

James Grande, John Stevenson and Richard Thomas, eds., *The Opinions of William Cobbett*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 214 + x. £25. ISBN 9781409464327.

‘Put me on a gridiron and broil me alive if I am wrong’ proclaims the masthead of William Cobbett’s post-1819 *Political Register*, predicting that paper money would lead to disaster. The statement is also the motto of the William Cobbett Society that held an event at Nuffield College to celebrate his 250 birthday in 2013. But, as this outstanding book demonstrates, Cobbett was a man who changed his mind on matters as various as reform, war, and Catholicism in the course of five decades and over 20 million published words. This accessible and brilliantly chosen selection, which is interspersed with judicious directive comments, is the first collection of Cobbett’s writings in forty years, following previous collections by Richard Ingrams, who writes the Foreword to this book, John Derry, G.D.H. and M.I. Cole, and Cobbett’s children who published selections soon after he died in 1835.

Reformer, agriculturalist, historian, politician, journalist, soldier, convict, speechwriter to Queen Caroline, and MP, Cobbett was a remarkable figure. A.J.P. Taylor thought him second only to Samuel Johnson as ‘greatest Englishman’. Many admired him, including Arnold, Morris and Ruskin. Samuel Bamford wrote: ‘The writings of William Cobbett suddenly became of great authority; they were read on nearly every cottage hearth’. Shelley and Blake, barely read in their lifetime, are taught, but Cobbett is denied the visibility of other major figures of the period. This book is an excellent guide as to how a student or teacher might start with Cobbett and best discover his work.

Divided into thirteen chapters, each with a theme, such as ‘America’ and ‘Literature, Sensibility and the Romantics’, this book captures Cobbett’s largeness in only 200 pages. The editors, Grande, Stevenson and Thomas, well-known for their expert knowledge of Cobbett – Grande has a monograph, *William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England: Radicalism and the Fourth Estate* appearing this year – do an admirable job of presenting Cobbett’s opinions in an objective light. As far as possible they seem to have followed the advice of Cobbett’s *English Grammar*: ‘the *only* use of words is to cause our meaning to be clearly understood; and that the best words are those which are familiar to the ears of the greatest number of persons’ (9-10).

Cobbett was proud that a simple education consisting of country games, and work, saved him from ‘those dens of dunces called Colleges and Universities’ (17). After eight years in the army he set out against corruption: ‘My head was filled with the corruptions and the baseness in the army’ (30). Imprisoned in 1810 for protesting against the flogging of militiamen he wrote *Paper Against Gold* during two-years in Newgate. The chapter ‘Corruption’ shows Cobbett rail against ‘*taxes*, which the government compels us to pay for [...] the payment of interest of its debt.’ He fingers ‘merchants, manufacturers, and bankers’ as ‘the cause of our present miseries’ (39). The chapter ‘Parliamentary Reform’ shows Cobbett shift from a conservative defence of the ‘traditional status quo’ (57) to someone who saw the need for every man ‘who pays a *tax*, of any sort’ the right to vote to ‘*give his consent*’. Attempting to become MP for Coventry, he, usually a willing scrapper, met the physical force side of Old Corruption: ‘never did my eyes behold any thing in human shape so ferocious, so odiously, so diabolically ferocious, as those bands of villains, hired, paid, fed, and drenched by the Rich Ruffians of Coventry.’ (72)

Cobbett was politically idiosyncratic. As G.D.H. Cole asserts: ‘Cobbett the Anti-Jacobin and Cobbett the Radical Reformer were definitely the same person’. Whatever his shade of politics his greatest beef was with the ‘Scotch feelosophers’ (1) who were obsessed with how ‘the “*national wealth*” can be increased by making [...] people work *incessantly*,

that they may raise food and clothing, to go to feed and clothe *people who do not work at all?*' (88). Of Scots in general he wrote: 'These vagabonds [...] will *not work*; they depend on the taxes in all countries whither they go' (169). Cobbett hated many things as 'Villains and Pet Hates' shows. The editors write that a 'single chapter will inevitably fail to do justice to the full range of Cobbett's prejudices: [...] a full Cobbett demonology would run to several volumes' (77). Cobbett hated, amongst many other things: potatoes; London; loans; Shakespeare—'punning and smutty'; tea; *Paradise Lost*—'barbarous trash, so outrageously offensive to reason'; pianos and paper-money. Cobbett also had irrational prejudices, that he tried to rationalise, calling Jews 'stockjobbers' (78) but this fronts a deeper anti-Semitism that he recited disturbingly regularly. The chapter 'Religion' displays Cobbett's hatred of tithes that demanded farmers surrender 10% of crops to the parson. 'Poverty and the Poor Laws' shows Cobbett at his most admirable: 'I have *occupied my whole life [...] to better the lot of the Labourers*' (133).

This book has just the right mix of extracts and direction from the editors, who one feels are familiar with not only everything that Cobbett's published, but also his unpublished correspondence. Tribute is paid to the many sides of Cobbett here, and the darker ones are not ignored.

John Gardner
Anglia Ruskin University