeeper. His earliest memories were of life and work in the fields—crow-scaring, hoeing, ploughing, gardening for the Bishop at Farnham Castle, and contriving to find time for country sports such as coursing as well. He loved gardens, and at fourteen he gave a hint of his taste for adventure by running away to London in order to get a job at Kew Gardens, of whose beauty he had heard. He got his job; but before long he returned home and resumed his work on the farm. His next adventure occurred when he was nineteen. On a visit to relations near Portsmouth he first saw the sea, and conceived at once the desire to be a sailor. His wish was thwarted, only because a kindly captain, who supposed him to be running away for fear of a bastard, persuaded him to return home.

"I returned once more to the plough," Cobbett wrote, "but I was spoiled for a farmer." Within a few months another sudden impulse caused him to leave home for ever. He was going to Guild-



ford Fair, and was on his way to meet two or three girls who were going with him, when he met the London coach coming up the turnpike road. In a moment he made up his mind, mounted the coach, and, without a word to his friends, was off to London, arriving there with but half a crown in his pocket. His was just twenty years old.

In the coach he was lucky enough to meet a business friend of his father's, a hop merchant, who after vainly trying to persuade him to go back home, at length found him a job in a lawyer's office. There, without friends or companions, Cobbett slaved for some months, learning to be an efficient clerk, but pining for green fields and adventure and acquiring a healthy distaste for the law and all its works. His longing for the sea returned upon him. At length, he could bear his office no longer. He went to Chatham, and enlisted, as he thought, in the marines, only to find that he had joined the infantry by mistake. He was now twenty-one.

Cobbett's books are full of memories of his life in the army. For a year he remained at the Chatham depot, and became a corporal. Then, in the spring of 1785, he was ordered to join his regiment in Nova Scotia. Almost at once the regiment was transferred to New Brunswick, and there Cobbett remained, rising to be regimental sergeant-major, until the autumn of 1791.

He was, to the end of his life, very proud of his doings as a soldier. At Chatham he had joined a circulating library, and read everything he could lay hands on. His experience as a clerk caused him to be made copyist to the Commandant, and he began to realise the deficiencies of his education. He set to work, under the extreme difficulties of barrack life, to teach himself what he called "grammar" —by which he meant the power to speak and write correct and vigorous English. He got Lowth's Grammar, wrote it all out several times, learnt it by heart, and repeated it when on sentry-go, saved up out of his twopence a day in order to buy pens, ink and paper, and pay his library subscription, and even went without food in his search after knowledge. In New Brunswick he continued this work, but found time also to amuse himself hunting and walking, and to make friends both among his fellow-soldiers and among the settlers. At the same time, he was absolutely punctual in his attendance to duty, never a minute late, never in fault with his superiors or his equals.

"There is no situation," he wrote, "where merit is so sure to meet with reward as in a well-disciplined army." Be this as it may, Cobbett was rewarded. As sergeant-major, if we may trust his own accounts, he soon ran the regiment, the officers, intent on amusing themselves, readily resigning the administrative control into his hands. He liked authority, and his army experiences early accustomed him to its exercise.

But he found time for love affairs. In New Brunswick he met Ann Reid, who later became his wife. She was the daughter of an artillery sergeant, and he fell in love with her at first sight when he saw her scrubbing out a tub at early morning in the snow. "That's



the girl for me," said he to his companions, before he had ever exchanged a word with her. They became engaged; but soon after the artillery regiment was moved back to England. Cobbett handed over his savings, a hundred and fifty guineas, to Ann Reid's keeping, and they parted.

Cobbett remained in New Brunswick for some years longer, and once almost got married to someone else. But he remembered Ann Reid, and escaped in time. When his regiment at length returned home he at once sought her out and married her. "I found my little girl *a servant of all work* (and hard work it was) at *five pounds a year*; and, without hardly saying a word about the matter, she put into my hands *the whole of my hundred and fifty guineas unbroken!*" This though he had told her to use it, if necessary, for her maintenance till his return.

Arrived in England, Cobbett at once procured his discharge from the Army, and set about a dangerous enterprise that had been long in his mind. He had become aware in New Brunswick that the officers of his regiment systematically pillaged the men, holding back part of the pay, and making all sorts of illicit gains in connection with the supply of provisions and stores. Aided by a corporal, he had made copious excerpts from the regimental books in proof of his case, and had made up his mind to leave the army and devote himself to an exposure of the frauds. He now demanded a court-martial, to be held in London, as in Portsmouth, where the regiment was, he feared intimidation of witnesses. He further claimed the discharge from the army of certain vital witnesses.

