

This is the first rural and cultural study of the great English countryman William Cobbett (1763–1835). It binds Cobbett's radical career to his rural heritage and to the experiences and politics of agricultural workers during the early nineteenth century.

As a Radical, Cobbett's first quest was to represent the hardships of the labouring poor, and he adopted the labourers' cultural experiences and class consciousness as the basis of his political platform. He revolutionized press history by joining the 'pedlar's pack', from where he dispensed his two-penny broadsheets along with other varieties of popular literature. The rural labourers understood Cobbett because he articulated their beliefs and values as expressed in their own folksongs and broadside ballads. They embraced Cobbett as a radical leader and as an educator, heeding his moral instruction, his treatises on cottage economy, and his prescriptions on the recovery of old England. Cobbett lived and moved among the labourers, and knew their political or economic grievances; thus long before the 'Captain Swing' rising he forecast the date and patterns of the revolt. His predictions came to pass and he became the single most important leader of the insurrection. His position of authority in the villages carried him forward in the cause of the Great Reform Bill and the Old Poor Law, so that by the end of his eventful career he was the sole public exponent of the cottage charter.

This is a major and original work on Cobbett, and represents a breakthrough in the study of rural popular culture and in Cobbett scholarship. It will appeal strongly to a wide range of social and political historians, and have much of value for all those interested in the language of class, the evolution of the English language and the history of journalism.

Cambridge University Press
0521021707 - William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture
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*WILLIAM COBBETT AND
RURAL POPULAR CULTURE*



1 Cobbett in 1800. Reproduced by permission of Lady Lathbury.

Born at Farnham in 1763, Cobbett spent most of his boyhood and adolescent years as an agricultural worker and gardener. In 1784 he enlisted in a marching regiment, and after a year of military training at Chatham was sent to a garrison in New Brunswick where he assisted to guard the Canadian border from American incursion. After six years of duty the regiment was sent home to England, where Cobbett requested and received his discharge in 1791. Following a brief stay in revolutionary France he removed to America, where under the pen name of Peter Porcupine he rose to fame as an anti-Jacobin journalist. A steady flow of libel suits prompted him to return to England in 1800.

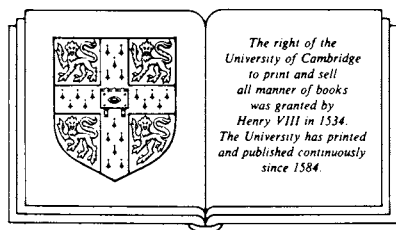
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[More information](#)

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

NEW YORK PORT CHESTER MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Cambridge University Press
 0521021707 - William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture
 Ian Dyck
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521413947

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First published 1992
 This digitally printed first paperback version 2005

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Dyck, Ian.
 William Cobbett and rural popular culture / Ian Dyck.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 41394 X

1. Cobbett, William, 1763–1835 – Contributions in popular culture.
 2. Great Britain – History – 1800–1837 – Historiography.
 3. Great Britain – History – 1789–1820 – Historiography.
 4. Great Britain – Rural conditions – Historiography.
 5. Great Britain – Popular culture – Historiography.
 6. Agricultural laborers – Great Britain – Historiography.
- I. Title.

DA522.C5D93 1992

941.07'3'092–dc20 91–17636 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-41394-7 hardback

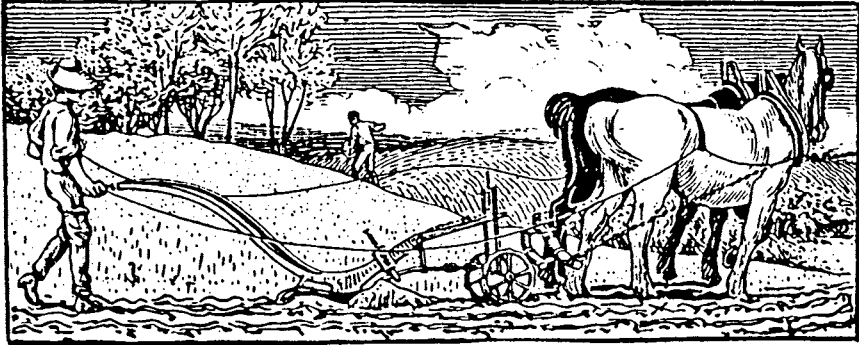
ISBN-10 0-521-41394-X hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-02170-8 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-02170-7 paperback

