

Two Williams of One Medieval Mind: Reading the Socialist William Morris through the lens of the Radical William Cobbett

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Oh the roast beef of old England,
And old England's roast beef¹

In January 1883 William Morris joined the Democratic Federation and declared himself a Socialist. As a writer, he turned his full attention to the task of aiding in the propaganda of the new cause. If social revolution was to be necessary, those who would carry the torches would need to be educated: 'to teach them, in as much detail as possible what are the ends and the hopes of Social Revolution'.² Morris began reading in earnest about economics and Socialism, and it was at this time that he seems to have enthusiastically discovered the writings of William Cobbett (1763–1835), which, according to E. P. Thompson, 'had a pronounced influence upon the forthright polemical style of his own Socialist writings'.³ The strong appeal of the radical Cobbett for Morris, however, was based not solely on the earlier man's rhetorical abilities, but in a mutual affinity for England's medieval past, and a conviction that the greater social and economic freedoms enjoyed by labourers in 'Old England' could be used in support of their own agenda for radical political and social reform. Cobbett, therefore, who preceded Morris by several generations, serves as a unique lens through which Morris's Socialist writings can be viewed, both in the historical context of nineteenth-century radicalism and its sometime bedfellow, the Medieval Revival.

Influenced in part by Henry Myers Hyndman's *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England*, a copy of which he obtained early in 1884,⁴ Morris came to believe that a case could be made for an indigenous presence of Socialism in England,

particularly during the fourteenth century: ‘That time was in a sense brilliant and progressive, and the life of the worker in it was better than it ever had been’.⁵ Morris, who had immersed himself in the history and art of England during the Middle Ages since his boyhood, found a new voice for his medievalism in a belief that the life of the medieval labourer was one of greater liberty, equality and brotherhood than that of the worker in Victorian England. *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris’s story of the Peasants Revolt of 1381, was first published in 1886 as a serial in *Commonweal*, the newspaper of the Socialist League, of which Morris was the editor.⁶ Based largely on a contemporary account of the uprising by John Froissart,⁷ the story is of ‘the men of Kent’ and their leader, the hedge-priest John Ball, as they prepare to march to confront King Richard II in order to demand their freedom from oppression by anyone who ‘layeth law on other men because he is rich’.⁸ Ball preaches hope for a world which will return to the social ideals of Genesis, when Adam and Eve worked without any human master. This is the world of the English farmer, specifically the rural Essex in which Morris spent his childhood. It is also the land of William Cobbett’s ‘chopsticks’,⁹ and the riots in the *unquiet country* which threatened the stability of the British government during the decade leading up to the Reform Act of 1832:

The Essex County inhabitants of Morris’s childhood — the boy himself — had good reason to recall the fourteenth century rebellion, its heroes, and its rhymes. The poverty experienced by craftsmen, farmers, and agricultural workers and the disruption of former patterns of life may have been greater during these years than any in the previous five hundred. It was one of the regions caught up during the 1820s and 1830s in what William Cobbett called the ‘Rural War’ between landlords and country labourers threatened by agricultural and industrial mechanisation and by the decline in employment and wages.¹⁰

William Cobbett was not only chronicler of the Rural Wars. He was also widely denounced as a chief instigator of the ‘Swing’ Riots of the 1820s, some going so far as to identify him as ‘Captain Swing’ himself. According to a witness of one of his speeches, ‘not only by oblique hints did he inflame their minds, but openly did he predict that that and every other part of the country would be visited with similar outbreaks as to those then raging in Kent’.¹¹

Cobbett’s Radicalism grew somewhat enigmatically from his original Tory roots while he was living as an exile in Philadelphia (1794–1800) after being threatened at home with a court-martial for attempting to bring fellow soldiers to justice for corruption in the British Army. Faced with a strong anti-British attitude, Cobbett found his voice as a pamphleteer: writing under the pen-name ‘Peter Porcupine’, he supported British interests and constitutional monarchy against pro-French ‘republicans’ such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. When he returned to England in 1800, in order to avoid imprisonment after

being found guilty of libel in the United States, his radical voice was given a new organ in his *Political Register*. The enemy was now the ‘Pitt System’ and its plutocracy of bankers, jobbers and brokers, who, he believed, had conspired against rural farm workers by increasing the National Debt during the American and French wars. Food prices rose and wages fell, making life hard for the labourer – the issue which became the *cause célèbre* for his Radicalism for the remainder of his life.

