WILLIAM COBBETT AND
PHILADELPHIA JOURNALISM:
1794–1800

William Cobbett's life in England after 1800 as editor of Cobbett's Political Register is reasonably well-known to readers of English history. His more amusing and adventurous activities as a soldier of the 54th regiment of foot in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick from 1784 to 1791 have been interestingly reported by Cobbett himself in various autobiographical passages. But of his life in and near Philadelphia from 1793 to 1800, the record is confusing. It is true enough that Cobbett had much to say about it at a later date, but his memory then was busy with trying to make his career seem coherent. And, though the name of William Cobbett occurs in all works covering this decade of Philadelphia life, the statements are almost invariably careless, inadequate, or plainly wrong.

This period of Cobbett's life is an awkward one to present, because his exact place in American life has never been described. Such contemporary accounts of him as one meets with are likely to be contradictory and misleading. He is an agent of William Pitt, engaged in subverting American judgment for a reward of British gold; he is the scurrilous opponent of the French patriots; he is the victim of a terrific whirlwind of violent pamphlets; he is the dear friend of honorable Quaker merchants like John Oldden; he is, this time in his own opinion, a virtuous and patriotic Englishman cast on a foreign shore and openly and honorably defending his country against the general malice of the French Republicans and the particular slurs of the American democrats. So Cobbett, following Shakespeare's generalization about man, appears in Philadelphia as an actor playing many parts.

This article, although its purpose is to sketch Cobbett's place in Philadelphia journalism during the last decade of the 18th century, will also by implication at least make clear his more general position

in the American scene. If his activities are analyzed with reference to the background of Philadelphia’s political and cultural interests, it becomes plain that Cobbett was not creating his own audience or defying the foul fiend in a lonely and heroic way; but that he was fitting himself into a place that circumstances had made for him.

Cobbett returned to England from his service in Nova Scotia late in the year 1791. He obtained his discharge on December 19 and proceeded to London where he laid before the War Office certain charges of peculation against the officers of his former regiment. The skirmish thus begun dragged on until March 1792, when, just as the matter was at last being brought to trial, Cobbett left the country. His later explanation was that he “had been baffled in his attempts to obtain justice, only because [he] had neither money nor friends.”

He went with his bride, Ann Reid, to France in order to learn the French language. In September, while on his way to Paris, he heard at Abbeville that the king had been dethroned and his guards murdered. Fearing arrest in France if England declared war, he turned aside to Havre de Grace and within a fortnight was embarked for America.

Cobbett speaks of himself as having been “touched by Republican Principles at this time.” His mind was inflamed by his conflict with established authority at the War Office; he had moved from an interest in the common soldier by way of Thomas Paine to an interest in the common man; and he looked to America with some of that confused political nostalgia that was so common in the feelings of his contemporaries. More practically, he had secured for himself in France a letter of introduction to Thomas Jefferson. An American stationed at The Hague had written it at the request of “a gentleman in the family of the English Ambassador here and acquainted with Mr. Cobbett. . . .” In this letter Cobbett is described as intending to settle in the United States.

After a dangerous passage of eight weeks, Cobbett and his wife landed at Wilmington. The fact is certain, but the account of the events leading to it are a little contradictory. The husband says that he had meant to go to Philadelphia but that the port was closed by

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2 Political Register, VIII. 522.
3 Short to Jefferson, Aug. 6, 1792; printed in To the Independent Electors of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, n.d.), 7–8; a copy is in H. S. P.
the fever and he was forced to disembark down the river. The wife remembered that, while on board, her husband had "looked at a map and fixed upon Wilmington as the place where he would go and settle and keep school." Mrs. Cobbett may have been remembering after the event, because her husband did settle in Wilmington and did take pupils.

But before he did this, he forwarded his letter of introduction and recommendation to Jefferson, covering it with a note of his own, dated November 2, 1792. In this accompanying letter he gives an explanation of his purpose in coming to America that is of some interest in view of his later activities were:

Ambitious to become a citizen of a free state, I have left my native country, England, for America. I bring with me, youth, a small family, a few useful literary talents, and that is all.

Should you have an opportunity of serving me, my conduct shall not show me ungrateful, or falsify the recommendation I now send you. Should that not be the case, I shall feel but little disappointment from it, not doubting but my industry and care will make me a happy and useful member in my adopted country.\

It should be remembered, in order to appreciate this letter to the fullest extent, that Jefferson, in 1792, was recognized in American political life as a professed admirer of the French and that this admiration was already being organized into the opposition party of American politics. It is impossible to say flatly that Cobbett was aware of the implications of offering himself to Jefferson, but it is safe to say that, given the republican tastes he describes himself as having, he was not averse to the connection nor unwilling to follow wherever it might lead. Jefferson's answer, however, put an end to this first effort to establish a contact in "a free state." He regretted that he could be of no service, for "Public Offices in our Government are so few, and of so little value, as to offer no resource to talents"; but he added that after Cobbett had settled himself and looked about he would be pleased to hear from him again.