Away in New Brunswick, Cobbett had supposed that the corruption he saw was an isolated thing, proceeding from the special depravity of his own officers. Gradually, in face of the obstructions put by the War Office in his way, he realised that he was attacking a spoils system that was common to the whole army, and generally recognised in official quarters. For a time he persisted; but at length he understood he had no chance of success, and that he would in all probability be crushed himself unless he gave way. When the court-martial was at last held, no prosecutor appeared. Cobbett had thought discretion the better part, and fled to France, then in the throes of the Revolution. This was in March, 1792—the Girondins were still in power; the Terror had not begun.

Cobbett was at this time no politician, and it is doubtful if he had any political views. He took no part in French affairs, living quietly with his wife at Tilques, a village near St. Omer, and using the time to make himself thoroughly master of the French language. Here he stayed until August, when he set off on a visit to Paris. On the way, he heard the news of the attack on the Tuileries and the deposition of Louis XVI. Realising that this meant war, he made for Havre, and took boat for the United States.

For nearly eight years from 1792 Cobbett lived in the United States, maintaining himself first as a teacher of English to the stream

of émigrés who were arriving from France, and then as the leading journalist and pamphleteer in the British interest. He settled first at Wilmington, on the Delaware, but soon moved up to Philadelphia—a stronghold of Democratic opinion, which was keenly pro-French. Gradually Cobbett was drawn into politics, at first by disputing with his French pupils, who were mostly moderate republicans, and then by the rising tide of anti-British feeling which developed after the outbreak of the Revolutionary war. At length, his resentful patriotism made him take up the cudgels publicly for his country. He had taught himself how to write; indignation caused him to use his talent.

In 1794 Dr. Priestley, the great Radical Unitarian, whose house had been burnt down by the Birmingham mob in 1791, came to settle in the United States. The Democratic Club received him with fervent addresses, denouncing British persecution and acclaiming the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Roused to fury by what he regarded as Priestley's betrayal of his own people, Cobbett wrote a violently abusive pamphlet about him, entitled *Observations on Dr. Priestley's Emigration*.

The pamphlet was a success. It sold largely, and attracted widespread attention and controversy. Cobbett, having found the thing he could really do well, enjoyed himself hugely. In pamphlet after pamphlet he smote hard at the French Revolution and its American supporters, receiving shrewd knocks, but administering shrewder. Before long, he had become virtually the unofficial agent of British propaganda in the United States. Pitt's Government offered to take him into its pay; but then, as always, he preferred his independence.

The titles of these American pamphlets give a clear enough indication of their character. *A Bone to Gnaw for the Democrats*, *A Little Plain English*, *A Kick for a Bite*, *The Bloody Buoy*, *The Scare-Crow*, *A Letter to the Infamous Tom Paine*, *The Cannibal's Progress*, and a dozen more vigorous pamphlets soon followed the first. And in 1796 Cobbett began, with the *Political Censor*, the first of his many ventures into controversial journalism. In 1797 *Porcupine's Gazette*, a daily newspaper, replaced the *Censor*, and continued to appear as long as Cobbett remained in Philadelphia.

There is a curious irony in the fact that the greatest of English Radicals thus began his career as a loyalist writer in hot denunciation of the French Revolution and all its works. There was nothing too vile for Cobbett to attribute to the Revolution and its upholders. He wrote a *Life of Paine*, in which he collected all the scurrilous stories he could find. He published pamphlets about the events in France, which were as good examples of horror-mongering as anything lately issued from Riga or Helsingfors about events in Russia. And he libelled the American partizans of France as unmercifully as he dealt with Paine or Robespierre.

Yet a reading of these pamphlets makes the truth plain. There is in them no trace of thinking on political questions, and no con-



sidered view of Cobbett's own. They are simply joyous tirades of a naturally combative spirit, loving his own country the more for his absence from it, feeling his countrymen and his own late profession of arms insulted by the friends of France who surrounded him, forgetting in his instinctive patriotism the abuses and the reaction at home, which had driven him forth when he attempted their exposure, and idealising an England which was represented in his mind by the pleasant memories of his childhood at Farnham. Opposition, moreover, always roused him. "I was never in my life," he wrote, "of an accommodating disposition." Once he was plunged into the controversy about France, everything written in reply to his tirades served to increase the vigour of his own denunciations.

Before long this indiscriminate lashing out brought him into trouble. Among the 'Democratic' politicians of Philadelphia was Dr. Benjamin Rush, the leading advocate of the 'bleeding treatment' for combating the prevalent yellow fever. Cobbett nicknamed him 'Doctor Sangrado,' out of *Gil Blas*, and pursued him and his treatment with a curious mixture of medical and political denunciation. Rush treated George Washington, who died. Cobbett accused him of murder. But before this Rush had found matter enough in Cobbett's strictures for a libel action. After long delays, he won his case, and Cobbett was heavily fined. He wrote a violent pamphlet attacking the judge, and actually started a new paper, the *Rushlight*, to pursue his campaign against the Democratic doctor. But America had become too hot to hold him. At length, in 1800, he gave up the battle, and set sail for England.

