

WILLIAM COBBETT: A MAN FOR ALL REASONS

By Ted Johns

William Cobbett was an extraordinary man. Born in Farnham (though nothing extraordinary about that – plenty of people are born there every year without exciting comment), he moved eclectically around in England (he was MP for Oldham), in Canada, France and America.

Unfortunately, many of his adventures were accidental rather than deliberate – he had joined the army by mistake, whilst trying to enlist in the marines, and then found that his regiment was posted to Canada – or were undertaken in an attempt to avoid arrest, usually for seditious libel. When he was only about ten years old, he trekked to Kew Gardens and obtained a job there, without telling his parents where he was going (history does not record how they finally located him, or what they said to him when they did). Later, at the age of 20, he whimsically jumped on to a coach that was travelling to London when he was supposed to be on his way to Guildford fair. Again his parents must have wondered where he had gone, though perhaps they were used to him by then. They must have known that William was very definitely his own man.

Being his own man got him into trouble not just once, but several times throughout his life, as he pursued his idiosyncratic career. During his stay in Canada, Cobbett discovered that the quartermaster was stealing from army funds – though, to be fair, the quartermaster was only doing what every quartermaster at the time was expected to do, namely, appropriate to himself one-third of the funds theoretically allocated for feeding the troops. No wonder most soldiers were hungry most of the time.

Yet when Cobbett tried to expose the scandal by suing the whole Army Board en masse, he was accused of being a troublemaker. This should cause us no surprise in the 21st century, as whistleblowers continue to be greeted with hostility, not only by those whose frauds are exposed, but also,

rather more curiously, by others who, despite being innocent, feel themselves threatened by perhaps what they see as the self-righteousness of the blower. In any event, the Army Board retaliated – by threatening a charge of seditious libel – and Cobbett, now married, thought it advisable to beat a tactical retreat to France. He didn't like France very much, though – it was the middle of the French revolution – so decamped once again, this time to the USA.

In 1799 Cobbett returned to England, and started his newspaper, the *Political Register*, which he subsequently sold (during one of his many periods of lurking insolvency) to his publishers, Hansard. Whilst he still owned it, however, he had attacked the use of German troops (remember, there was a Hanoverian king on our throne at the time), who had put down a mutiny in Ely, flogging the mutineers in the process. This time Cobbett didn't get out of the country quickly enough, so he was tried for seditious libel (there it is again) and sentenced to two years in Newgate Prison.

There, according to one of his daughters, the iron entered his soul. If he was not anti-establishment on entering prison, he most certainly was when he was finally let out.

What this meant was that Cobbett now flirted endlessly with prosecutions for seditious libel or plain old-fashioned libel. The government didn't like him because the *Political Register* was the main newspaper read by the working class, so in 1817 they planned to have him arrested yet again, would you believe, for seditious libel. Luckily he escaped to the USA, but on his return was charged with seditious libel at least four more times. It's no surprise that Richard Ingrams, founder of *Private Eye*, has written a book about William Cobbett, given that Ingrams himself is no stranger to libel claims (if the offence of seditious libel still existed, doubtless Ingrams would have been charged with that as well).

William Cobbett was a deeply principled man, not merely a maverick who was deliberately trying to attract cheap fame. He did not subscribe to the myth that things have been steadily getting better since the dawn of time. Quite the contrary. Cobbett believed – and argued through every weapon available to him – that the Enlightenment had brought in a new era of commercial exploitation, wage slavery, and an impersonal factory system that supplanted the more paternalistic and caring approach typically deployed by the traditional aristocracy. Cobbett had no time for the

nouveaux riches: he saw them as cruel, ruthless and indifferent to the fortunes of others less well off than themselves. There remains more than some truth in this, of course.

Equally relevant to our situation in 2007 is Cobbett's view of the press. In his day the press was anything but free – by 1815 the tax on newspapers had reached 4d a copy, and Cobbett only got round it by publishing his *Political Register* as a pamphlet, which meant he could sell each issue for 2d – and Cobbett did not mince his words (he once described Queen Elizabeth I as a “cold-blooded murderer”). He wrote that the press was “the most enslaved and the vilest thing that has ever been heard of”. Because newspaper proprietors depended on advertising as a “great source of revenue”, they ordered their men (note: no female journalists in Cobbett's day) to “write in a way to please the classes who can give most advertisements”, including the government, which “itself pays large sums in advertisements.” Nothing new there. Indeed, I see that *Private Eye* contains a good deal of advertising which is never the subject of satirical comment in *Private Eye*'s editorial columns, so perhaps, were Cobbett to be alive today, he would be castigating *Private Eye* for its ‘sell-out’ to capitalism.

William Cobbett was a great Englishman. He was humane, talented, self-taught, bold, an articulate writer and an advocate for the underdog. Less impressively, he was also bloody-minded and egotistical. He has some impressive achievements to his credit – not least his ‘invention’ of the publication we now know as Hansard – but he must have been hell to live with. It's a pity we don't have his long-suffering wife's personal story (which she would have written had they been living in this century), and it's also a pity that we don't know what William's three brothers were like. Did they also take off spontaneously to other parts of the globe, or were they tender conformists? Did William's parents miss him when he went to Kew and later to London, or did they think they were better off without him? We shall never know.

This article was inspired by an Odiham Society lecture about ‘The Life and Times of William Cobbett’, given by Chris Hellier, Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Farnham, on 13 October 2006.

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