So Cobbett turned to another aspect of the French interest in America, the émigrés from the West Indies. Wilmington, as a point of disembarkation, was filled with these people; and, as many of

4 Susan Cobbett to John Cobbett, Sept. 30, 1835; in Progress of a Ploughboy, 59-60.
5 Original in the Morgan Library, New York City; printed with scornful comments in To the Independent Electors of Pennsylvania.
them apparently considered going into business in the United States, there was a brisk market for a teacher of English who knew French as well. To one of these pupils, James Mathieu, he became so attached that he took him as a boarder, and this led, after Mathieu's departure for Philadelphia, to a constant supply of recommended guests. Through this work and through the connections that resulted, Cobbett found himself kept in close contact with all the varieties of French opinion that came into the vicinity of Philadelphia. By January, 1794, the stream of his particular customers had shifted to Philadelphia and at the end of the same month he closed his Wilmington establishment and followed them. Mrs. Cobbett remembers this very clearly: "Mr. Mathew [Mathieu] was one of these French gentlemen, but he was so pleased with Papa's company that he would insist on living in his house, as well as being taught by him and they used to go on together . . . stealing each other's bread at supper and so on. . . . They continued to receive boarders for some months, but Mama found them disagreeable and got to dislike Wilmington, and Mr. Mathew thought Papa might do much better . . . in Philadelphia . . . so to Philadelphia they went. . . ."

Publicly, Cobbett said nothing of this period of his life; and, at least while he was active in Philadelphia, his silence was justified. When he did, in 1796, become somewhat of a public character, he so sharply identified himself with the Federalists and the Anti-French factions that he might well have found it hard to explain the circles in which he first moved and the connection he first sought. Even more difficult would it have been if any of his opponents had brought up against him the earliest occasion on which he had tried to exercise what both he and Thomas Jefferson had agreed to call "a talent." Sometime between November, 1792, and February, 1793, he translated from the French the following item:

*Impeachment of Mr. La Fayette: containing his Accusation, (Stated in the Report of the Extraordinary Commission to the National Assembly, on the 8th of August, 1792), . . . with a Supplement, containing the Letters, and other authentic Pieces relative thereto.*

This pamphlet, published in Philadelphia, has a preface addressed by William Cobbett "To the Citizens of the United States," dated

*Supra, note 4.*
from Wilmington, February 19, 1793. A single sentence shows plainly enough its political intention: 7

To do justice to La Fayette as well as to those who have persecuted him, in the minds of a people who feel such a lively interest in every thing that concerns the honor and welfare of the French nation, I present the public with the following pieces . . .

But Cobbett seems to have found it unsatisfactory to exercise his talents for the republican school of thought. In a letter to James Mathieu, written December 13, 1793, he lets off a blast that appears to be a reference to the Impeachment of Mr. La Fayette. "For the Pamphlets, I beg you to let them remain with Mr. Dobson, and to tell him if he pleases to sell them as soon as he can, he will much oblige me.—At any rate I shall be glad to have made a settlement with these Gentlemen; and I'll be damned if I do not take care how they cheat me again."

It is at least a good guess that Cobbett is referring to his pamphlet, because the only other writing on which he is known to have been engaged during 1793 was a work that combined practical value with political neutrality, a work that when finally published in 1795 was called Le Tuteur Anglais, ou Gramaire regulière de la langue anglaise, en deux parties. 9 Even before this he describes with grim disapproval a quarrel between the factions in Wilmington, and gave Mathieu a lecture on preserving himself "from the political pest"—advice that he had not followed some months before. 10

By the end of 1793, he has made up his mind: his work is that of a teacher of languages, and he writes again to his friend in Philadelphia:

I am of opinion to go to Philadelphia . . . for if the French go away, I shall have nothing to do here. At P. there will always be resources for me as a maître de langue . . . a small house and going out to teach French seems to me the most reasonable plan . . .

7 There are two copies of this pamphlet in H. S. P.; one printed in Philadelphia in 1793 and the other in Hagerstown in 1794.  
8 Cobbett to Mathieu, Dec. 13, 1793; HM 22882. The Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, possesses twenty-two letters from Cobbett to Mathieu; the quotation above and those that follow are made with the kind permission of the Director of the Huntington Library.  
9 He mentions being engaged on this in two letters to Mathieu, Dec. 13 and 25, 1793; HM 22882, 22884.  
10 Cobbett to Mathieu, July 19, 1793; HM 22842.  
11 Idem, Dec. 25, 1793; HM 22884.
And, in another month, everything is arranged and he writes to say what coach he is coming by.\textsuperscript{12}

It is at this point that Cobbett came into touch with the realities of American political life. Within a few months he threw his own advice and his own resolutions to the winds and he was at it with ungloved hands. That he should have bounded back into the arena is not a matter for surprise. He had very definitely a taste for violent political discussion; he had also that capacity so necessary for a pamphleteer of seeing all events, even the most trivial, in those precise unshaded colors black and white. Given these qualities, he could scarcely have been other than a political writer in the 1790's. What is surprising, however, is that in 1794, after having tentatively sought the hand of Jefferson, after having experimented with the republican interest, after having rested in a spell of neutrality, he should have so wholeheartedly plumped for the opposing side. The simple fact that Dr. Priestley had come from Birmingham, had been fêted in New York City, and had made a few speeches whose sentiments were quite justified by the Doctor's experiences with the King and Church mobs of Birmingham, could not explain the tone of Cobbett's pamphlet-greeting. To any honest unthinking man of the time Cobbett could only appear as a plain hireling, so clearly had he stepped from one camp to the other when he wrote what he called \textit{The Tartuffe Detected} and what Bradford finally published as \textit{Observations on Dr. Priestley's Emigration, to which is added, a Story of a Farmer's Bull}.