In the opening paragraph of *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris connects Cobbett with the landscape of the Essex of 1381: ‘an island of shapely trees and flower-beset cottages of thatched grey stone and cob, amidst the narrow stretch of bright green water-meadows that wind between the sweeping Wiltshire downs, so well beloved of William Cobbett’.¹² In Morris’s mind, the radical Cobbett comes from the same English soil as the radical John Ball. More important, Cobbett was a successful public orator who knew how to speak to labourers: ‘he found the tone, the style, and the arguments which could bring the weaver, the schoolmaster, and the shipwright, into a common discourse’.¹³ In Morris’s words, Cobbett was ‘the master of plain speaking’.¹⁴ He saw in Cobbett a skill for language which he himself did not possess, but wished to learn and to put to into practice: ‘How often I have it said to me, You must not write in a literary style if you wish the working classes to understand you’.¹⁵

Ian Dyck suggests that the beginning of the ‘Great Depression’ in 1874 renewed interest in rural poverty, and brought Cobbett’s name back into the public *milieu*: ‘Richard Heath entitled an essay on Cobbett “A Peasant Politician”’. Matthew Arnold, in 1880, remarked that Cobbett’s politics were governed by “the master-thought ... of the evil condition of the English labourer”’.¹⁶ Perhaps it was at this time that Morris became aware of Cobbett. He first mentions his name during August 1883, when he asks Ellis & White’s bookshop: ‘Could you lay hands for me on the works of William Cobbett – any all of them’.¹⁷ In September, his enthusiasm is expressed to his daughter Jenny in words which suggest a first-time reader: ‘I have got a lot of W. Cobbett’s books; such queer things they are, but with plenty of stuff in them’.¹⁸ Cobbett was a prolific author, but according to May Morris, her father apparently obtained only three of his better known works: ‘I have just been re-reading Cobbett’s *Rural Rides*, a book that amused my father very much. He used to quote largely from it to us, as well as from his *Cottage Economy* and *Advice to Young Men*’.¹⁹

Rural Rides (1830) is Cobbett’s diary of his journey on horseback in southern England from 1822–1826 (Figure 1). Each ‘ride’ was originally published separately in his *Political Register*. The purpose of his effort was to compile a first-hand empirical account of the ‘Condition of England’ – by his own description, ‘hearing what gentlemen, farmers, tradesmen, journeymen, labourers, women, girls, boys and all have to say; reasoning with some, laughing with others, and observ-

have a natural tendency to draw wealth into great masses. These masses produce a power of congregating manufacturers, and of making the many work at them, for the gain of a few'.²² Life is being sucked out of rural England by the 'wens', the polluted and overcrowded industrial cities – 'Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow, Paisley, and other Hell-Holes of 84 degrees of heat. There misery walks abroad in skin, bone and nakedness'.²³ London is *The Great Wen*, the all-devouring *Wen*, the *Wen of all wens*.

