

## CHAPTER I



‘COMMON CAUSE’: COBBETT AND THE  
 VILLAGE WORKER

I, as far as I am convinced, am quite willing to trust to the talent, the justice and the loyalty of the great mass of the people . . . I am quite willing to make *common cause* with them, *to be one of them*.

PR, 24 April 1819, p. 980.

Nobody tells the tale of the labourer.

PR, 22 February 1823, p. 482.

THE name William Cobbett inspires a variety of associations and meanings. For many readers he is the author of the delightful and often reprinted works *Rural Rides*, *Cottage Economy* and *Advice to Young Men*, where among other things, he offered instruction in how to court the opposite sex, plant a garden and fatten hogs. At the same time, and often in the same works, he turned his hand to economic and political commentary. His earliest writings, which alone constitute the twelve substantial volumes of *Porcupine's Works*, can be counted among the most influential pro-British propaganda during the second decade of the new American Republic. Upon returning home to his native England in 1800, he founded the *Political Register*, a leading periodical first in anti-Jacobin and then in radical politics, while on the side he originated the systematic collection and printing of parliamentary debates, better known today as *Hansard*. As a journalist he addressed open letters to the aristocracy, the middle class and the working class, as well as to individuals from kings, to prime ministers to country labourers. He socialized with the rich and the poor, dining in 1800 with William Pitt to celebrate the new measures against treason and sedition, and in 1832 with the farm workers to celebrate the Great Reform Act. Twice the government prosecuted him for fomenting popular disturbances; twice it circulated his writings to quell them. And among his several stage-credits are his performances as the

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soldier's friend, the king's advocate and the spokesman for the entire working class as a member of Parliament for Oldham.

Cobbett's diversity as a commentator on politics, society and culture is implicit in the cultural and ideological diversity among his admirers of past and present – a notable company which includes Karl Marx, Matthew Arnold, G. K. Chesterton, A. J. P. Taylor, Raymond Williams, Michael Foot, Asa Briggs, Edward Thompson and the ex-editor of *Private Eye*, Richard Ingrams.<sup>1</sup> Each of these writers, together with the numerous other essayists and the dozen biographers who have written on Cobbett over the past 150 years, has advanced our knowledge of this great Englishman; the problem is that the collective portrait has become polarized and fragmented to the point of reducing Cobbett studies to an exercise in free association. During the past two decades alone, he has been diagnosed as 'the consummate Utopian reactionary', 'the original patriarch', a 'most untypical Englishman' and 'the most English of Englishmen'.<sup>2</sup> He has been called 'the greatest Radical of his day' by one writer; 'incompetent as a popular leader' by another.<sup>3</sup> Some commentators even doubt whether he warrants the title 'Radical'; others prefer to characterize him as a 'father of reform', a founder of 'a new form of Tory-Radicalism', a popularizer of 'old-style Whiggish radicalism' or simply 'a maverick without party'.<sup>4</sup> The ironic thing is that each of these captions bears application to some moment of Cobbett's ideological evolution, but they have collectively reduced him to an ideological chameleon while leaving unposed and unanswered the question of whether there exists a dominant Cobbett or only a series of Cobbetts who waxed and waned according to opportunity and fortune.<sup>5</sup>

It is the neglect of Cobbett's rural and cultural associations that accounts for much of the current indiscipline in Cobbett studies, and in particular for the oft-heard lamentation that he is 'so difficult to classify'.<sup>6</sup> So preoccupied are we with industrialization and town-based politics that Cobbett has more often been denounced for his shortcomings as an urban and industrial witness than acclaimed for his service as a rural and agrarian one. It is certainly a sound historical method to enquire into what a given person or ideology is not, but this approach becomes a liability if we insist that contemporaries answer our questions ahead of their own. Industrialization and urbanization, furthermore, do not represent the full extent of historical process in the nineteenth century; indeed, we too readily forget that farm workers comprised the single largest occupational group in Regency England. Their subsequent decline in relative and absolute numbers was perhaps predictable from Cobbett's own day, but this does nothing to reduce their importance as historical actors and agents.

