

WILLIAM COBBETT: LIBELLER.*

I had nearly written this heading "When William Cobbett libelled:" but that would never do. It would need to be "When William Cobbett didn't libel." His life was spent in the positive, and not in the negative. Far and away the most picturesque, energetic and debated figure in his day,—as a publicist, that is,—William Cobbett can hardly die while lawyers read either English literature or constitutional history. He it was who in 1804 founded "Hansard," (then called "Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates") which he sold in 1811; and he it was who gave us "Cobbett's Complete Collection of State Trials," which also in 1811 became "Howell's State Trials." More widely known, of course, are his "English Grammar," and his incomparable "Advice to Young Men"; and any lover of the English scene or of English literature does himself a grave injury until he has devoured "Rural Rides."

Cobbett has a closer interest for Canadians, for he served as a soldier in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick for over six years, (1785-1791), and after that he lived in the United States for eight more years, chiefly in Philadelphia, with further long visits to America in after life.

Born with the tongue of an ardent demagogue, and achieving by painful self-teaching the pen of a brilliant pamphleteer (some critics say the greatest pamphleteer in the English language), William Cobbett never hid his light under any man's bushel. He was law clerk, soldier, traveller, farmer, teacher, editor, historian, member of parliament, experimenter, reformer, convict; but, most of all, orator and agitator. His "clients" were the English farmers, the labourers, the good old squires, the private soldiers, the drinkers of beer and the raisers of sturdy urchins on English meadows and uplands: his victims were the innovators, the upstarts, the "Scotch feelosophers," the "Tax-eaters," the Tithers, Malthus, and the parson of Botley. He was only saved from being a violent Tory by being a slightly more fervent Radical.

By 1804 Cobbett was home from America, writing the lurid "Political Register," and criticising every public man whose views deviated from Cobbett's own, or whose actions showed any hint of condescension or ineffectiveness. He did not think much of Mr. Addington's government, and liked to label him the *Doctor*, thereby obliging the Attorney-General in court to explain elaborately that

* See Medland & Weobly's *Criminal Trials*: Vol. II, p. 431. London: 1804, and "The Life of William Cobbett" by G. D. H. Cole: Collins, 1924.

he was far from saying that describing such a man as Mr. Addington by the epithet of *Doctor* was degrading to him: but Mr. Attorney was plainly speaking with much doubt on this point.

Cobbett had not much use for any administration he ever saw, even in his Toryest days, but he certainly had no use for the administration that then held sway in Ireland. It was a repressive one, when critical days called for conciliation. Lord Hardwicke was at the head as Lord Lieutenant, with Lord Redesdale as chancellor. Cobbett's article, or at least the article which Cobbett edited, for a certain Irish judge, Robert Johnson, was probably the writer, went thus:

Enquiry and research were the duty of the ignorant. He had enquired, and the result was, he had discovered that Lord Hardwicke was in rank an earl, in manners a gentleman, in morals a good father, and that he had a fine library in St. James's Square. There he should have stopped, if he had not met with one Lindsay, an Irish parson, by Divine providence (for he could not have been so by secondary means) Bishop of Killaloe. This Lindsay had informed him his lordship was celebrated for the modern method of breeding fat sheep in Cambridgeshire. In another passage the libel stated, that while the author was writing, a map of the West Indies lay before him; he fixed his eyes on a spot which had been redeemed from the capitulation of Amiens by the British arms. He supposed this island menaced by foreign invasion, and bands of ruffians ready to co-operate with them; and that a committee of the proprietors applied to the *Doctor* for protection. What would they think if the Doctor should desire them not to be alarmed, for that he had entrusted their interests to an eminent breeder of sheep, who was assisted by a strong built pleader in chancery? The whole of Downing Street would ring with their clamours; and yet, on such protection, the safety of the British Empire, and consequently of Europe, depended.

For good measure he must attack not one man, but four. Hardwicke's assistants were less lightly dealt with. Lord Redesdale was taunted with doing in Ireland in his high office things that Lord Kenyon, the Chief Justice in England, would have been ashamed to do, even though

Lord Kenyon loved money, but it was his own money, and not the money of others: he would not have made an order to convert the fees of the office of Master of the Rolls to the chancellor's secretary, in order to enable him to pay a pension to some unknown person.

Chief Justice Osborne, too, was not held up to admiration; but it was against Marsden, the Secretary to government, that the most odious words were penned. He was described as a corrupt, unprincipled, rapacious plunderer, preying upon the property of the people of Ireland; and concerning him were these trenchant words:

Rebellion and invasion were evils of less magnitude than the ermined robe of Majesty being wrapped round a man whose blood-stained hands had been washed in the fountain of justice.

Of course, the Attorney-General was anxious to safeguard himself: it was the privilege of the subject to use strong and vigorous language for the purpose of rendering those ministers and public characters unpopular, who, from their inability, deserved to be so; but here in Cobbett was a man guilty of a foul endeavour to bring the whole of the government into scorn, contempt and execration. (All sides had a pretty turn for invective in those days).

Cobbett, who then was regarded by the gentry not so much as a reckless Radical as an eccentric jingo, capable of most useful service against Republican blackguards and frog-eaters, called some eminent names as his witnesses. He seems to have had no real defence. Mr. Windham, Mr. Yorke, Lord Minto, Lord Henry Stewart, and the Minister from the United States, all swore to being convinced of Cobbett's patriotism, his devoted attachment to the King, the royal family, and the constitution. His strenuous support of the monarchy was cited again and again. The special jury did not dally: it brought in a verdict of guilty; but the judge, Lord Ellenborough, seems to have feared tumult. Cobbett was merely bound over to come up for sentence next term. This trial occurred May 24th, 1804. The report does not show the outcome, but Cole in the "Life," p. 84, talks of Cobbett's loss "to the tune of £500 damages," but it is doubtful if the damages were actually exacted from him. Anyway it did not "larn" him. It was neither the first, the last, nor the worst of the libels of the doughty William Cobbett. He hated and despised the law and its defenders. Perhaps it was as reformers that his four sons all entered the profession, three the Bar and one the lower branch. They all lived the full term of the "promise" and more: but their names are not entered in the roll of law reformers. Poor William Cobbett: loveable, unselfish man! That heart, always on fire for the wrongs of others, did not deserve so cruel a cold douche, and three times repeated!

G. C. THOMSON.

Swift Current.