Morris first adopts Cobbett's *wen* in his lecture 'Art Under Plutocracy,' in November 1883: 'It is my business here to-night and everywhere to foster your discontent with that anarchy and its visible results ... with the hideousness of London, the wen of all wens, as Cobbett called it'.²⁴ At the end of *A Dream of John Ball*, when the dreamer awakes, he looks toward the fields of Richmond Park:

... looking like the open country; and dirty as the river was, and harsh as was the January wind, they seemed to woo me toward the country-side, where away from the miseries of the 'Great Wen' I might of my own will carry on a day-dream of the friends I had made in the dream of the night and against my will.²⁵

Morris here is echoing Cobbett not only in the use of a word, but also in the connection between pollution and the cities. While on his ride through 'Hampshire, Surrey and Down to the Wen', Cobbett observes something in the sky coming up the valley: 'Is it smoke, or is it a cloud?' he asks the farmer to whom he has been speaking. 'The day had been very fine hitherto; the sun was shining very bright where we were. The farmer answered, "Oh, it's smoke, it comes from Ouselberry, which is down in that bottom behind those trees"'.²⁶ The 'smoke-cloud, dense manufacturing mist' in John Ruskin's 'The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century'²⁷ is remarkably similar to this description, and the date of that lecture (1884) suggests that Ruskin may have been reading Cobbett upon recommendation by Morris.

Cobbett contrasts the ugliness of the industrial wens with the idyllic beauty of rural England in its landscape: 'a country where high downs prevail, with here and there a large wood on the top or the side of a hill, and where you see, in the deep dells, here and there a farm-house, and here and there a village, the buildings sheltered by a group of lofty trees'.²⁸ Though Morris apparently did not always agree with Cobbett's selection of the most beautiful spots in England,²⁹ he seems to have imitated his style in many of his own landscape descriptions. And in *News from Nowhere*, in a passage which reads as though it might have come from the pages of *Rural Rides*, he returns England to its rural ideal:

England was once a country of dwellings amongst the woods and wastes, with a few towns interspersed, which were fortresses for the feudal army, markets for the folk, gathering places for the craftsmen. It then became a country of huge and

foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens, surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm, pillaged by the masters of the workshops. It is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty.³⁰

In his contemptuous description of the period preceding the revolution, Morris perhaps purposely imitates Cobbett's vitriol with several hyphenated words, in what E.P. Thompson called 'Cobbett's trick of naming'.³¹ This is exemplified by words such as 'stock-jobber' and 'tax-eater'.

The revival of cottage crafts was one of Cobbett's greatest causes. This clearly resonated with Morris, whose own childhood was spent in a household with 'homemade beer and bread, real butter and real cream and the like'.³² Upon discovering Cobbett in 1883, he praises him to Jenny: 'One little book called *Cottage Economy* is very amusing, and there is a chapter in it on the making of straw plait: the article on the pig is touching'.³³ At the time of its publication (1823), Cobbett believed that much of the misery of rural labourers was being brought about by the influence of urban manufacturing centres and their 'cheap and nasty' goods. Cobbett hoped that tenant farmers and labourers 'could defeat the manufacturers and taxgatherers by returning to the system of making as many things at home as possible'.³⁴ The problem was the population had largely forgotten how to feed and clothe itself, so in *Cottage Economy* he took on the task of that education. In Cobbett's view, Old England was always a land of plenty: 'The people of England have been famed, in all ages, for their good living; for the abundance of their food and goodness of their attire. The old sayings about English roast beef and plum-pudding, and about English hospitality, had not their foundation in nothing'.³⁵ The way back to that better time was for the English family to regain the skills needed to live independently, making their own clothes, baking their own bread and brewing their own beer.

For Cobbett, the clothes of the simple labourer are a thing of nostalgic beauty: 'The landlady sent her son to get me some cream, and he was just such a chap as I was at his age, and dressed in the same sort of way, his main garment being a blue smock-frock, faded from wear, and mended with pieces of new stuff, and of course, not faded'.³⁶ Women too are far more attractive in their cottage-made clothing than in the 'showy and flimsy' fabrics made by the machinery of the industrial mills: 'are they less pretty, when their dress is plain and substantial, and when the natural presumption is that they have smocks as well as gowns, than they are when drawn off in the frail fabric of [the mill]'.³⁷