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Miners, handloom weavers and domestic servants have experienced similar numerical declines, yet their stories, quite rightly, continue to be told and re-told without apology. Village workers, it is true, did not leave us an abundance of autobiographies; nor did they have many friends and supporters to articulate their experiences and aspirations. Yet it is precisely this archival disadvantage that should encourage us to delve more deeply into their past, and at the same time to take seriously a prolific contemporary who claimed to orient his culture and politics around their interests and experiences.

Cobbett's social and political commentary underwent dramatic evolution, but for too long his credibility has been crippled by an assumption that he was adrift in paradox and self-contradiction. Yet paradox can be no one's essence, and there is no more contradiction in his writings than one would expect of someone who composed for publication some thirty million words over the course of forty years. Thus in the manner of Edward Thompson's approach to the concept of class, we should not freeze or codify Cobbett at any one point in his career; much of his significance inheres in his very evolution from an anti-Jacobin to a Radical and from a countryman to a class commentator. Rubrics such as 'Whig' or 'Tory' are sometimes necessary to explain this evolution, but they have only a transient relevance for understanding Cobbett's long-term thought. For three-quarters of his public life he qualifies as a Radical in the full sense of the word, yet in order to understand the motivations and character of his radicalism we must appreciate the rural cultural mortar that gave shape and consistency to his discourse and ideology. It was rural popular culture, it will be suggested, that nurtured Cobbett's idiom, directed his reform programme and made of him a cultural as well as a political commentator. In turn, Cobbett volunteered as the rural labourer's leader in politics, economic protest and cottage technology. He believed this to be 'a rational ground for action'; and so ingested this 'sacred duty' as to assure one of his sons that he would 'think it no disgrace to be a labourer again'.<sup>7</sup>

Although this latter conviction was never put to the test, Cobbett was unable to separate himself and the condition of England from its country workers. 'I say WE,' he once informed Coke of Norfolk, 'because I never can separate myself from the Labouring Classes', and in particular from the agricultural labourers, whom he represented as 'the very best and most virtuous of all mankind'.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after returning to England in 1800, he made it his object to liberate the village workers, or 'chopsticks'<sup>9</sup> as he preferred to call them, from the condescension of the Whigs and Evangelicals, but by the 1810s he began to claim more for his rural studies,

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identifying himself as a member of the ‘Order of Chopsticks’ and boasting that ‘I know more of their toils and sufferings than any other man.’<sup>10</sup> Had he never left his native Farnham, he mused before an audience of farmers in 1822, ‘in all probability I should have been a labourer to this day’.<sup>11</sup> Cobbett’s association with rural workers was in part an autobiographical mission, but he pursued that mission with a sense of responsibility and cultural sympathy that was unique in the English radical movement of the early nineteenth century. Of leading Regency Radicals, only Henry Hunt shared Cobbett’s sympathy for the village worker, and then only intermittently. Richard Carlile would join Cobbett in falling afoul of the Whigs during the Captain Swing disturbances, but he was otherwise silent on rural subjects. Francis Place understood the rural worker as ‘ignorant’ and confused;<sup>12</sup> John Cartwright and Francis Burdett implied as much.

Sixty-five years ago G. D. H. Cole described Cobbett as a spokesman for the first generation of industrial workers who were ‘torn from the land and flung into the factory’.<sup>13</sup> Cole’s presentation of Cobbett as an industrial commentator with rural memories is not invalid, but efforts to locate Cobbett’s significance in his industrial commentary have reduced his meaning to a series of negative caricatures: anti-urban, anti-industrial, anti-modern. At the same time the industrial focus has distorted Cobbett’s competence by emphasizing his urban constituency at the expense of his rural following. By his own admission, Cobbett knew very little about industrial conditions; he was ill at ease with most manifestations of industrial protest (his advice to the Luddites to return to the plough, for example, was culturally significant but economically impertinent), and not until late in his career did he develop an appreciation of industrial trade unionism. Even Cole, the founder of the industrial approach to Cobbett’s career, confessed that the town worker rejected much of the *Register’s* advice on political and economic matters. It was Cobbett’s strength (and sometimes one of his weaknesses) to require direct experience of the conditions of labour, though not until his last years did he as much as enter a factory; and even then his experience was limited to the unrepresentative mills of Robert Owen and John Fielden. As Gertrude Himmelfarb has remarked, ‘Cobbett did not “understand”, or want to understand, a world of factories and factory towns.’<sup>14</sup>

