Cobbett, William (1763 - 1835)

Definition: **Cobbett, William** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

English journalist and political reformer. He fought for the British in the American Revolution, and his criticism of the fledgling democracy in the United States forced his return to England. In 1802, Cobbett founded the weekly newspaper *Political Register*. He was an outspoken critic of abuses of political power and was imprisoned (1810-12) for his attack on flogging in the army and forced into exile (1817-19) in the USA. His masterpiece, *Rural Rides* (1830), describes the conditions of rural workers. He was elected to Parliament in 1832.

Summary Article: **COBBETT, WILLIAM**
from *The Encyclopedia of American Journalism*

William Cobbett (March 9, 1763-June 16, 1835) spent most of his writing career in England, but his talent for searing invective was on display in the United States from 1794 to 1800. He was an extremely prolific polemicist who responded to English corruption, the French Revolution, and American democratic politics by idealizing the traditional values and hierarchical order he associated with his youth in rural England. An egotistical social conservative with racist, sexist, and ultra-patriotic views, Cobbett could be acerbic with his enemies, but he drew attention to political excesses and individual hypocrisy. He was widely read in America and Britain even though he offended many with his scurrility and had contempt for the idea of the sovereignty of the people.

Cobbett was born in Farnham, Surrey, where his father was a small farmer and innkeeper. Although later proud of having a simple country upbringing where God and king were paramount, he left for tedious office work with a London attorney and then joined the army. Stationed in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, Cobbett taught himself writing, grammar, and other subjects. He used administrative skills to rise in rank to sergeant major in his regiment, but was disgusted with embezzlement by officers. He left the military and prepared evidence to use against four of them in England. Obstructed in court and intimidated by officials, he fled to revolutionary France and then America, but not before writing *The Soldier's Friend* (1792), an anonymous pamphlet detailing abuses and cover-ups in the British military.

Arriving in the United States upset enough to seem sympathetic to republicanism, Cobbett was soon so angry about avaricious Americans, critical British émigrés, and accounts of turmoil in France that he became a journalistic defender of his native country. Starting in 1794, he wrote a steady stream of pamphlets that heaped contempt on Paineites [supporters of Thomas Paine] and Jeffersonians. He opened a store in Philadelphia that sold office supplies, lottery tickets, and his own works. From 1797 to 1799 he published *Porcupine's Gazette*, a daily newspaper that did battle with Benjamin Franklin Bache and other journalists who backed Thomas Jefferson, sympathized with change in France, and attacked Federalists. Contending that America was on the brink of French-inspired moral and political anarchy, Cobbett supported passage of the Sedition Act of 1798 and urged a military alliance with Britain.

As a journalist, Cobbett disdained fears of subscriber reaction and professions of impartiality. He was, however, subjected to threats and legal actions. After losing a financially ruinous libel suit brought by Dr. Benjamin Rush, he returned to England in 1800. Over the next thirty-five years Cobbett founded a number of periodicals and maintained his prodigious journalistic productivity despite occasional
problems with the law that included two years in prison for protesting flogging in the military. His writings identified with the common people and appreciated the pre-industrial world of old England. His works included proposals for political reform and the celebrated *Rural Rides* (1830). Elected to Parliament in 1832, he had a heart attack during a debate in 1835 and died several weeks later.

**Further Reading**


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