Cambridge University Press
0521021707 - William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture
Ian Dyck
Frontmatter
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*For my parents,
Clifford and Agnes Dyck,
farmers both*





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Cambridge University Press
 0521021707 - William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture
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PREFACE

Several years ago at the University of Saskatchewan I was introduced to William Cobbett by Christopher Kent, and to the study of rural popular culture by Michael Hayden. As I began to observe a relationship between these two subjects I was interrupted by an encounter with the journalist in Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* who created an essay on Chinese metaphysics by joining the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s information on 'China' with its entry on 'metaphysics'. But as I moved from *Rural Rides* to the depths of the eighty-nine volumes of the *Political Register* I became convinced that I was not on the path of Dickens's journalist: 'Cobbett' and 'rural England', it seemed to me, were so integrally related as to warrant their mutual study. Their appearance in tandem here, I hope, yields viable and refreshing new perspectives on Cobbett, Regency radicalism and rural popular culture.

Most of the research for this study was carried out at the University of Sussex where I had the good fortune to work with an English countryman in the person of Alun Howkins, who encouraged me from the start to pursue a rural and cultural approach to Cobbett. Eileen Yeo and Stephen Yeo taught me to attend to Cobbett's language and political context, while my fellow students in the History Graduate Division, especially Malcolm Chase, Rohan McWilliam, Mick Reed and Ruth Richardson, shared with me their understandings of popular radicalism and agrarianism in nineteenth-century England. I am also indebted to Edward Royle, Joanna Innes, Roger Wells and the anonymous readers of Cambridge University Press for providing helpful comments and suggestions on various parts of the text. Edward Thompson and Dorothy Thompson kindly offered their opinions on an early version of the opening chapter. Keith Snell did the same with the second chapter. I also owe much to Keith's steady encouragement and to his manifest conviction that culture and lore can legitimately be incorporated into the 'new' rural history.

Helpful in the early stages of the project was the late George Spater, who as a senior research fellow at Sussex often shared with me his unrivalled

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knowledge of Cobbett's private life. Without his masterful two-volume life of Cobbett, published in 1982, the present study would not have liberty to venture beyond matters biographical. A very special note of gratitude must go to my supervisor, John Harrison, whose intellectual generosity, together with his insistence that this Canadian farm lad be well-walked in rural England before writing about it, kept me happily to the task. I thank John for his counsel and for his friendship.

I am grateful for the generous assistance that I have received at the Bodleian and Nuffield College libraries at Oxford; the University Library and the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge; the British Library and Museum; the Public Record Office at Kew; the county record offices of Hampshire, Kent and both halves of Sussex; the Goldsmiths' Library of the University of London; the London Library; the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society; and the libraries of Sussex and Simon Fraser Universities. For financial support I thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canadian chapter of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, the Committee of the Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom and my own institution of Simon Fraser University. My appreciation is also extended to Linda Randall for her careful attention to the script, and to Michael Moore for permission to reprint some portions of an early version of chapter 2 which appeared in the pages of *Albion*.

Far from least I thank Karen Chappell for her patience and varied means of support. Over the last few years she has heard much talk about Cobbett's recipes for bread and beer, rather less about his advice that men and women take an equal hand in the preparations.