For Morris, the good society of Nowhere also values things well-made and simple. The people working the fields along the upper Thames during hay-making are well-fed and well-attired: 'strong and handsome, both men and women, and that so far from there being any appearance of sordidness about their attire,

they seemed to be dressed specially for the occasion ... gaily and with plenty of adornment'.³⁸ This was not always the case: before the Revolution, under the control of industrial enterprise, manufactured goods prevailed and handicrafts had been forgotten:

[T]he consumer is perfectly helpless against the gambler; the goods are forced on him by their cheapness, and with them a certain kind of life which that energetic, that aggressive cheapness determines for him ... the traditions of a thousand years fall before it in a month ... and whatever romance or pleasure or art existed there, [was] trodden down into a mire of sordidness and ugliness.³⁹

Cobbett saw his cottage economy, given enough time, winning back England for rural crafts, and defeating the manufacturers and the capitalists. Morris was less patient and advocated social revolution. Cobbett would have been pleased nonetheless with the outcome in Morris's own account: the inhabitants of Nowhere re-learn the skills of the cottager, since many 'had even forgotten how to bake bread'.⁴⁰

Cobbett's view of education supports his insistence on the need to foster appreciation for the basic skills of the English homestead at an early age. He received his own education working at his father's farm in Farnham in Surrey: 'a due mixture of pleasure with toil', without which 'I should have been at this day as a great a fool, as inefficient a mortal, as any of those frivolous idiots that are turned out from Winchester and Westminster School or from any of those dens of dunces called Colleges and Universities'.⁴¹ He distrusts public education: 'schools over which the parents have no control, and where nothing is taught but the rudiments of servility, pauperism and slavery'.⁴² Instead, he is an advocate of home-schooling, and charges parents with the responsibility 'to give, if they are able, book-learning to their children, having first-taken care to make them capable of earning their living by bodily labour'.⁴³ The Cobbett pedagogy would certainly have produced a capable individual in Morris's Nowhere, where cottage skills are primary for all children: 'They all of them know how to cook; the bigger lads can mow; many can thatch and do odd jobs at carpenting; or they know to how to keep shop. I can tell you they know plenty of things'.⁴⁴

Cottage-crafts are, for Cobbett, rooted in the soil of England. It is this sense of the organic which gives him the voice to condemn those things which take the English labourers away from their native heritage and legacy: 'A nation is made powerful to be honoured in the world, not so much by the number of its people as by the ability and character of that people'.⁴⁵ Cobbett's own medievalism is based in his observation that the character of the people of the England of the past was 'greater'. When he visits the ruins of the Abbey at Highworth, Wiltshire, he offers a description laden with *dustsceawung*:

It was once a most magnificent building; and there is now a door-way, which is the most beautiful thing I ever saw, and which was nevertheless, built in Saxon times, in the 'dark ages' . . . If, in all that they have left us, we see that they surpassed us, why are we to conclude, that they did not surpass us in all other things worthy of admiration?⁴⁶

Morris, of course, was a man of similar words and feelings long before he ever read Cobbett, and, along with Ruskin, lauded the greatness of medieval art as a testament to the freedom labourers enjoyed in the society in which they worked: 'The medieval craftsman was free in his work, therefore he made it as amusing to himself as he could; and it was his pleasure and not his pain that made all things beautiful that were made'.⁴⁷ In an article entitled, 'Artist and Artisan,' published in *Commonweal* in September 1887, Morris makes mention of Cobbett's assessment of St Paul's Cathedral: 'Again, along with William Cobbett, contrast the dungeon-like propriety of St. Paul's, the work of a "famous" architect with the free imagination and delicate beauty of the people-built Gothic churches'.⁴⁸ In Morris's paraphrase, Cobbett anticipates Ruskin's 'slavery argument' in the *Stones of Venice* against the homogenous perfection required of workers in Classical (or Wren's Neoclassical) architecture.