Of course, this is speaking from knowledge that Cobbett's contemporaries did not have. The pamphlet was issued anonymously and was not connected with Cobbett's name until he was long-established in the public mind as a writer on the English side. By then, his early ventures in the other direction were unknown or forgotten, or at least, if remembered, were by some chance never brought up against him. Cobbett himself was very discreet at first. In a letter written to an English friend, he talks in what can only be a cautiously dissembling way of an attack that some Englishman or other has just made on Dr. Priestley.\textsuperscript{13} Next, he used the pseudonym of "Peter Porcupine," and so concealed himself behind this name.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Idem}, Jan. 31, 1794; HM 22885.
\textsuperscript{13} Cobbett to Rachel Smithers, July 6, 1794; Melville, \textit{Life and Letters}, I. 85 ff.
that not until 1796 was it generally known, or did it become, as he puts it, "a matter of notoriety," that he "was the person who had assumed the name of Peter Porcupine."

But now it is necessary to wonder at the change that had taken place in Cobbett and the search for an explanation cannot be avoided. I have deliberately written "explanation" rather than "reasons" because the precise answer needed by the word "reason" cannot be found. If we restate the essential facts we can see in the sharpest way the thing to be explained. Cobbett reached America at the end of 1792. He called himself to Jefferson's attention. He moved in consistently French circles. He translated revolutionary documents and presented his work to the public in a way that leaves no doubt of where his stated interests lay. These efforts are far from establishing him in the United States. He becomes politically neutral and supports himself by teaching. This brings him, by the spring of 1794, to Philadelphia. By the middle of 1794, however, he has written a strong anti-revolutionary pamphlet anonymously; by January, 1795, as Peter Porcupine, he is definitely of the pro-British party; by January, 1796, he enters vigorously into domestic politics on the Federal side with A New Year's Gift to the Democrats; and he is in full cry from then on until he sailed for Falmouth in June, 1800. The discrepancy is undeniably great: the partial resolution of it appears to depend on the character of the man and on the circumstances in Philadelphia life in which he found himself.

Cobbett was a man in whom instinctive habits of mind and unconscious forms of thought and feeling were always being overlaid by efforts at rational organized thinking. But, being a man to whom these rather complex processes were not natural and in whom they were produced by self-forcing, he was without that sort of intellectual consistency that formal education at its best gives to its pupils. He was constantly discovering, sometimes with too deep a pain, sometimes with too much enthusiasm, ideas and implications of ideas that for other men were so normal a part of thinking that they called for no particular consideration. This means that if one speaks of Cobbett as a thinker one cannot hope for a steadily growing line of thought. All one finds is a series of leaps and bounds. And it was

*Bradford published A Bone to Gnaw for the Democrats, parts I and II; and A Little Plain English addressed to the People of the United States.*
exactly the spectacle of Cobbett jumping from rock to rock across the stream of time that so disconcerted his opponents: they never knew what rock he would next be on, and as they looked back on his track they could see that he had for a moment rested on stones that they themselves had used. The charges of inconsistency, of being a turncoat, of charlatanism that they brought amply express their confusion and their dismay at seeing all rational principles denied. Cobbett devoted much space to explaining away these charges, giving circumstantial accounts of his life and feelings in which he vigorously tries to rationalize what simply cannot be made coherent by logical means. All that he says can be reduced to a few facts: he changed his mind, he saw more implications than he had at first seen, he discovered that what he had been thinking was not what he felt. To him, these were good reasons for altering his course; but they were not strong weapons to use in a political quarrel.

But if one studies the growth of Cobbett’s feelings and forgets that he imagined he was thinking, all, or nearly all, is steady and sincere. Cobbett’s feelings were fixed in the past, in a rural England, in a lovely agrarian utopia of the 18th century countryside, in a neat world of cottages, gardens, rich pig-sties, buxom girls, flushed young men, solid belongings, huge hay ricks, beef-lined stomachs; and the more the present became unlike this memorable past, the more harshly Cobbett judged its divergence. It was a slow process, however, for an untrained mind to find this fixed basis for its opinions when it had to penetrate revolutionary confusions, industrial change, varied experience of life, the vainglorious sensations of the ploughboy who rose in the world. In the first forty years of his life, every word Cobbett wrote was the product of a mind in which thought and feeling were so interpenetrating that the principles on which that mind worked were as obscure to himself as to his contemporaries.

If Cobbett’s own story of his entrance in American politics is read
again in the light of what has been said above, the part played by his character in explaining his shift from the side of the pro-French democrats to the pro-English Federalists can be studied. Also the peculiar mixture of an emotional sincerity with a superficial disregard of facts can be seen. And then we can turn to the background of circumstances for still further explanation.

In 1804, in answering a series of attacks, Cobbett gave a long account of his early career. He was, of course anxious to prove himself as good an Englishman as anyone else, and this desire colors the telling of the tale. He speaks of his work as the logical fruit of a sharply awakened patriotism; he calls his early republicanism the consequence of inexperience and of being "a perfect novice in politics"; age dismisses youth. In the sense that this is a record of feeling it is true; in the sense that it is record of fact, our knowledge of his earlier activities prevents our accepting it. This contradiction is the one that needs to be emphasized, and, if possible, one should be aware of it without seeing Cobbett as disparaged by it.16

It was at the memorable epochs of Dr. Priestley's emigration to America. . . The manifestoes of the Doctor, upon his landing in that country, and the malicious attacks upon the monarchy and the monarch of England which certain societies in America thereupon issued from the press, would, had it not been for a circumstance purely accidental, have escaped . . . my knowledge of their existence.

One of my scholars . . . chose, for once, to read his newspaper by way of lesson; and, it happened to be the very paper which contained the addresses presented to Dr. Priestley at New York, together with his replies. My scholar, who was a sort of republican, or, at best, but half a monarchist, appeared delighted with the invectives against England. . . . Those Englishmen who have been abroad, particularly if they have had time to make a comparison between the country they are in and that which they have left, will know how difficult it is, upon occasions such as I have been describing, to refrain from expressing their indignation and resentment. . . . The dispute was as warm as might reasonably be expected between a Frenchman, uncommonly violent even for a Frenchman, and an Englishman not remarkable for sang-froid; and, the result was, a declared resolution on my part, to write and publish a pamphlet in defense of my own country. . . . Thus it was that, whether for good or otherwise, I entered on the career of political writing. . . .