Cobbett was thirty-seven years old at the time of his return. His reputation as a pamphleteer ensured him a welcome from the Government at home. He met Pitt and William Windham, and was offered the editorship of a Government newspaper, with a certain prospect of good pickings. He refused, and started an independent paper of his own, *The Porcupine*, which, having no capital behind it, speedily failed. Then, with money supplied by William Windham and other friends belonging to the extreme anti-Jacobin group, he started the weekly newspaper with which, for the rest of his life, his name was associated in the public mind.

The first number of the *Political Register* appeared in 1802, at a time when England was just concluding with Napoleon that Peace which neither side meant as more than a breathing-space to be used in getting ready for a renewal of the long war. Windham and his group were violently opposed to the Peace, and the *Political Register* began its career as an extreme loyalist and anti-Jacobin journal. The stop-gap Prime Minister, Henry Addington, later Lord Sidmouth, who had been put into power by Pitt in order to conclude the Peace of Amiens, incurred Cobbett's special hostility. To Pitt he gave for the time a qualified support, but Windham was his real leader and patron.

In 1803 the war was renewed; and in 1804 Pitt again became Prime

Minister, forming a Government largely composed of the same elements as Addington's. Fox was excluded because the King would not have him; and Windham and the Grenvilles would not take office without Fox. Cobbett found his political associations changing. With Napoleon Emperor of the French, Anti-Jacobinism was no longer a live issue. Fox, who had upheld the French Revolution, and Windham who, following Burke, had most bitterly opposed it, had joined hands against Pitt and Addington. Cobbett, who had denounced Fox up hill and down dale, found himself in the same political camp.

About this time began that change in Cobbett's political opinions which caused him, a few years later, to break completely with Whigs and Tories alike, and to pass over definitely to Radicalism. His new attitude to Pitt seems to have been the beginning of this change. The more Cobbett surveyed Pitt's policy with critical eyes, the more he saw in it to disapprove. Hitherto, he had written, and thought, almost wholly about foreign affairs. But now that all the political groups were united in support of the war against Napoleon, Cobbett began to think and write about home affairs as well. He awoke, with a start, to a sense of the abuses which were everywhere prevalent. The rapid increase of the National Debt and the no less rapid growth of pauperism in the countryside, the multiplication of pensions and sinecures by the Governments of Addington and Pitt, the squandering of public money, the enrichment of Government contractors and stockjobbers, the speculation and inhumanity prevalent in the army—of these he became consciously aware for the first time. He began to write about them, and to apply his power of invective to things and persons nearer home.

This does not mean that Cobbett became at once a Radical. For some time longer he continued to denounce all proposals for the reform of Parliament, and to demand the vigorous prosecution of the war. The real turning-point came in 1806, when Pitt died, and Cobbett's closest political associate, Windham, joined Fox and Grenville to form the Ministry of All the Talents. Cobbett at once presented to the new Ministers a drastic programme of reforms; he expected Windham, as Secretary for War, to clear corruption out of the Army, and the Government as a whole to put a stop to the enormous abuses which he denounced as the "Pitt system." Naturally, he was disappointed; the new Ministers merely carried on in these respects the traditions of the old. Within a few weeks, he had quarrelled with Windham, and shaken the dust of the orthodox parties for ever from his feet. Speedily he moved on to acceptance of the whole Radical programme, and became an advocate of Manhood Suffrage as well as of "economical reform."

This rapid conversion was not, however, wholly due to political disillusionment. During the years following his return Cobbett was gradually rediscovering England. From the time when he left Farnham in 1783 to his return in 1800 he had seen practically



nothing of the English countryside. He had lived in New Brunswick, in France, and in the United States, with only one brief and busy sojourn in England when he got married and sought unsuccessfully to expose the peculations of his officers. Even after his return in 1800, he lived in London, and paid for some years only a few short visits to the country. But he had not lost his love for the countryside, and at length, in 1805, he felt well enough established to settle down out of London, and combine his journalistic work with a little farming. He bought at Botley, near Southampton, a charming farmhouse and some land, both of which he set to work vigorously to improve. His return to the country brought him again into touch with the life of the people, and opened his eyes to much that he had failed to realise before.

For the country round Southampton, as he now saw it in 1805, was very different from the memories of his boyhood at Farnham. The huge rise in prices due to war inflation had reduced the mass of the rural workers to destitution. Enclosures were being actively made, usually with little regard to their effect on the poorer commoners. The rural labourers, a class swollen by the peasants who had lost their lands or rights of common, were largely subsisting on poor relief, doled out under the Speenhamland system in aid of wages on which no family could live. Even the scale of this relief was being steadily cut down, as the poor rates and taxes together became an intolerable burden. The farmers, who had profited by war prices, aped the manners and expense of gentlefolk, and ground down the labourers in order to retain the means to luxury for themselves. The stockjobbers, contractors and placemen were busy buying up estates, or carving new great properties out of holdings taken from the peasants by enclosure.