For Cobbett and Morris, labour is a precious resource, and part of human greatness. Morris gives it an almost spiritual purpose: 'A man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body'.⁴⁹ Labour, therefore, should not be wasted on meaningless toil. In *Rural Rides*, Cobbett comes upon a group of men who normally work on the farm, but because farmers are too poor to pay them, are paid by means of parish poor-rates assessed on the farmers to carry out 'meaningless' road work:

The hop-picking is now over; and now [the men] are employed by the Parish; that is to say, not digging holes one day and filling them up the next; but at the expense of half-ruined farmers and tradesman and landlords, to break stones into very small pieces to make nice smooth roads lest the jolting, in going along them, should create bile in the stomachs of the overfed tax-eaters.⁵⁰

Here is labour as useless as that used to make 'glass beads,' but Cobbett also gives us the non-producers, the consuming 'tax-eaters, and their base and prostituted followers, dependents, purveyors, parasites and pimps'⁵¹ – those, who in Morris's words, 'do not produce [,] . . . and consume out of all proportion to their due share'.⁵² On this issue, Morris and Cobbett are of one voice: Morris, using Cobbett's vocabulary, refers to the commercial manufacturers as 'parasites of property'.⁵³ But Cobbett has still another metaphor: 'locusts, called middle-men, who create nothing, who add to the value of nothing, who improve nothing,

but who live in idleness, and who live well, too, out of the labour of the producer and the consumer'.⁵⁴ Cobbett believes that it is not simply middle-men, however, who burden the lives of the working poor; it is the entire government-banker-capitalist system, what Cobbett likes to call the *The Thing*. The most hated members of this parasitic, controlling group are the 'stock-jobbers'. These are 'the agents to carry on gambling. . . [they] call themselves gentlemen; or at least, look upon themselves as the superiors of those who sweep the kennels'.⁵⁵ The tenor of Cobbett's homiletics can be heard when Morris describes England as 'this stock-jobber's heaven',⁵⁶ and when he labels the middle-man 'the gambler, who uses both consumer and producer as his milch cows'.⁵⁷

Both writers add the army to the list of parasitic 'tax-eaters'. Cobbett suggests that since they are used to pay the military salaries and pensions, poor-rates be called 'wages':

[T]he whole amount of these poor-rates falls far short of the cost of the standing army in time of peace! So that, take away this army, which is to keep the distressed people from committing acts of violence, and you have at once, ample means of removing all the distress and all the danger of acts of violence.⁵⁸

Cobbett clearly remembers the use of the militia against rural uprisings during his own lifetime, which no doubt increased his sense of outrage over its cost. Morris reading Cobbett may have envisioned a similar use of the military during the soon-to-come revolution. Like Cobbett, he condemns the expense of 'the soldiers by land and sea who are kept on foot for the perpetuating of the national struggle for the share of the product of unpaid labour',⁵⁹ and places them with the other members of the class of 'accidental labour . . . the soldier, the thief, or the stockjobber'.⁶⁰

Because producer and consumer are separated by middle-men who fight each other on a 'battlefield' of commerce, producing things which nobody wants, the solution is to foster a more direct relationship in trade between maker and user. Once more Cobbett returns to the heritage of Old England:

The fair and the market, those wise institutions of our forefathers . . . bring the producer and consumer in contact with each other. Whatever is gained is, at any rate, gained by one or the other of these. The fair and the market bring them together, and enable them to act for their mutual interest and convenience.⁶¹

Morris describes the plenty and variety of a medieval market in *The Well at the World's End*: 'the scent of fresh herbs and worts and fruits; for it was market day, and the country-folk were early afoot, that they might array their wares timely in the market-place'.⁶² In *News from Nowhere*, the cash-less market, and the pleasantness of its free exchange is emblematic of the liberty, equality and fraternity of a Socialist England, which for Morris is a reflection of the England of the

medieval past.