If one is content to overlook the fact that behind this story lies a change of heart and take it for what Cobbett honestly remembered it as being, the story of a heart's awakening, there then remains one more item to be brought into the account. What were the circum-

16 Political Register, VI. 450.
stances in which real feeling was for the first time called up, and
called up so strongly as to cancel the petty details and the little
theories of the past?

The essential factors of the situation, as they must have appeared
to Cobbett's limited knowledge, can be stated roughly. It may be
assumed that he knew nothing of the long historical process that had
produced the federation of American states by 1790. He certainly
did not understand the precise tangle of financial obligation, cultural
inheritance, practical distrust, and theoretical enthusiasm that made
up the American attitude towards the world in which the United
States found themselves. But these confusions and historical vague-
nesses were momentarily cleared in the last decade of the century
by the fact of the French Revolution. Generally for all men, par-
ticularly for Cobbett, this event and its consequences provided an
exact point of reference. For the first time in its long course, the 18th
century had something large enough to force its citizens to take
sides, and what was more, to force decisions in the light of all the
possible motives on which human beings can act: reason, feeling,
tradition, hope, and fear. Probably, up to this moment, a man like
Cobbett had never been made to consider his full relation to the
social order in which he freely moved. Now when he was asked to
do so, he found himself responding without further consideration to
the tradition in which he had been inconspicuously born. In making
his choice Cobbett was doing no more than following crudely a line
already marked out with greater refinement of feeling by Edmund
Burke, and anticipating, again crudely, the steps by which the emo-
tions of Wordsworth and Coleridge were to be stabilized. Once
this necessity of choosing is understood, one can look at the details
of the situation without getting lost.

Around the new Federal government revolved, as an inheritance
from its colonial past, one of the most fundamental antagonisms of
which human society is capable. In its most general form this was a
clash of interest between the groups whose activities were mercantile
and those whose activities were agrarian. By 1790 this material for

17 As a publisher and bookseller in Philadelphia, Cobbett took great pride in keeping
the genius of Burke before the American people. He imported his works, he republished
his anti-revolutionary speeches, he filled Porcupine's Gazette with references to the
opinions of this admired leader.
forming two political parties had begun to take shape, and their oppositions could already be described by such sectional, personal, or theoretical names and catch-terms as one chose to use. It was the mercantile, shipping, financial North against the planting, slave-holding, indebted South; it was Federalist against Republican democrat; it was Hamilton against Jefferson. It was, if one states it abstractly, the low Hobbesian view of human nature against the high hopefulness of Locke and the French physiocrats.18

However unsound in practice and politically vicious Hamiltonian finance seemed to the agricultural gentlemen of Virginia, it fitted the facts of life as understood by the merchants and financial men of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. They knew from their ledgers the complete dependence of their section of society on a successful maintenance of credit in the English money-market; and they found it as easy to rationalize this fact into a conservative theory of government as their opponents to rationalize their own situation into a democratic theory.

The supporters of these rapidly sharpening alternatives had already settled themselves to the detailed maneuverings of political life when Cobbett arrived in America. The final restatement of their differences in the significant terms of foreign policy came in 1793 when the news belatedly arrived that the French Republic had declared war on Great Britain and Spain. In the year that followed the confused practical issues and the blurred outlines of theory became clear and precise for American minds, for there was at last a plain European pattern against which both doctrines and practice could be measured.19

In the tumultuous year 1793 Americans gazed on the French Revolution as in a crystal ball, for an answer to their hopes and fears. Presently they looked up, satisfied, with a hearty "Yes!" or a thumping "No!". . . . Thus the French Revolution seemed to some a clean-cut contest between monarchy and repub-

18 Compare the following passage from Hamilton's report of 1795 (Works, 1886, VII. 462) : "One great error is that we suppose mankind more honest than they are. . . . All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and the well-born; the other the mass of the people . . . turbulent and changing. . . . Give therefore to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government," with the Jeffersonian phrases of the Declaration of Independence.

19 S. E. Morison, Oxford History of the United States, I. 156. This section of my paper is so deeply indebted to this work that I can do no more than make a general acknowledgment of the able analysis that is given in it, pp. 114–76.
licanism, oppression and liberty, autocracy and democracy; while to others it was a mere breaking out of the eternal strife between anarchy and order, atheism and religion, poverty and prosperity. The former joined the Republican Party; the latter the Federalist.

It was just because the circumstances sharpened and clarified themselves in the way described, it was because events and the opinions they generated could finally be related to formulas like Republican-France, Federalist-Britain, that Cobbett found his feet in the American scene.

