

James Grande, *William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England: Radicalism and the Fourth Estate, 1792–1835*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. 250. £58. ISBN 9781137380074.

Part thematic intellectual biography, part Romantic critical portrait, James Grande's conceptually nuanced and compelling study adds an epistolary dimension to the range of recent scholarship engaging with Cobbett's multifaceted cultural project. Grande argues that in Cobbett's periodical prose, found most notably in his *Political Register*, 'the newspaper becomes a form of weekly correspondence, stamped with a vivid sense of personality and founded on the epistolary tropes of intimacy, authenticity and spontaneity', bringing together 'mass appeal with intimate address' (4). Cobbett's unique bond with his audience is dissected alongside what Grande calls his 'oppositional idea of rural England' (8) – a rural imaginary, Grande argues, that 'forms one of the neglected landscapes of British Romanticism [...] as visible to contemporary audiences as Wordsworth's Lakes or Scott's Borders' (5).

The first chapter traces Cobbett's emergence as a journalist in Philadelphia after the Revolutionary War, demonstrating that 'writing as a fiercely patriotic Tory in America [...] involved a strategic appeal to ideas of national character and patriotism', and thus, 'sow[ed] the seeds for Cobbett's English ruralism' (18). Chapter 2 frames the development of some of Cobbett's signature tropes of oppositional popular journalism around his correspondence, from 1800 to 1806, with the first financial backer of the *Political Register*, the leading anti-Jacobin politician William Windham. Cobbett's journalistic innovations are mapped dialectically, his pioneering periodical record of parliamentary debates (later to become *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*) and distinctive editorial personality that emerged in response to the official practices of the British government, marking out a 'tension between the newspaper as an intimate, impassioned rejoinder and a dispassionate system of information' that was 'central to the development of the *Political Register*' (50).

Chapter 3 examines Cobbett's series on England's financial system, written while imprisoned in Newgate, *Paper Against Gold* (1810–11), and his landmark November 1816 'Two-Penny Trash' edition of the *Register*. These two enterprises are related, in part through Cobbett's mode of address pioneered in the former. 'As Cobbett uncovered a system of war, corruption and speculation,' Grande observes of *Paper Against Gold*, 'he found a representational crisis which required increasingly innovative forms of address' (70). Grande brings an original critical perspective via the correspondence of Cobbett with his family in rural Botley during his imprisonment, arguing that 'the printed letters of *Paper Against Gold* and the archive of family correspondence are based on an opposition between the paper system and a rural world of common sense, productive labour and tangible goods' (81).

Chapter 4 engages with Cobbett's *A Grammar of the English Language* (1818) through a series of open letters published in his *Register* during his second American exile in Long Island, the latter 'laying the ground' for the main ideological impetus of the former, 'working out his ideas before his audience and linking rural life, clarity of expression and political reform' (104), with 'grammar as the tool that will restore agency' to his audience (105). Chapter 5 highlights how Cobbett's 'characteristically domestic mode of writing takes on renewed significance when encountering the relatively new idea of the royal *family*' (115) during the Queen Caroline affair, using 'the epistolary form to transform Caroline into a paradoxically chivalric symbol of radical reform' (128).

Chapter 6 looks at Cobbett's 'distinctively modern version of the polemical tour' in *Rural Rides*, 'combining political argument with documentary evidence' (148). Grande observes how this method 'can also operate alongside a vivid sense of wonder' in the description of rural landscape (159), and draws parallels between the *Rides* and

Wordsworth's poetry of the 1790s, 'which are both preoccupied with ideas of rootedness and itinerancy' (161).

The final chapter juxtaposes Cobbett's activist journalism in the *Register* during the agricultural riots of 1830–31 with the periodical's overlooked writing on the contemporaneous July Revolution in France. This Anglo-French context brings an important new perspective on the three open letters Cobbett published in the 23 October 1830 *Register* that 'weave together what was happening in the southern counties, London and Paris' (180) – a rhetorical feat 'bring[ing] apparently disparate events into correspondence during the Swing riots, shuttling between England and France to place current events within a long narrative of oppression' (181). Grande's archival research enriches his account of Cobbett's subsequent trial for seditious libel by the Whig Government, using family and Home Office papers to illuminate the strategies on both sides.

William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England significantly develops what is already a formidable body of scholarship on the most influential contemporary English prose writer of the Romantic period. Grande's painstaking research in the Cobbett family correspondence yields a rich new interpretative context for assessing a range of his most enduring texts and the journalistic innovations showcased in the *Political Register* and *Two-Penny Trash*. But this major new study is more than simply a synthesis and presentation of valuable archival research. It re-imagines Cobbett as a distinctively Romantic writer sharing a range of moral and aesthetic concerns with the likes of Wordsworth, whilst convincingly portraying this leading radical champion of English localism as one of the most cosmopolitan and international writers of the age.

Note: The present reviewer contributed an essay to the author's *William Cobbett, Romanticism and the Enlightenment: Contexts and Legacy* (London: Pickering, 2015), co-edited with John Stevenson.

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