This is not to say that Cobbett was without relevance to his industrial and urban audience. The fact that his writings appealed to industrial workers who aspired to return to the land meant that he articulated an agrarian ideal for industrial Radicals as well as a radical ideal for agrarians. In much of his political writing, as Edward Thompson and Olivia

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Smith have shown, he articulated a political vernacular that brought the weaver, schoolmaster and shipwright into a common discourse.<sup>15</sup> Yet it must also be recognized that Cobbett was never comfortable with the culture of the workshop and factory, especially the secularist, republican and cosmopolitan creeds of London artisans. Nor was he averse to rebuking artisans and industrial workers who ignored agrarian protests or who assumed rural workers to be 'ignorant on public matters'.<sup>16</sup> When in 1821 Thomas Attwood accused him of ignoring the town worker, he defended himself without denying the charge: 'Born amongst husbandmen, bred to husbandry . . . it is natural that I should have a strong partiality for country life, and that I should enter more in detail into the feelings of labourers of husbandry than into those of other labourers. But, in my wishes and endeavours, I have the welfare of *all* in view.'<sup>17</sup> This emphasis on the rural worker might seem at first glance a divisive strategy in the popular radical movement. John Belchem has argued that during the 1820s, especially after the popular agitations on behalf of Queen Caroline, Cobbett 'deserted his popular audience' and his erstwhile ally Henry Hunt.<sup>18</sup> But Cobbett's apparent desertion of the radical platform of the town was to enable him to create a corresponding radical platform in the countryside. The creation of a countryman political union was the great object of his rural rides and of his attendance at county agricultural meetings throughout the late 1810s and 1820s. Just as many urban popular Radicals sought a working alliance with middle-class Utilitarian reformers during the 1820s, Cobbett sought to ensure the presence of rural interests in the reform movement by uniting rural labourers and employers on a country platform.

This is to say, of course, that Cobbett did not play a direct part in the events at Spa Fields or Cato Street or Peterloo, but to expect of him equal devotion to the platform of town and of country is to underestimate (and by implication, to undervalue) his contributions to political radicalism among farm workers. As James Obelkevich and Howard Newby have shown,<sup>19</sup> rural workers did not always come easily to radical politics or to class consciousness. Although they might not have needed a leader to the extent that Marx argued for the Continental peasantry, they were only loosely bound by common economic experience, for by the 'chopsticks' Cobbett meant not merely day-labouring men and women, but also farm servants, the piece-worker, the village craftsman who toiled part time on the land, and even the small farmer who worked his own land with his own hands and those of his family. Yet Cobbett did not feel that his task was in any way impaired by the so-called 'idiocy of rural life'. Face to face relations with employers, relatively low rates of literacy, as well as the

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labourer's much-maligned veneration for old England were not seen by Cobbett as liabilities upon the development of a political consciousness; indeed he turned these characteristics of village culture to radical advantage by arguing that they facilitated popular protest and class consciousness. Country people, he argued, are more difficult to 'deceive and cajole on political matters than townspeople'.<sup>20</sup>