From Cobbett's character and out of the general situation in which he lived it should be possible to derive an explanation of his position and of why he took the position he did. The best procedure will be to state the factors, tangible and intangible, that must have influenced him, and to leave it to the reader to calculate their comparative weight. Cobbett had a family to support, and nothing to rely on beyond his own exertions. Whatever he did, his actions were conditioned by this necessity: throughout his long life he always thought of himself as simply and unquestionably accepting this as a primary obligation. His efforts to use what he felt to be his talents as a political writer had led him nowhere before 1794, and he had with good reason turned to a more neutral occupation. But, as an individual, he found his feelings again involved in 1794; he had in his own heart to take a stand; the movement of events denied the possibility of one of his temperament finding any more ease on a bed of neutral roses. Under some immediate, though now probably undiscoverable compulsion, he found himself to be moved, more deeply than he had been moved by the writings of Thomas Paine, by the feelings of an Englishman, a member of the Church of England, a patriot of the mother-country. The Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Priestley has the unpremeditated violence of mind that flows naturally from a man who has suddenly discovered in himself unsuspected sources of feeling. But now comes the interesting fact that by the simple writing of this pamphlet Cobbett uncovered for himself an American career: what may have been the product of spontaneous emotion was converted into a livelihood, a consciously organized business, and a business that while it lasted offered both profit and a chance to exercise a talent. Unwittingly Cobbett stumbled into a market for his wares, then his eyes opened and he began
to develop his market; and finally he found himself linked in a thousand unexpected ways with one whole school of American feeling.

For if there was an opening for writers on the Republican-French side, there was bound to be an opening on the Federalist-British side. Circumstances of which Cobbett could not have been more than half aware had created a special demand for the special and apt services he could render not only as a writer of propaganda, but as an importer of English books, as a publisher who reprinted important English items, and finally as a journalist who could unite these various activities. His mind, stirred by patriotism, supported by conviction that grew with what it fed on, practically guided by the need of keeping a family, saw and exploited all the avenues of expansion the situation in Philadelphia offered. The rest of this article naturally becomes a record of this development; and if the account is read with all of the contributing factors in mind, it will be possible to understand Cobbett's place in American life.

During 1794 and 1795 Cobbett was the pamphleteer, "Peter Porcupine," and William Cobbett, maître de la langue. In the first capacity, he was reprinted in Birmingham and Liverpool and noticed by "Old Sylvanus" of The Gentleman's Magazine in a comment that elegantly blended polish and patriotism. He further replied to a nasty piece of democratic propaganda called The Political Progress of Britain, with the slashing Bone to Gnaw for the Democrats. As a teacher of language he translated Marten's The Law of Nations and got into print Le Tuteur Anglais on which he had been at work when he left Wilmington.

These two years must presumably have opened his eyes to the unthought of possibilities of his new profession. The interest he had aroused in England in anti-revolutionary circles proved to be

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20 Gentleman's Magazine, LXV. pt. i, 47.

21 This pamphlet, issued in January, 1795, went through three editions in the year and ended up in London in 1797 with a preface by Humphrey Hedgehog—John Gifford, editor of The Anti-Jacobin Review. After an interlude in February, 1795, entitled A Kick for a Bite; or, Review upon Review, with a Critical Essay on the Works of Mrs. S. Roscaon . . . , he added Part II, A Bone to Gnaw for the Democrats, in which he replied to a pamphlet recording the Proceedings of the United Irishmen. He finished the year with A Little Plain English, a work in which he lectured the people of the United States and defended Jay's Treaty.
worth cultivating, since it led to commercial contacts with the Lon-
don publishers and by degrees to the establishment of an export and
import business. And, in Philadelphia, he found himself looked to as
the popular writer on the Federalist side. He could estimate this
position pretty accurately from the pains taken by his opponents, the
whole democratic mob, to write him down. He was treated to A
Rub from Snub, A Twig of Birch for a Butting Calf, a Demo-
cratiad, a Little Innocent Porcupine’s Hornet’s Nest, A Roaster,
a Pill for Porcupine, a Last Confession and Dying Speech, and to
a wide range of miscellaneous insults. In return he gave, though not
so copiously, as good as he got, commenting with malice on Mr.
Randolph’s susceptibility to French gold in A New Year’s Gift for
the Democrats;\textsuperscript{22} and replying to the personal attacks with a mas-
terly blend of autobiography and germane lies called Life and Ad-
ventures of Peter Porcupine.\textsuperscript{23}

But these things were not the real task to which he settled: they
were but incidental to his larger schemes. In the spring of 1796, as
the bed-rock of this plan, he took a house in Second Street opposite
Christ’s Church, and in July opened a publishing and book-selling
business. He set himself frankly forward as an Englishman, as
no friend to “democratic principles,” as a man who with the cool
remoteness of a stranger would give to the struggling young nation
advice as to her proper course. In the circumstances, this plain state-
ment of his position was a good stroke. It gave him the almost unique
position of being free from direct American political influences,
made him a focus for the pro-English party of the City, and made
him seem to those in England who had their eyes on America an
outpost of English sentiment. Its only danger was one that he was
willing to face—broken shop windows and the charge that he was
supported by “Pitt’s Gold.”

The use he made of his position is an interesting one. The direc-
tion in which his mind worked was made clear in one of the earliest
productions of his new trade, The Bloody Buoy, thrown out as
Warning to the Political Pilots of America: barbarity of the French
Revolution. In this work he parallels in the United States the
methods of the Anti-Revolutionists who had in England turned into

\textsuperscript{22} Published by Bradford, January, 1796.
\textsuperscript{23} Published by Cobbett and sold at his own new shop, 1796.
conclusions about the freedom of the press and the operations of justice in a society corrupted by dangerous political theory; and probably, under its English title of *The Republican Judge*, it was read with great satisfaction by English anti-Jacobins. It is not surprising to find Cobbett, after his return to England in 1800, reducing all that was unpleasant in his American adventure to a pamphlet, *The American Rush-Light; by the help of which, Wayward and Disaffected Britons may see a Complete Specimen of the Baseness, Dishonesty, Ingratitude, and Perfidy of Republicans, and of the Profligacy, Injustice, and Tyranny of Republican Governments.*