All this Cobbett began to realise only when he returned to the countryside. It roused his indignation as nothing else could have done. All through his years in America he had comforted himself with an idealised picture of England, based on the pleasant memories of his own boyhood. With this in mind he had flayed the enemies of his country, who appeared to him the would-be destroyers of this rural paradise. Now, at length, he saw the reality, and his anger was proportionate to the contrast with the picture he had cherished.

Thus, Cobbett's Radicalism, as it developed from 1805 onwards, was in its essence a defence of the peasantry against the oppression under which they suffered. He saw the cause of their misery in the prevalent economic abuses—inflation, the growth of the National Debt, heavy taxation, money frittered away in pensions, sinecures, and inefficient and corrupt administration. Since the orthodox parties upheld these things, on which, indeed, their power and wealth were based, there must be a thorough Reform of Parliament, which would replace these by men prepared to pluck up abuses by the root. This involved, in Cobbett's view, no attack on monarchy, or even on the old nobility. The enemies of the people were the new classes which

were now dominating society by the power of wealth—the financiers, the cotton lords, the contractors, on whom Pitt and his successors relied for the means to finance the European struggle against France. It is significant that, in the zeal of his new Radicalism, Cobbett turned his invective mainly upon two things—the swiftly growing National Debt, and the transformation of Great Britain from an agricultural to an industrial and commercial country. Exports, he said, harmed the nation; an agricultural country would never have produced such a monstrosity as modern Manchester; the “commercial system” and the “funding system” were inseparable; as commerce grew, pauperism and the National Debt grew by corresponding stages.

Rapidly, Cobbett became a power among the Radicals. He developed close associations with Sir Francis Burdett, Lord Cochrane, Major Cartwright, Henry Hunt and other Radical leaders. The *Political Register* became by far the most influential of Radical journals. Naturally, he also incurred the strong hostility of the governing classes; and before long those in power were seeking eagerly for ways of suppressing him. He had, moreover, by this time become also a fluent and popular speaker. He had tried his power on the Radical side in several election campaigns, and had begun that series of “rustic harangues” which made him the greatest agitator as well as the greatest journalist of his day. This was an additional reason for his suppression.

The Tory Government's chance came in 1809. A small mutiny over unfair deductions from the soldiers' pay broke out among the local militia at Ely, and was quelled by the arrival of four squadrons of the mercenary German Legion. The ringleaders were tried by court-martial, and sentenced to five hundred lashes. Cobbett wrote a furious article denouncing the floggings; the Government promptly prosecuted him for sedition. After some negotiations, during which he hoped at one time that the charge would be withdrawn on condition of the *Register* ceasing publication, he stood his trial, and was sentenced to a fine of £1,000, two years' imprisonment in Newgate, and to give bail in £3,000, and find two sureties at £1,000 each, at the end of his term.

From 1810 to 1812, therefore, Cobbett was confined in Newgate gaol. But, according to modern notions, the terms of his imprisonment were quite extraordinarily lenient. He was allowed to hire comfortable rooms in the prison, where his children took turns to come and stay with him, and hampers of provisions were sent regularly from Botley. He could receive, and entertain to steak and porter, as many visitors as he liked. And, above all, he could go on writing and issuing the *Register* as freely as if he had been at large. For all this he had to pay, and pay heavily; but he suffered from no other disability than confinement within the walls of the prison.

The *Register*, then, was published regularly during his confine-



ment, and under his editorial control. In it appeared his *Paper against Gold*, his most considerable work up to this time, in which he stated at length his case against inflation, the growth of the National Debt, and the 'Pitt system' of finance, regarded as the source of the prevailing pauperism and distress. Inspired largely by Tom Paine's famous tract, *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*, Cobbett treated the flood of paper money, let loose during the war and the Industrial Revolution, as the sign of national decay and the source of the great rise in prices which had made the few unprecedently rich and the many intolerably poor. His book is a queer mixture of true and false. It was right enough in its account of the effects of the war-time finance; but it took no account of the needs for more currency and credit in order to finance the swift expansion of industry under the influence of machinery. With all its faults, it became immensely popular, and confirmed Cobbett's position as leader of the Radicals outside Parliament.

