

The classless Cobbett

Andrew Kemp reviews
*The Life and Adventures
 of William Cobbett*
 by Richard Ingrams
 (HarperCollins, 2005,
 456 pages)

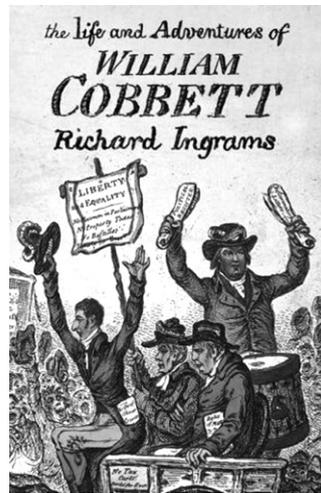
'Every now and then someone asks as a sort of parlour game, "Who do you think is the greatest Englishman?" I have never been at a loss for an answer. Samuel Johnson of course ... Johnson was profound. He was moral. Above all he was human ... still I have a qualm. There comes to my mind not perhaps the greatest Englishman but certainly the runner-up. This is William Cobbett.'

Richard Ingrams's recent biography of 'one of the most extraordinary characters in English history', begins fittingly with the foregoing quotation of A.J.P. Taylor's. History tends to prefer prolific leaders to eccentric journalists, though the story of Cobbett still remains a remarkable tale.

Picture a 20-year-old farmer's son, off to the Guildford Fair on the sixth of May 1783, only to spot a London stage coach rolling towards him. Possibly on impulse, he decides to jump on and ride to London instead. It was a decision that would be the symbolic first step to the remarkable career of a man who Ingrams describes as 'the most effective, most savage and most satirical political journalist of his or any other age'. It is an amusing anecdote that aptly encompasses the adventure of Cobbett's life, and indeed, Ingrams does well in making it read like one.

But what exactly were the politics of the greatest political journalist? Why

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is his life still worth reading about?

It is clear that the contemporary Right/Left labels simply do not fit Cobbett's politics. Like the great free trader Richard Cobden, Cobbett was fiercely against the Corn Laws, but like the Utopian socialist Thomas Spence, Cobbett would go on to advocate public ownership of land. Rural labourers were in a constant struggle to compete with the oncoming industrial revolution, but Cobbett was never a supporter of violence, or to the smashing up of machinery, of which he himself saw the benefits.

Cobbett, rather, is the great apostle of the democratic idea. He was classless in a society completely divided by class. Plato would famously argue the need for Philosopher Kings, but it was Cobbett who would argue that 'the nature and quality of all living things are known to country boys better than to philosophers'. He was the leading advocate of the reform movement at a time when many politicians saw the purpose of government (which Cobbett labelled 'The Thing') as the maintenance of the status quo. He detested the term 'lower orders' to describe his beloved labourers, noting that 'Genius is as likely to come out of the cottage as out of the splendid mansion'. The British will argue that William Cob-

bett was quintessentially English, but I would argue that Cobbett's spirit was quintessentially Australian.

Cobbett would found the *Political Register*, a journal which sought to expose the incompetence of government leaders and the neglect that was shown towards the common people. His most lasting legacy, however, was the printing of *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, which would come to be known as *Hansard* (after the man to whom Cobbett later sold his business). Cobbett was of the belief that anyone could achieve a level of education and intellect if allowed access to the right resources, and it was this that made Cobbett such a prolific writer. Books on English grammar, speaking French, economics, history—every topic known to man was approached at least once by Cobbett. *Rural Rides* remains his most enduring work, a kind of travel diary of the English countryside that gives readers the best look into an England on the brink of the Industrial Revolution.

Ingrams has chosen a good time to bring William Cobbett back to public view. Corruption still remains rife in the developing world, but with very little public attention given to it, we are stuck wearing coloured wrist-bands and supporting trivial development projects such as 'fair trade'. A William Cobbett today would be much welcomed, exposing the injustices of tyranny and the poverty caused by corrupt leaders and incompetent bureaucracies. The spirit of individualism is often associated with the American pioneer, but no better has it been demonstrated than by the British ploughboy who made it to parliament.

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