As a publisher and importer, Cobbett's work was entirely consistent with the principles shown in his writings. If he wrote to combat Jacobinism in its American forms, and if these writings were useful in the creation of Anti-Jacobin sentiment in England, then the obvious corollary was to bring into America, to republish in America, and to distribute in America, such English works as would carry on the same principles. If we examine a list of Cobbett's reprints, we see that this is exactly what he is doing. In every case he adds, in the character of "Peter Porcupine," a prefix or an appendix that will point the work in question at the situation in the United States.\(^{26}\)

Following his activity as a writer and a publisher for a special market, Cobbett found himself rapidly engaged in pursuing the related possibilities that soon showed themselves. At first, he worked jointly with booksellers like Benjamin Davies; and his paper, *Porcupine's Gazette and Daily Advertiser* was an obvious place for the advertisements of small dealers like Omrod, Humphreys, and Cruikshank the importer. But he seems, in time, to have overtopped these lesser men, for in following the advertisements we note how items that first appear in the shops of the other dealers gradually come into Cobbett's hands. There is no suggestion that Cobbett was a leader in this particular branch of Philadelphia book-selling; probably he did no more than draw to himself by superior activity the

\(^{26}\)I give here a list of the more striking of these items: *A Letter from Right Hon. Edmund Burke . . . [1796?]; The History of Jacobinism . . . by William Playfair. With an Appendix . . . Showing the close connection which has ever subsisted between the Jacobins of Paris and the Democrats of the United States of America (1796); An Answer to Paine's Rights of Man . . . by H. Mackensie (1796); The Cannibal's Progress; or, the Dreadful Horrors of French Invasion (1798).
major portion of the trade in English items.

Although he dealt most particularly in the sort of English work that fitted the political and social interests of his clientele and his own announced purposes as a writer of propaganda, he did not disdain the milder reaches of English culture. He announces, as published, *Camilla*, "... by the admired Miss Burney"; he introduces that splendid fruit of literary endeavour, *The Pursuits of Literature* by T. Mathias; and he was proud of having reprinted in a fine style the *Baeviad* and *Maeviad* of the solidly satirical Mr. John Gifford. His biggest bow in this direction is to be found in his letter to John Nichols, editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine*:

Few booksellers carry on that branch of business with more life than I do. If you choose, and can fall upon any arrangement, I will receive from you a few volumes of your magazine half-yearly? I could get 50, if not 100 subscribers to the work, and this would take off a good number of your surplus dead-stock ... and please to communicate to me the mode in which I can be most useful to your excellent publication.

Naturally, in this line he showed no discrimination. He had very little taste for polite literature, and his judgment for the most part was conditioned by the extent to which such writings could be made to fit political opinions. But quality is not the point in the present case; there is nothing involved beyond indicating the growing range of Cobbett's activities, and showing the fairly consistent intention that gave them coherence.

It is easy enough, as long as one is speaking of books and pamphlets, to speak of Cobbett as a simple sharer in the whole English movement against the French Revolution. But when we come to

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27 *Porcupine's Gazette*, April 18, 1797.
28 Cobbett to T. Mathias, Philadelphia, March 12, 1799; British Museum, Add. MSS.
22, 976, f. 212.
29 Cobbett to John Wright, June 10, 1799; Bodleian Library, MSS. Montagu, d. 17:
"I think this is the most valuable parcel I have ever received from you. The things you intend sending me by Mr. North, particularly the portrait of Burke, will be gratefully received. Oh! I had like to forgot to thank you kindly for the poetry of the Anti-Jacobin. It is a charming collection. I send you a copy of my edition of the Baeviad and Maeviad. . . . One Humphrey advertised the work as being in press; but, after he had done this he came to get a copy of me. By this I found he had none; but I knew he would get one from gentlemen who had purchased of me; and I resolved to get the start of him. He would have murdered the work in a shabby shilling pamphlet, and I was determined it should not be so disgraced."
30 *Gentleman's Magazine*, N. S., IV. 246.
propaganda the generalized materials of Burke's *Reflections*. The method was to turn on the French party by raising the terrible cry of barbarous anarchy. The details of the method were to produce horrid examples from revolutionary annals. By falling into this vein, Cobbett was identifying the anti-revolutionary parties of both England and America; and, in practice, he became a medium for the exchange of anti-revolutionary literature between the two countries.24

The greater part of Cobbett's work derived from the purposes indicated by this volume. He saw as one and the same, revolutionary sentiment in France and democratic sentiment in America: and it must be admitted that the language of the American democrats might easily have deceived him. From this point it will be more convenient to describe these activities under several heads: as a pamphlet writer, as a publisher introducing important English writings, as an importer of English books, and as a journalist in contact with politicians of the Federalist group.

First of all, as a pamphlet writer, he developed his attack on revolutionary principles in a series of works.25 In this same line of duty, by treating many of the aspects of life in republican America as identical with life in republican France, he produces works that add to his catalogue of the consequences of "licentious politics." *The Democratic Judge*, an account of his prosecution before Thomas McKean, Chief-Justice of Pennsylvania, for a supposed libel on the King of Spain and his Ambassador, enabled him to draw valuable knowledge from his experiences. Mr. Michel, Vice-Provost of King's College, presented it to the University Library, no doubt as a warning to undergraduates.