Cobbett's life in prison was comfortable and productive; but it was also very expensive. When he came out of Newgate in 1812, he was a ruined man. Even before his imprisonment, his affairs were in a tangle, though he only discovered when he was in gaol the extent of his embarrassments. Never a good business man, he had allowed the business side of the *Register* and his other enterprises to slip into the hands of his assistant, Wright, who had made a thorough mess of them. The *Register* Cobbett saved from the wreck of his fortunes; but he had to sell his house at Botley, and two of his most considerable enterprises, the *Parliamentary History of England*, a great compilation of historical records, and *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, which bought by his printer, Hansard, has become the familiar *Hansard* of our own day. Despite these sales, his financial difficulties continued until 1820, when, by becoming a bankrupt, he got a fresh start.

During the intervening years, a great deal had happened. The long war at last ended in 1815, after the episode of the Hundred Days; and, after the first rejoicings, the country settled down to count the cost. Prices fell, indeed; but the burden of the War Debt rose in proportion. Unemployment was everywhere; and the blow fell with especial severity in the country districts, where the collapse of war prices fell on a labouring population already living on a bare margin of subsistence. With hunger came unrest. The Luddite disturbances of a few years before had shown the depth of discontent in the industrial districts. Now, the troubles became more general; and the governing classes lived in fear of revolution. The first mood, in which ineffectual attempts were made to relieve the distress, soon gave way, under the influence of fear, to a mood of repression. In 1817 the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended, and the Government passed a series of 'Gagging Acts' directed especially against the popular press and the right of public meeting.

These measures had a direct reference to Cobbett's doings. Hitherto, the *Register* had been an expensive weekly, costing 10d.

or 1/-, and therefore bought only by fairly well-to-do persons and a few clubs and public houses patronised by the Radical workers. But in 1816, at the height of the unrest, Cobbett produced a special *Register* at 2d, containing an *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers*, in which he backed up their claims, and urged Radical Reform as the sole remedy for the distress. Intended as an isolated issue, the cheap *Register* had an instant success and Cobbett at once decided to issue it regularly. For some time he sold 50,000 copies weekly—for those days a quite unprecedented circulation. Within a few weeks, he had put himself definitely at the head of the Radical working-class agitation.

Undoubtedly, the success of the cheap *Register* and the growth of Cobbett's influence were among the chief reasons for the repressive laws of 1817. Cobbett at once realised that, if he stayed in England, arrest was certain, and that the conditions of his second imprisonment would be quite unlike those of seven years before. He made up his mind to fly, and, leaving England in secret, returned to the United States of America, where he remained for more than two years, sending copy regularly for publication in the *Register*, which was kept going by his agents during his absence.

Cobbett has been much criticised for running away at this critical time. His own answer to his critics was that he was better occupied writing in America than gaoled in England, and that he could have accomplished nothing by staying. But some of his Radical colleagues who stayed behind and went to gaol were naturally not content with his explanation. Posterity, whether it holds him right or wrong, can at any rate be grateful for the results of his going.

For this two years' sojourn in America begins what is, for posterity, the most fruitful period of Cobbett's life—the period of his greatest writings. At the farm which he rented in North Hempstead, he not only wrote his *Journal of a Year's Residence in America* and his *Grammar of the English Language*, but also planned out many of the books written during the last crowded fifteen years of his life. Escape from direct political contacts and the daily struggle set free a part of his mind which had been repressed. He began to write, not merely great political journalism, but great books, greater because he put into them more of himself, a broader view of life, a more abounding sympathy and virtue. His withdrawal was necessary, not only to save him from gaol, but still more to enable him to find out more fully his own powers.

Cobbett returned to England in 1819. The danger was not over. Indeed, unrest had grown, and the Government, on the morrow of the Peterloo massacre, was just pushing through the Six Acts, which went considerably further in repression than the measures of 1817. He came back, not because it was safe to come, but because he knew now what he wanted to do.

From 1819 to 1832 Cobbett's life is, in one aspect, the history of the Reform agitation. But it is also a great deal more. In 1820 he began



that series of rural rides which, part pleasure trips, part missionary tours, part journeys of investigation, are imperishably associated with his name through his greatest work. There never was such a work as *Rural Rides*; for there never was so eloquent a countryman as Cobbett. In it he left behind not only an unrivalled description of the English countryside, its beauty and wealth and the misery of its people, but also as plain a revelation of himself as man ever wrote by way of formal autobiography.

In these years, too, he published in swift succession a series of books any one of which would give him an honoured place in our national literature. *Cottage Economy* and *Cobbett's Sermons* in 1822, *The History of the Protestant Reformation* in 1824-26, *The Woodlands* in 1825, *Advice to Young Men*, and *The English Gardener* in 1829, the collected *Rural Rides* in 1830, are only a few of his works of this period, apart from the steady stream of his periodical writing and a long list of political pamphlets. He had rediscovered, above all, his capacity to teach and to give sound, homely advice. His *English Grammar* is still the best book for the young worker who wants to learn the habit of writing good English. The simple wisdom of *Advice to Young Men* still stands, for the most part as good as when it was written.