The decorative arts employed by fourteenth-century villagers in *A Dream of John Ball* are indicative of the happiness and freedom of the labourer in society. Cobbett, too, observes in the 'more noble' art of medieval England an emblem of the economic liberty enjoyed by its workers:

After we came out of the cathedral [Winchester], Richard said, 'Why, Papa, nobody can build such places now, can they?' 'No, my dear', said I. 'That building was made when there were no poor wretches in England, called paupers; when there were no poor-rates, when every labouring man was clothed in good woolen cloth, and when all had a plenty of meat and bread and beer'.⁶³

During Cobbett's own lifetime, he watched the food of working people reduced to water and oatmeal: 'No society ought to exist where the labourers live in a hog-like sort of way'.⁶⁴ He argued against those who would attribute such deteriorating conditions to increase in numbers: 'the country has never varied much in the gross amount of its population'.⁶⁵ For Cobbett, the great size of old churches, and amount of land which had formerly been ploughed speaks to a large population in England's past and fully repudiates the theories of the 'Monster Malthus'. What has changed is a diminishment in the lives of the working poor. Cobbett interprets history as a declensionist, observing in *Rural Rides* those deteriorating conditions which support his argument that 'Englishmen had liberties in the past, which are now being invaded by greedy, corrupt and oppressive governments'.⁶⁶

But, the fact is, that, where honest and laborious men can be compelled to starve quietly, whether all at once or by inches, with old wheat ricks and fat cattle under their eye, it is a mockery to talk of their 'liberty', of any sort; for the sum total of their state is this, they have 'liberty' to choose between death by starvation (quick or slow) and death by the halter!⁶⁷

In 'How we live and how we might live' (1884) Morris echoes Cobbett's link between liberty and hunger: 'So you see, as we live now, it is necessary that a vast part of the industrial population should be exposed to the danger of periodical semi-starvation ... for their degradation and enslavement'.⁶⁸ In 'The Aims of Art,' also published in 1888 in *Signs of Change*, he repeatedly refers to 'the Artificial Famine caused by men working for the profit of a master'.⁶⁹ But Morris, however, takes Cobbett further down the road of liberty, equality and fraternity towards Socialism than he might have wished to travel (even when ceremoniously repatriating the bones of Thomas Paine in 1819 in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre):

So for fear you my Socialist friends should refuse to hear me any longer allow me to remind you, that William Cobbett asks this pertinent question: 'What is a slave?' and answers it thus, a slave is a man without property. In that I wholly agree. What are you to do if you have no property? You cannot get up when you will, go to bed when will, eat and drink as you will.⁷⁰

Cobbett's words here are from *Advice to Young Men*, (Figure 2) where, in the context of making an appeal for reform of Parliament (not for revolution, however), he urges readers to be mindful of not turning labourers into slaves; someone 'who has no share in making the laws in which he is compelled to obey'.⁷¹ Morris can be forgiven for reading a sense of communal property in Cobbett. At times it is expressed as nostalgia for the English past:

Time was when the inhabitants of this island, for instance, laid claim to all things in it, without the words owner or property being known. God had given to all the people all the land and all the trees, and everything else, just as he has given the burrows and the grass to the rabbits, and the bushes and the berries to the birds.⁷²

It is also evident in Cobbett's appeal for a return to a feudal system of customary rights to common land in order to help the poor feed themselves. Cobbett never denies the right of land-holders to charge rent, but it must be reasonable: 'it is a little step towards a coming back to the ancient small life and lease holds and common fields ... when almost every man that had a family had also a bit of land'.⁷³ Being poorer than one's neighbour, however, is not a bad thing and is largely relative. 'So that poverty is, except where there is an actual want of food and raiment, a thing much more imaginary than real'.⁷⁴ Like Rousseau, Cobbett believes that Civil Society arose at the same time as 'property', along with the notion of mine and thine: 'One man became possessed of more good things than another, because he was more industrious, more skillful, more careful, or more frugal: so that Labour, of one sort or another, was the Basis of all property'.⁷⁵ Morris would perhaps find this more difficult to paraphrase in support of his own collectivist cause.