24 If one studies the career of a book like *The Bloody Buoy*, Cobbett's peculiar work can be more easily understood. In 1797 it was translated into Pennsylvania German, printed at Reading, and distributed by the Federalists of that area, under the title of *Die Blut-Fahne ausgestecket zur Warnung politischer Wegweiser in Amerika*. The same year John Wright of London, an associate of John Gifford, reprinted it, giving it a more universal title, *The Bloody Buoy, thrown out . . . to the Political Pilots of all Nations*. In 1797 also it fell into the hands of F. Hodsen, a bookseller of Cambridge, England, who reprinted it and gave it a really scarehead title, *The Annals of Blood . . . by an American*. Mr. Michel, Vice-Provost of King's College, presented it to the University Library, no doubt as a warning to undergraduates.

25 *The Life of Thomas Paine* (1797); *Letter to the Infamous Thomas Paine* (1797); *Democratic Principles . . . Part the first* (1798); *Democratic Principles . . . Part the Second* (1798); all of these were reprinted in London by John Wright, and the last is particularly to be noticed because it contains "... an Instructive Essay, tracing all the horrors of the French Revolution to their Real Causes: the licentious Politics, and Infidel Philosophy of the Present Age."
Cobbett the Philadelphia journalist, this clear definition needs modification. A journalist is driven by the demands of his trade to think entirely in terms of localized events and opinions; the only place for abstraction in his work comes when he sees an immediate event as an illustration of a general principle. Cobbett’s journalism becomes part and parcel of his larger political interest if one reads it with the above limitation clearly in mind. It becomes a method for interpreting daily circumstances by means of a broad background of feeling and opinion. In this respect it is, of course, like all political journalism. If, in a pamphlet, Cobbett can provide illustrations of “democratic principles”; so, in a daily paper, can he do the same; only, in the latter, he is more affected by the chopping and changing and confusion that follows the effort to find principles illustrated by the recurring flux of small happenings. But the complete run of Porcupine’s Gazette is as much an illustration of republican behavior as were any of the more deliberate pamphlets.

Journalism, in addition, requires one other thing: a body of supporters, subscribers, people who want to have their opinions stated for them in this convenient form. A paper, unlike a pamphlet, demands that it be organized with reference to a group of actual or possible backers. For Cobbett to enter this field, therefore, meant that he had come to be a representative of a recognized and fairly coherent point of view. This is certain, even though the details of the matter cannot be produced. In Philadelphia political life there must have been men who encouraged, who found in Cobbett a mouthpiece, who suggested practical forms and supplied the daily food for his editorial digestion.81

A single piece of evidence will show what is meant by Cobbett’s getting support from those men in American politics who appreciated

81 Cobbett rose to full fledged journalism slowly, and perhaps his tentative steps indicate the gathering of supporters. The first step was a monthly pamphlet, A Prospect from the Congress Gallery, No. 1, February, 1796. This came out with a pretence at non-partisanship. With the second number, March, 1796, he dropped this pretence, changed the paper’s name to The Political Censor, and proceeded to indulge his taste for controversy. With each number—there seem to have been eight more, coming out irregularly until March, 1797—he exercised more and more of the journalist’s prerogative. This led him directly to a daily paper, Porcupine’s Gazette, the first issue of which appeared on March 5, 1797; it ran through 778 issues until October 26, 1799.
the general point of view that he presented. Robert Goodloe Harper, a lawyer and a Member of Congress, was attached to the ranks of the Federalists. There was a long contact between him and Cobbett. Its beginnings are not known, but its course can be charted. Cobbett published in June, 1797 a pamphlet Harper had written presenting the Federalist argument against France. In 1800, after leaving Philadelphia, Cobbett sent Harper an itemized account covering the years 1797-1799. It shows that they worked together for a common cause. Harper had purchased a great many works of propaganda for distribution: 100 copies of The Cannibal's Progress, 121 of his own pamphlet, and, apparently for his own use, he imported volumes like Gifford’s French Revolution, collections of unspecified English pamphlets, and the Pursuits of Literature! Finally, when Cobbett was brought to trial in Philadelphia for his libel against Dr. Rush, Harper acted as one of the lawyers for the defense. The significance of this brief record is that it indicates a direct link between Cobbett, a political writer, and a Federalist politician who was anxious to produce a given political result—turning public feeling from the revolutionary French to the stable English.

Harper was not Cobbett’s only connection with the feelings that expressed themselves through the Federalist party. His writings were used in various sections of the country apparently with effect. Porcupine's Gazette appeared in a Pennsylvania-German version at Reading, and in due course Cobbett was libelled in Der Unpartheysiche Readdinger Adler. Daniel Clymer, a Reading lawyer and

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83 This account is enclosed in a letter dated from New York, Jan. 20, 1800; in the possession of Mr. J. G. E. Hopkins of Brooklyn, who very kindly supplied me with a transcript.

84 This relationship appears to have been a purely practical one, for when Harper spoke in Cobbett’s defense he was careful to dissociate himself from his client: “That my client has overstepped the bounds of good manners and decorum, I have admitted... his conduct must meet with strong disapprobation, but agreeable to the rules of law... he merits your verdict...” Cf. Rush v. Cobbett (Philadelphia, 1800). And among the Rush MSS., at the Ridgway Branch of the Library Company is a letter from Harper to Dr. Rush, Oct. 15, 1805, on which the Doctor’s son James has noted: “This gentleman... a friend of Dr. R’s, yet was the counsel for Cobbett... he said to Dr. R after the trial 'I was obliged to say something for him!’” Rush MSS. 21,100.