On his return in 1819, Cobbett had first, by bankruptcy, to clear himself of his financial worries. Then he plunged again headlong into the political fray. Through 1820 and 1821 all England was being stirred by the case of Queen Caroline. Popular opinion everywhere backed the Queen against the reprobate King and his unpopular ministers, and the Radicals enthusiastically took up the Queen's cause as a stick wherewith to beat the Government. Cobbett was swept off his feet, and became the Queen's most determined partisan. He wrote her famous open letter to the King, and took the lead in organising the flood of loyal petitions from town meetings, political societies, and working-class bodies. Queen Caroline, by no action of her own, had a great influence in furthering Radical and working-class organisation. In Cobbett's hands, she became a powerful instrument of the Reformers. Her death, after the withdrawal of the proceedings against her had been triumphantly secured, caused a momentary set back to the Radicals. But soon the movement for Reform went forward more vigorously than ever.

By this time there had been some recovery from the economic prostration which had followed the conclusion of the war. The condition of the workers in the countryside remained as bad as ever; but they were helpless. In the towns, trade was better, and unemployment had decreased. Distress was still severe; but the spontaneous hunger riots of the years after the Peace were already giving place to more systematic working-class organisation. Permanent Trade Unions were being formed; and in 1824 and 1825 the repeal of the Combination Acts enabled them to come out in the open

Under the influence of Owenite doctrines, the workers were beginning to create Co-operative Societies; and working-class political societies were springing up in most of the larger towns. In short, the working-class movement was beginning to take shape as an organised protest against exploitation.

All this time Cobbett was incessantly writing and lecturing. He was now in close association with the chief bodies of working-class Radicals, and had come to appreciate much more fully the situation and the aspirations of the industrial workers. His *Tours and Rides* took him into the factory districts as well as the villages; he was a greater power in Lancashire than in Hampshire or in Sussex. For it seemed as if the rural workers had been pressed down too far to have any power of resistance left. Radicalism had its strongholds, not in the villages, but in Lancashire and Yorkshire, the industrial Midlands, and the South of Scotland. But these industrial workers too were peasants—countrymen rooted up from the soil, and planted in the uncongenial atmosphere of the new factory towns. When Cobbett spoke to them he spoke as peasant to peasant—and he was understood.

This is not to say that Cobbett had any clearly thought-out policy for coping with the new conditions. Industrialism he hated, and did not pretend to understand. His cry was all for the removal of abuses and oppressions, and he staked his faith in the reform of Parliament as the means to that end. He was for ever saying that he and the people of England wanted "nothing new," that they sought only a restoration of what had been filched from them by financial jugglery, by enclosures, by the power of the new rich, and by governmental oppression. He was looking back to the Old England that was gone past recall, not forward to the control of the new forces of mechanical industrialism. This disabled him from becoming the leader of the younger working-class Radicals who accepted the industrial Revolution, and were feeling their way towards a Socialist solution of its problems. Cobbett was no Socialist. But the very fact that he was not was a symptom of his unity with the main body of the workers. For these dispossessed peasants were no more Socialists than he. They heeded him, because he felt and thought as one of themselves.

So Cobbett played his part in the great agitation which led up to the Reform of Parliament in 1832. More than any other man, he held the agitation together. And in its final phases he played once more an outstanding part. In 1830, when the towns were shouting for Reform, the labourers of the South-Eastern countries, driven beyond endurance by the lowering of their standard of life, broke out into what has been called "the last labourers' revolt" in English history. For a time, whole districts were in the hands of the labourers, who marched from place to place demanding higher wages, the abolition of tithes, and other reforms. The Whigs, newly come to power and eager to show their zeal for law and order, suppressed the revolt with military force, followed by savage judicial murders and transpor-



tations. Cobbett, while opposing violence, wrote defending the labourers and attacking their oppressors, including the Whig Government. The Government retaliated by prosecuting him. He defended himself in a masterly speech, in which he rather constituted himself the Government's accuser. The jury disagreed, and he was discharged, the Whigs not venturing on another trial. He had scored a triumph, both for himself and for the cause of free speech and the rights of agitation.

1831 was the year of the Bristol Riots—a year of happenings which made reform inevitable. In 1832 the King and the Lords yielded, and the Reform Act became law. Cobbett, who had stood unsuccessfully in earlier years for Coventry and Preston, was returned to Parliament for Oldham, as the colleague of John Fielden, the Radical employer, prominent as a friend of Owen and a leader in the agitation for factory reform.

Cobbett was sixty-eight years old when he was returned to the House of Commons. But his energy was undiminished. From the outset he made himself the leader of a small group of extreme Radicals, opening his parliamentary career by opposing the re-election of the Speaker, and his maiden speech with the words "It appears to me that since I have been sitting here I have heard a great deal of unprofitable discussion." He supported the Factory Act of 1833, and spoke and voted regularly against all measures of coercion in Ireland. Again and again, he led his little band of followers into the lobby against the dominant Whig majority.