In order to approach Cobbett and the Country political platform we must maintain the shift away from the old labour history conventions of divorcing politics from culture, of emphasizing town over country, and of assuming that the ideal Radical must almost volunteer for dispossession. We must also rethink the Regency and Victorian stereotype of Hodge that continues to afflict some species of English rural history in our own day, even if it now takes the rather muted form of statements to the effect that farm workers shared 'a sense of identity with the interests of their employers'.<sup>21</sup> The way ahead in rural history, as exemplified in the new journal by that title and in the work of historians such as Keith Snell, Malcolm Chase, Alun Howkins, David Jones, Barry Reay, John Archer, Mick Reed and Roger Wells, is to permit the village workers to inform us of their own experiences, complaints and pleasures – the 'cottage charter' as it will be called here.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the starting point for our understanding of Cobbett should be his understanding of himself: a 'South-of-England' person, the son of a Surrey smallholder, whose most valued constituency was the rural workers of that region.<sup>23</sup>

Cobbett's relationship with the land and its workers has yet to be studied in a detailed way, though it has long been the subject of passing comment.<sup>24</sup> In 1874, as the start of the Great Depression renewed public interest in rural poverty, Richard Heath entitled an essay on Cobbett 'A Peasant Politician'.<sup>25</sup> Matthew Arnold, in 1880, remarked that Cobbett's politics were governed by 'the master-thought . . . of the evil condition of the English labourer'.<sup>26</sup> For Leslie Stephen, J. B. Morton and G. K. Chesterton, Cobbett was the 'voice' or 'tribune' of the labourer or peasant; the Hammonds went further and declared his association with the village workers to be 'the key to his career'.<sup>27</sup> Not until the appearance of Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*, however, were we provided with a sophisticated search for Cobbett's rural meanings. Williams rightly argued that Cobbett was radical in his 'class viewpoint' and 'persistent social questioning',<sup>28</sup> but the dominant context of Williams's interpretation was the 'structure of feeling' that Cobbett shared with other rural writers of past and present. Similarities there certainly were, but these should not cause us to ignore the immediacy of Cobbett's association

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with the rural society of his day. As George Sturt once remarked, ‘Cobbett did not use his brains as his peasant and folk ancestors used theirs. Yet really he was nearer to them than to me.’<sup>29</sup> It is this extraordinary proximity to Regency rural experience that sets Cobbett apart from other rural writers; and it is important that we leave him oriented towards that society rather than steer him in the direction of ‘eternal truths’. There are indeed, as H. J. Massingham discovered,<sup>30</sup> many ‘Sons of Cobbett’ in twentieth-century England, but to liberate Cobbett from his Regency context is to obscure the empirical causes behind his ideological incarnations, especially his transition to radicalism (chapter 2) and his subsequent evolution from a countryman to a class commentator (chapter 3).

The obscuring of the Regency context is an unfortunate side-effect of some of Professor Williams’s work and of the assimilation of Cobbett’s writings into anthologies of romantic prose. Many literary scholars have identified passages in Cobbett’s texts which harmonize with the finest prose of Hazlitt or Wordsworth, but sometimes they have missed the implications of Cobbett’s mastering grammar, not at Christ’s Hospital like Coleridge, or Westminster School like Southey, but in an army barrack in the company of other ex-ploughboys; and when the time came to compose his own grammar of the English language (it sold 100,000 copies in its first fifteen years), he subtitled it ‘especially for the Use of Soldiers, Apprentices, and Plough-Boys’.<sup>31</sup> In way of poetic inspiration, Cobbett was too suspicious of idealism and metaphysics to seek subject matter in Shelley’s heavens or in the urns and nightingales of Keats. Even his well-known reflections about a disused farm-table derive from careful and sustained study of proletarian experience:

Squire Charington’s father used, I dare say, to sit at the head of the oak table along with his men, say grace to them, and cut up the meat and the pudding. He might take a cup of *strong beer* to himself, when they had none; but, that was pretty nearly all the difference in their manner of living. So that all lived well. But, the *Squire* had many *wine-decanter*s and *wine-glasses* and ‘a *dinner-set*’, and ‘a *breakfast-set*’, and ‘*desert-knives*’; and these evidently imply carvings on and a consumption that must of necessity have greatly robbed the long oak table if it had remained fully tenanted . . . Therefore, it became almost untenanted; the labourers retreated to hovels, called cottages; and, instead of board and lodging, they got money.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, in chatting with a labourer near the beautiful hill of rotten Old Sarum, Cobbett’s allegorical discourse on political corruption has its primary and functional truth, not in the dialogue’s *internal* referents (the usual means by which literary scholars, especially structuralists, measure