85 No. 113, Feb. 26, 1799.
a Federalist politician was instructed to bring suit.\textsuperscript{38} There is also some sort of link with the same party at Boston through a series of business transactions with Jedidiah Morse, the famous gazetteer.\textsuperscript{37}

Cobbett summarized these American activities in an article written in 1804, and the following passage can be used as an introduction to the conclusion of this paper:\textsuperscript{38}

From the summer of 1794 to the year 1800 my labours were without intermission. During that space there were published from my pen about twenty different pamphlets, the whole number of which amounted to more than half-a-million copies. During the three last years, a daily paper, surpassing in extent of numbers, any ever known in America, was the vehicle of my efforts; and, by the year 1800, I might safely have asserted, that there was not in the whole country, one single family, in which some part or the other of my writings had not been read; and in which, generally speaking, they had not produced some degree of effect favourable to the interests of my country.

The people of America, still sore from the wounds of their war against England . . . were so loud and enthusiastic in the cause of the French, that . . . everything seemed to indicate that the Government could be forced into a war with England in aid of the French. I took the English side; the force of my writings gave them effect; that effect was prodigious; it prevented that which both Governments greatly dreaded; peace between America and England was preserved. . . .

Of course, this shows no more than the form of Cobbett’s thoughts, but its exaggerations can be easily reduced. It overlooks, and Cobbett can be pardoned the ommission, the fact that the work he was doing was only a single element in a much larger pattern of activity, a pattern that included Washington, Hamilton, John Adams, the merchants of Boston, New York and Philadelphia, and that whole complex of ideas—republican, mob, democracy, the best man of the community, Christian faith, atheism, barbarism, England, France, all men are created equal—that were disturbing poor human minds. Cobbett called his work serving “the interests of my country”; those in America to whom he was fitted, naturally ignored this description, and saw only a mind that in a rough and ready way moved vigorously along a common track.

This distinction is an important one because when Cobbett at last

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Readinger Zeitung}, March 27, 1799. On Aug. 15, 1800, Cobbett was writing from London to Clymer; his letter is extremely intimate in tone and gives the names of other members of the Federalist group at Reading, of whom Edward Tilghman is to be noticed for his having served as Cobbett’s lawyer in the suit \textit{Rush v. Cobbett}; H. S. P., Clymer Collection.


\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Political Register}, VI. 150–151.
drew it plainly he lost his place in the American scheme, found his livelihood gone, and properly retired to his native land, where his fame as an ardent anti-Jacobin had preceded him. Cobbett must be seen as a writer whose work, following almost unconsciously a private bent, fell into the American puzzle only through the accidental working of events. As long as European affairs could be sharply stated for American minds in such precise antagonistic forms as English and French, Tradition and Revolt, God and the Devil, Cobbett, whose pen ran with faith and tradition, and who stood as a Britisher, had his listeners. But the feelings stirred and clarified by these contradictions soon found resolution in the practical compromises of political and social life. Yet by the time such compromises were making themselves felt, Cobbett’s traditional manner of speaking had become fixed; and the inevitable consequence was that he found himself in an increasingly lonely position. He no longer fitted into the puzzle, and being what he was he could not analyze the change. He could only console himself by growing more defiantly patriotic, by looking more and more towards his own land; and finally he had to go.

The departure, comparatively speaking, was rapid. Near the end of 1798, Mr. Liston, British Envoy to the United States informed Cobbett that the Government at home were aware of what they owed him, and were prepared to advance his interests. Cobbett insisted that he had rejected all such offers and called upon Lord Henry Stuart, a young attaché of the Embassy and later in England his friend, to confirm the denial. The denial is acceptable on the basis of Cobbett’s character; but the circumstances formed a natural basis for the charge of being a British agent that his opponents steadily brought against him. Truth was not the point, the effect gradually produced on the public mind was the heart of the matter, and Cobbett’s enemies were quick to point him out as a fit object for attention under the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Cobbett himself thought that he had been marked for deportation by President Adams. There is no evidence that this was the case. What was happening was too large to fix its attention on one man; American politics were reverting to their more normal domestic forms, were being stated in local rather than international terms, and it was this that sank Cobbett rather than any specific act, for his audience melted away and the general
themes he had so boisterously embroidered were turning into more practical questions, answerable by the less rugged phrases of professional diplomats.

Cobbett, of course, traced his collapse to specific conspiracy: his being brought to trial for his libel against Dr. Rush some two years after the charge had first been laid, the suit coming on just when it was clear that he had shifted his business to New York, the enormous damages awarded to Rush, the speed with which the sheriff sold his Philadelphia property, Chief Justice McKean's democratic disapproval of his political sentiments, the general malice of his foes. But this interpretation of events, even if taken at its face value, sacrifices the basic for the superficial. Cobbett's business, and the ends he had pursued, were brought to their natural conclusion even before Dr. Rush came on him. The significant fact to hold to is that he could not re-establish himself in an identical business in New York. He had no public left, the times wanted a new product, and this Cobbett could not supply. His mind had already shifted its attention to England, where Pitt was repressing the radicals, where acquaintances were happily engaged in exactly the sort of pamphleteering he so well knew, and where John Reeves, who admired him, was the indefatigable chairman of The Loyal Association against Republicans and Levellers.

So, at last, aware only of where his tastes and his talents led him; not knowing the imponderable forces that had brought him to the surface of American life and that were now pushing him under again; with the United States reduced in his mind to a formula illustrating the profligacy of all republican governments, he set sail for Falmouth in June, 1800. By August he turns up in the diary of that traditional gentleman, William Windham, as present at a Council dinner with Hammond, Frere, Canning, and Pitt. He is a bookseller and publisher and journalist again, operating under an impressive sign of The Crown and Mitre in Pall-Mall, and engaged in the fitting and glorious task of preserving English traditions and English feelings against all foreign opinion, but most particularly against the barbarous subtlety of French ideas.

Haverford College

WILLIAM REITZEL