The Whigs he had always hated at least as much as the Tories; and, though he had been ready to act with them in securing the passing of the Reform Act, he was under no illusions about the policy they were likely to pursue. Before the election of 1832, he had done his best to get together a strong body of Radical candidates, who would be prepared to take an independent line. He realised that, in putting the middle-classes into power, the workers were only changing their masters. His worst fears were realised when, in 1834, the Whig Government produced its Poor Law Amendment Bill.

The last year of Cobbett's life was spent in an unavailing struggle against the great Whig menace—the systematic application of the principles of orthodox political economy to the problem of poverty. Ever since his first awakening to the state of the country thirty years before, Cobbett had been ceaselessly upholding the right of the poor, not merely to relief, but to adequate maintenance out of the abounding national wealth. To demonstrate this right had been the main purpose of his *History of the Protestant Reformation*, and he had driven home his argument in a score of pamphlets, and in hundreds of articles in the *Register*. Now, the economists and "feelosofers" of the Whig party, so far from improving on the niggardly relief granted under the old system, proposed to sweep even this away, and to apply the workhouse test and the principles of "deterrence" and "less eligibility" to all claimants for relief.

Cobbett divided the House of Commons against every proposal in the Bill, meeting always with overwhelming defeat. He also urged the starting of a national organisation to combat the Bill, not merely in the House of Commons, but when it came to be actually applied.

All through this time Cobbett, in addition to assiduous attention in Parliament, kept the *Register* going and wrote a good part of it, continued to write fresh books and pamphlets, spent his parliamentary vacations in lecturing tours as far afield as Ireland, and conducted the farm near Farnham to which he had moved, from a smaller farm at Kensington, a few years before. The strain was too great, even for his fine physique. For the first time in his life, illness beset him. Hacking coughs, an attack of influenza, prostrated him. In May, 1835, he insisted on sitting through a debate in the House on agricultural distress. He was then taken seriously ill; but he persisted on carrying on his journalistic work. On June 18th, 1835, after a few days in bed, he died peacefully. At his earnest wish, he was carried round his farm the afternoon before his death. On June 20th the *Register* appeared black-bordered, with an article by John Morgan Cobbett announcing that his father was dead.

Cobbett died, then, in harness, after an extraordinarily full life of seventy-two years. He retained all his powers to the end; his *Legacy to Labourers* and *Legacy to Parsons*, which contain some of his best writing, were written when he was over seventy. His most enduring work, *Rural Rides*, was nearly all written when he was over sixty. The years between sixty and seventy were his most fruitful literary period. All his life he lived hard, and had a most extraordinary power of work. And into all that he did he put an abounding vitality, which remains alive to-day in every line of his writing. He had, in a sense, no message or gospel to proclaim. He is not, like his contemporary Robert Owen, the father or founder of many of the movements of our own time. He was not a theorist; he could never form judgments that went beyond the lessons of his own immediate experience. Yet, in another sense, he is all the more alive for that very reason. He translates for us, into strong, expressive language, the actual feelings and thoughts of the common people of his day, showing us their perplexities and bewilderments in face of the swift movement of social change, speaking across the century with Old England's authentic voice. Against Whiggism and Toryism, against enclosing landlords and exploiting factory owners, against Hannah More and Wilberforce, Sidmouth and Castlereagh, Melbourne and Peel, against Scottish "feelosofers" and disciples of Parson Malthus, against every reactionary and crazy "reformer" who sought to take away the people's right to pleasure, Cobbett's great protest stands. He may be wrong here, and unfair there. Many of his "remedies" may seem to us, in the light of after days, no remedies at all. But he was right about the main thing, that he saw the people oppressed and degraded, and that he fought every oppressor with all his might, and with a deep



sagacity that struck down beneath the facile optimism of the political economists and the rising middle-class. He was a great egotist, and a hard man to stomach in his own day. But much of his egotism was really a personification. As Walt Whitman identified himself with Young America, Cobbett identified himself with his own people. Every blow struck at him was a blow at them; every blow at them was a blow at him. All blows were returned with interest.

It is a curious, and a revealing fact that this egotist, who had so many quarrels in his own day, is in ours almost universally popular and beloved. When I published my *Life of Cobbett*, reviewers of all shades of political opinion united to speak well of him; and even to claim him as belonging, in some sort, to their own sects. They did this because they all felt in him something peculiarly typical—something representative of England as only a few of the greatest writers, such as Dickens, are representative. Cobbett is, indeed, the one British working-class leader who has in him also the makings of a national hero. Would there were more!

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## A NOTE ON COBBETT'S WRITINGS.