Port Coquitlam,
British Columbia
March 1991

C.I.D



ABBREVIATIONS

Adelphi	Adelphi University
BL	British Library
BL Colindale	British Library Newspaper Library, Colindale
BM	British Museum
BM Add. MSS	British Museum Additional Manuscripts
Bodleian	Bodleian Library, Oxford
BPL	Boston Public Library
Cornell	Cornell University
EFDSS	English Folk Dance and Song Society, London
Faithfull	Faithfull MSS, Nuffield College, Oxford
Firth	C. H. Firth collection of ballads, Bodleian Library, Oxford
Fitzwilliam	Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
Goldsmiths'	Goldsmiths' Library, University of London
GVAC	<i>General View of the Agriculture of the County of...</i>
HO	Home Office Papers, Public Record Office, Kew
HRO	Hampshire County Record Office
Illinois	University of Illinois
JJ	John Johnson collection of printed ephemera, Bodleian Library, Oxford
LUCB	London University collection of broadsides
Madden	Madden collection of ballads, Cambridge University Library
NALU	National Agricultural Labourers' Union
Nuffield	Nuffield College Library, Oxford
NUWC	National Union of the Working Classes

ABBREVIATIONS

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NYPL	New York Public Library
Rutgers	Rutgers University
SC	Select Committee
SDUK	Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge
Yale	Yale University

COBBETT'S WORKS

<i>Advice</i>	<i>Advice to Young Men and (Incidentally) to Young Women</i> (London, 1830)
<i>Cottage Economy</i>	<i>Cottage Economy: Containing Information Relating to the Brewing of Beer, Making of Bread, Keeping of Cows...</i> (London, 1822)
<i>Emigrant's Guide</i>	<i>The Emigrant's Guide; in Ten Letters...</i> (London, 1829)
<i>George the Fourth</i>	<i>History of the Regency and Reign of King George the Fourth...</i> (London, 1830–4)
<i>Horse-Hoeing Husbandry</i>	Cobbett's edition of Jethro Tull, <i>The Horse-Hoeing Husbandry...</i> (1731, London, 1822)
<i>Hundred Days</i>	<i>A History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom</i> , ed. J. L. Hammond (London, 1921)
<i>Legacy to Labourers</i>	<i>Legacy to Labourers; Or, What is the Right which Lords, Baronets and Squires have to the Lands of England?</i> (London, 1834)
<i>Legacy to Parsons</i>	<i>Legacy to Parsons; Or, Have the Clergy of the Established Church an Equitable Right to the Tithes...?</i> (London, 1835)
<i>Life and Adventures</i>	<i>The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine</i> , ed. G. D. H. Cole (1796, London, 1927)
<i>Paper Against Gold</i>	<i>Paper Against Gold and Glory Against Prosperity...</i> (1815, London, 1828)
<i>Poor Man's Friend</i>	<i>Poor Man's Friend, Or, A Defence of The Rights of Those Who Do the Work...</i> (London, 1826–7)

<i>Porcupine's Works</i>	<i>Porcupine's Works; Containing Various Writings and Selections ...</i> , 12 vols. (London, 1801)
PR	<i>Political Register</i> , 89 vols. (London, 1802–35)
<i>Protestant 'Reformation'</i>	<i>A History of the Protestant 'Reformation' in England and Ireland ...</i> (London, 1824–7)
<i>Rural Rides</i>	<i>Rural Rides in the Counties of Surrey, Kent, Sussex, Hampshire ...</i> , ed. G. Woodcock (1830, Harmondsworth, 1967). Unless otherwise mentioned, references are to this edition.
<i>Sermons</i>	<i>Cobbett's Sermons ...</i> (London, 1821–2)
<i>Trash</i>	<i>Two-Penny Trash; Or, Politics for the Poor</i> (London, 1830–2)
<i>Treatise on Corn</i>	<i>A Treatise on Cobbett's Corn ...</i> (London, 1828)
<i>Woodlands</i>	<i>The Woodlands; Or, A Treatise on the Preparation of the Ground for Planting ...</i> (London, 1828)
<i>Year's Residence</i>	<i>A Year's Residence in the United States of America ...</i> (New York, 1818–19)