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truth), but in its *external* referents – namely its empirical allusions to the labourer’s experience of dispossession and hunger:

I asked how he *got on*. He said, very badly. I asked him what was the cause of it. He said the *hard times*. ‘What times’, said I; ‘was there ever a finer summer, a finer harvest, and is there not an *old* wheat-rick in every farm-yard?’ ‘Ah!’ said he, ‘they make it bad for poor people, for all that.’ ‘*They?*’ said I, ‘who is *they?*’ He was silent. ‘Oh, no, no! my friend,’ said I, ‘it is not *they*’; it is that Accursed Hill that has robbed you of the supper that you ought to find smoking on the table when you get home.’ I gave him the price of a pot of beer, and on I went.<sup>33</sup>

Cobbett’s purpose in this dialogue was less to stimulate an emotional response in the reader than to offer political instruction to the rural workers. The dominant meaning of the passage therefore lies in its political prescriptions, which incline towards radicalism at the point where Cobbett directs the labourer beyond an ill-defined ‘them’ to the specific oppressions of ‘that Accursed Hill’, or the unreformed House of Commons.

Cobbett’s uniqueness as a rural writer lies in his celebration of both the microcosm of popular culture and the macrocosm of radical politics. Rural popular culture was primarily the creation of the community or microcosm, or of the ‘parish pump’ as Eric Hobsbawm calls it.<sup>34</sup> It was Cobbett’s quest to leave culture within the orbit of the village community, while at the same time providing workers with new and wider premises for their political thought. Thus one minute we find him directing the labourers into conflict with the ideologies of the ruling class, and the next defending the local sense of place of a labouring woman in a village near Andover:

I got, at one time, a little out of my road, in, or near, a place called Tangle. I rode up to the garden-wicket of a cottage, and asked the woman, who had two children, and who seemed to be about thirty years old, which was the way to Ludgarshall, which I knew could not be more than about *four miles* off. She did *not know!* . . . ‘Well, my dear good woman,’ said I, ‘but you *have been* at Ludgarshall?’ ‘No.’ ‘Nor at Andover?’ (six miles another way) ‘No.’ ‘Nor at Marlborough?’ (nine miles another way) ‘No.’ ‘Pray, were you born in this house?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘And, how far have you ever been from this house?’ ‘Oh! I have been *up in the parish*, and over to *Chute*.’ That is to say, the utmost extent of her voyages had been about *two and a half miles!* Let no one laugh at her . . . It is a great error to suppose, that people are rendered stupid by remaining always in the same place. This was a very acute woman, and as well behaved as need to be.<sup>35</sup>

By the 1830s, as we will see, radicalism was rife in this very district,



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including among persons whose geographic horizons were little wider than this woman's. A similar example emerges from Cobbett's acquaintance with a Preston man who broadened his physical sense of place (although hitherto never more than 8 or 9 miles from home) by taking a walking-tour of northern France, 'and that, too, without being able to speak, or to understand, a word of French!'<sup>36</sup> Here was an opportunity for an advertisement of Cobbett's *French Grammar* or of *A Year's Residence in the United States*, but nothing of the sort follows. Despite his notorious egotism, Cobbett represented the Andover woman and the Preston man as the cultural and intellectual equals of their rulers, and of himself. It was not in jest that he declared a carter or a hedger to be 'a more edifying companion than a *politician*'.<sup>37</sup>