Morris found in Cobbett a 'trail-blazer' for reform who was prophetic in his understanding of the need to address the deteriorating condition of the working poor: 'a man of great literary capacity of a kind, and with flashes of insight as to social matters far before his time ... a powerful disruptive agent, but incapable of association with others'.⁷⁶ Morris strongly believed that the Democratic Federation would be the key to success in any campaign to win England to Socialism: '... remember without organization the cause is but a vague dream, which may lead to revolt, to violence and disorder, but which will be speedily repressed by those who are blindly interested in sustaining the present anarchical tyranny

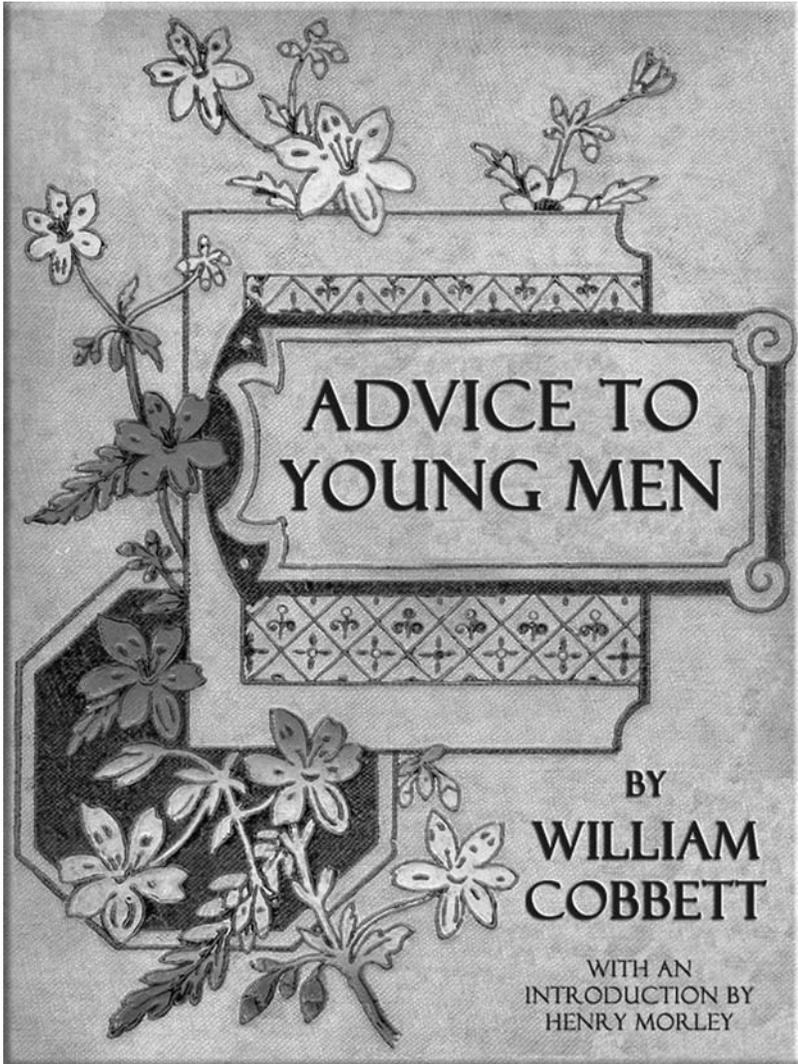


Figure 2 – Cover of Advice to Young Men, William Cobbett (1887). By permission, Bruce Hunt, oldlondonbooks.co.uk.

which is misnamed Society'.⁷⁷ In contrast, the early nineteenth century Radicals – Cartwright, Burdett, Hunt, Lovett, Cobbett – were free-thinking orators and writers who made little attempt at formal organisation. Unlike Morris and his fellow Socialists, they did not consider themselves revolutionaries. In the wake of the atrocities following the French Revolution, Cobbett writing in 1816 carefully styled himself a 'reformer':