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Only a few of Cobbett's books are still in print; but they include most of the best. Here is a list of the most important:—

*Rural Rides.* (Everyman's Library. 2 volumes.)

*A Grammar of the English Language.* (Oxford University Press.)

*Cottage Economy.* (Hampshire House Workshops.)

*A History of the Protestant Reformation.* (Several editions.)

*A Year's Residence in America.* (Chapman and Dodd.)

*The Last Hundred Days of English Freedom* (Labour Publishing Co.)

*Advice to Young Men, The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine, Paper against Gold, The English Gardener,* and others which are out of print can still be picked up fairly cheap by those who hunt in second-hand bookshops. But every year they grow more difficult to find.

My *Life of William Cobbett* is published by Messrs. Collins, at 18/- net. It contains a full list of Cobbett's writings.

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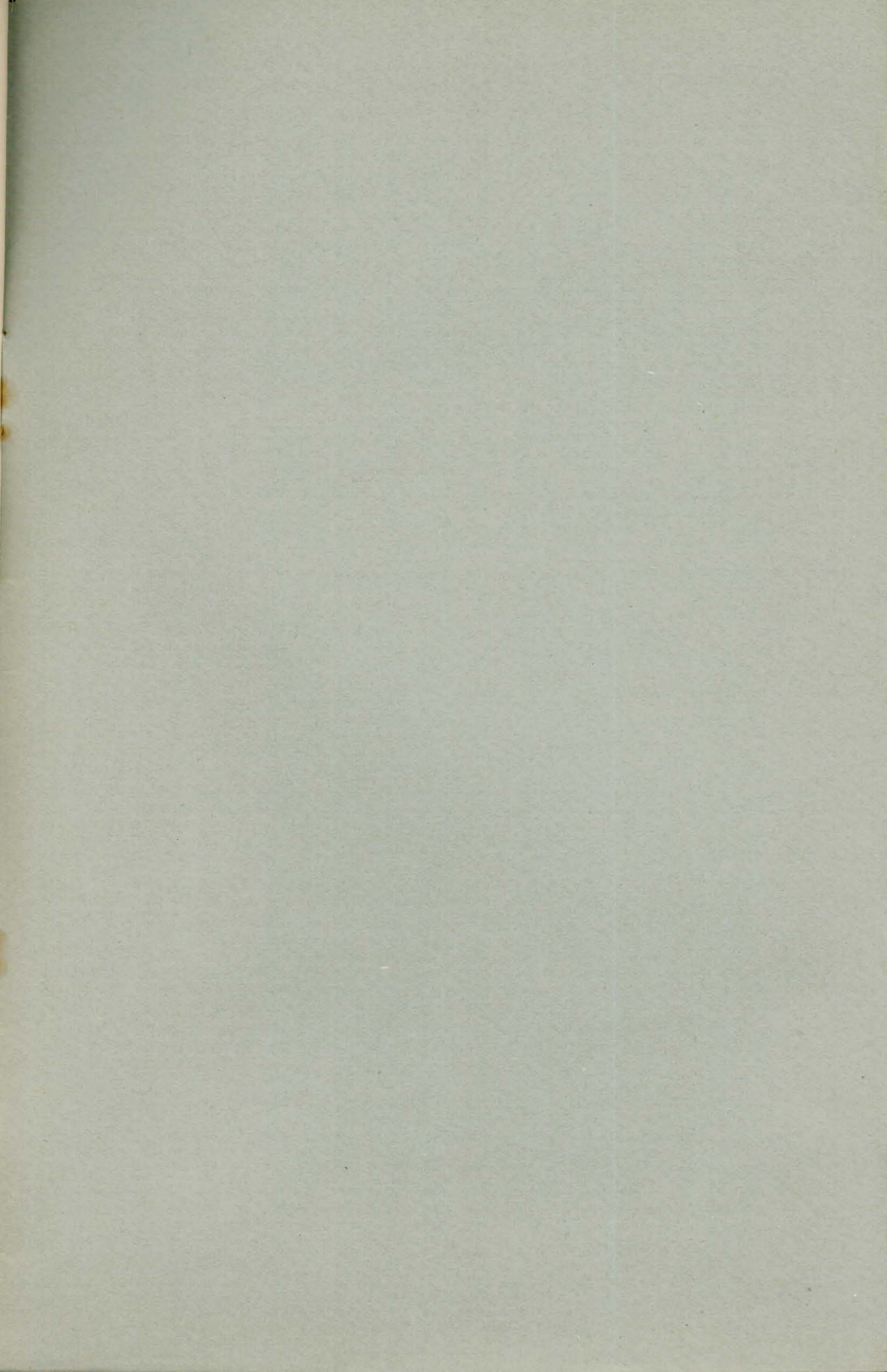
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