The fact that Cobbett does not properly belong to high literature does not necessarily assign him a place in popular culture.<sup>38</sup> Yet this is his rightful home. Not only did he articulate political and economic problems in a language familiar to the traditions and experiences of rural folk, he disseminated many of his writings in the traditional manner of the marketers of chapbooks and broadside ballads.<sup>39</sup> Although himself the author of a best-selling *Grammar*, he also wrote popular sermons, theatrical plays, alehouse songs and broadside petitions – all of which he intended for oral dissemination and consumption. His expressed contempt for book-learning (a subject on which he remains misunderstood) was moved in part by his understanding that written cultural productions were too easily infiltrated by the dominant culture, and that these texts sought to isolate popular politics from common sense, oral traditions and from what he called 'the great teacher, experience' (chapters 4 and 5). Thus it was the language and politics of rural oral culture, especially of popular rural song, that Cobbett emulated when he represented the cottage charter (see Appendix I). Indeed, as will be seen in the following chapters, we can witness in both Cobbett's writings and in popular rural song a mutual shift towards radical politics and class consciousness.

The term most frequently invoked to identify Cobbett's reform programme is 'populism'. Cobbett's ideologies, as they unfolded after 1800, bore much in common with the Country Party platform of the eighteenth century, especially his animosity towards stock-jobbers, public credit, placemen and sinecurists.<sup>40</sup> Part of the ideological dynamic of the Country Party platform, according to Isaac Kramnick, qualifies as populist, 'even though an early and most aristocratic populist manifestation'. Inherent in populism, Professor Kramnick suggests, 'is a force at once intensely radical and revolutionary. It is always "the people", be they yeoman farmers,

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urban small traders, and failing gentry who are being victimized by the small conspiratorial financial interests.<sup>41</sup> As we will see, Cobbett derived some of his reforming ideology from the Country platform as articulated by Swift, Pope and the early Dr Johnson, but even if the younger Pitt was to Cobbett what Walpole was to the Country Tory, the eighteenth-century Country critique was not the great moving force behind Cobbett's entry into radical politics. Country Tories (or for that matter, most Commonwealth Whigs) were neither democrats nor agrarians; the Country was for them an anti-bourgeois symbol designed to elevate the status and influence of the country gentleman, not that of his workers. Between 1800 and 1805 Cobbett shared the Country Party aspirations of placing the independent country gentleman in Parliament, but he subsequently shifted to distinctly radical terrain when he realized that the economic betterment of the English rural worker required actual rather than virtual parliamentary representation.

But even if Cobbett can be shown to have democratized the Country platform, and to have identified the Country with its proletarian workers, this does not deliver him from all constructions of populism. J. G. A. Pocock, for example, identifies Cobbett as both a radical and an 'authentically populist' critic of commercial society.<sup>42</sup> For the sociologist Donald Macrae, Cobbett is 'a very complete case' of English populism; while the economist Peter Wiles observes that except for his opposition to paper money, Cobbett is 'an otherwise perfect populist'.<sup>43</sup> A populist is understood by these scholars as someone who is anti-*élite* and anti-cosmopolitan, as one who subscribes to a golden age theory, 'romantic primitivism', and physiocratic economics; the 'populist' is sometimes anti-urban, racist, usually self-righteous and often anti-intellectual.<sup>44</sup> All of these symptoms apply in some measure to Cobbett, and nowhere more vividly than in the violent anti-Semitism that Professor Rubinstein has shown to be characteristic of too much nineteenth-century radicalism.<sup>45</sup> But the conventional depiction of Cobbett as the ideologue of the smallholder ignores the fact that his mentor was the 'half a labourer', or peasant proletarian, of the southern woodlands and weald.<sup>46</sup> The problem with framing Cobbett as a populist (according to most definitions and examples of the term) is that it obscures the subtleties of his political evolution while leading us inexorably to the riddle of his affiliation with Juan Peron, Enoch Powell, Jimmy Carter and David Lloyd George. Would Cobbett have supported the Tichborne Claimant with as much enthusiasm as he supported Queen Caroline? And so on.

Isaiah Berlin has rightly stated that 'there exists a shoe – the word "populism" – for which somewhere there exists a foot'.<sup>47</sup> Even if Cobbett