I know of no enemy of reform and of the happiness of the country so great as that man, who would persuade you that we possess *nothing* good, and that *all* must be torn to pieces. ... We want great alteration, but we want nothing new. Alteration, modification to suit the time and circumstances; but the great principles ought to be, and must be, the same, or else confusion will follow.⁷⁸

Cobbett, though a successful agitator, lacked the vision for change embraced by Morris. In the heat of argument, he frequently called for an end to the current conditions, 'blow this funding and jobbing and enslaving and starving system to atoms',⁷⁹ but, he offered little in the way of an alternative. Robert Owen's early experiments in Socialism, 'Villages of Co-operation', an idea much-admired by Morris as a revival of the medieval commune,⁸⁰ was belittled by Cobbett as 'Mr. Owen's Parallelograms of Paupers'.⁸¹ When in 1830 Britain teetered precariously towards civil war, Cobbett, in his *Political Register*, threw the support of his 'country labourers' behind the Whig Reform Bill as the only means for Britain to avoid its own French Revolution.⁸² After its passage in 1832, Cobbett, along with a small group of other Radicals including, Joseph Hume and Thomas Attwood, took seats in the newly 'reformed' Parliament,⁸³ believing that they could work towards a political solution for the working-class, who had sadly achieved very little in the Bill's final form. Morris, from the vantage of another fifty years of failed struggle of Labour against Capitalism, and benefitting from his studies of Fourier, Engels and Marx, might have offered some advice to these men on the folly of their attempted legislative solution:

Communism can never be realized till the present system of Society has been destroyed by the workers taking hold of the political power.⁸⁴

Although Cobbett and Morris followed the same path in their radicalism, and their championship of medieval England as a better time for the ordinary labourer, unlike the Socialist Morris, the Radical Cobbett, fettered by his Tory roots, could never imagine a complete overthrow of government and its replacement with a new order organised by labourers and based on the principles of equality, fraternity and liberty, exemplified by the workers of England's medieval past.

NOTES

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2. May Morris, *William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist*, Vol. II, New York: Russell & Russell, 1966, p. 404. (Afterwards AWS).
3. E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976, p. 269.
4. To Ellis and White, 12 February 1884, in Norman Kelvin, ed, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, Vol. II, 1885–1888, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 263. (Afterwards Kelvin)
5. 'Feudal England' (1887), in May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, Vol. XXIII, New York: Russell & Russell, 1915, p. 53. (Afterwards CW).
6. Stephen F. Eisenman, 'A Dream of Prehistory in William Morris's "John Ball."', *The Art Bulletin* 87, March 2005, p. 92. (Afterwards Eisenman).
7. Eisenman, p. 97.
8. 'A Dream of John Ball' (1886), in A.L. Morton, ed, *Three Works by William Morris*, New York: International Publishers, 1968, p. 56. (Afterwards Morton)
9. Cobbett uses the term to refer to 'village workers.'
10. Eisenman, p. 98.
11. Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 168. (Afterwards Dyck)
12. Morton, p. 35.
13. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York: Vintage Books, 1963, p. 746. (Afterwards Thompson, *English Working Class*).
14. To the Editor of the *Daily News*, 14 August 1881, in Philip Henderson, ed, *The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends*, London: Longmans, 1950, p. 179. (Afterwards Henderson)
15. 'Monopoly: or, How Labour is Robbed' (1887); CW, Vol. XXIII, p. 241.
16. Dyck, p. 6.
17. To Ellis and White, 18 August, 1883, in Kelvin, p. 215.
18. To Jane Alice Morris, 4 September 1883, in Henderson, p. 183.
19. May Morris in CW, Vol. XVIII, p. xxij.
20. William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, ed, Ian Dyck, London: Penguin, 2001, p. xxii. (Afterwards *Rural Rides*)
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