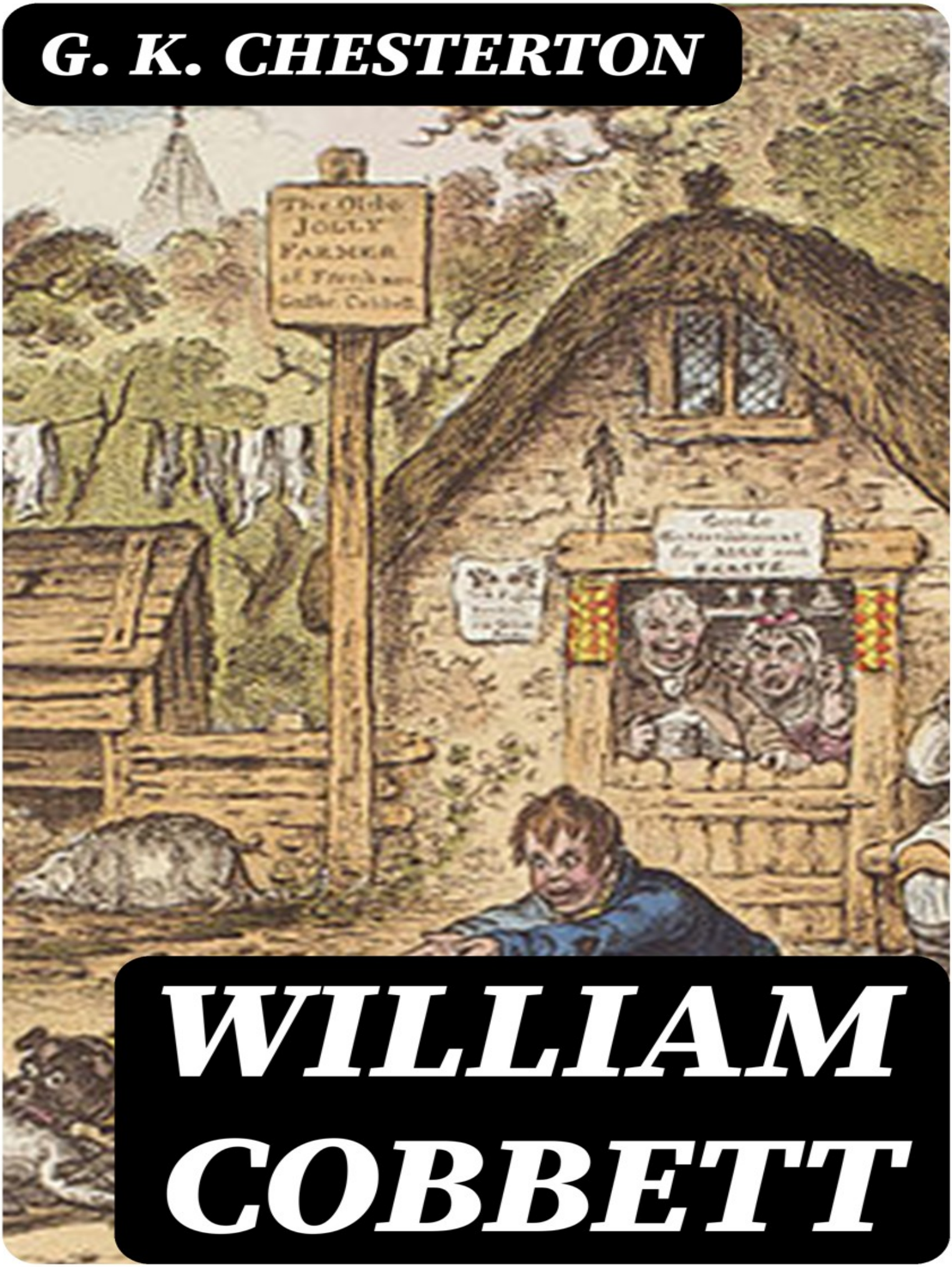
G. K. CHESTERTON



WILLIAM COBBETT

G. K. Chesterton

William Cobbett

EAN 8596547393771

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

I.—THE REVIVAL OF COBBETT

Table of Contents

This chapter is here called 'The Revival of Cobbett.' As originally planned, only a little while ago, it was to have been called 'The Neglect of Cobbett.' It is not unimportant to realise how recent has been the change. It is but a year or two ago that I had the great and (it is to be feared) the undeserved honour of reading a paper an the subject to the Royal Society of Literature on my admission to that body, which certainly consists almost entirely of men who know much more about literature than I do. It was a graceful formality on such an occasion for the least learned person in the room to lecture to all the rest. Yet on that occasion the chairman, who was much more of a literary expert than I am, re-marked on my having chosen an obscure and largely forgotten writer, just as if I had been lecturing on one of the last and least of the Greek sophists, or one of the numberless and nameless lyrists among the Cavaliers. Between then and now the change from neglect to revival has taken place. It is true that it is not until the first beginnings of the revival that we ever even hear of the neglect. Until that moment even the neglect is neglected. When I delivered the highly amateur address in question, the memory was already stirring, in others besides myself. But it is not out of egotism that I give this example; but because it happens to illustrate the first fact to be realised about the present position of Cobbett.

In one sense, of course, Cobbett has never been neglected. He has only been admired in the way in which he

would have specially hated to be admired. He who was full of his subject has been valued only for his style. He who was so stuffed with matter has been admired for his manner; though not perhaps for his manners. He shouted to the uproarious many, and his voice in a faint whisper has reached the refined few; who delicately applauded a turn of diction or a flight of syntax. But if such applause be rather disconcerting to the demagogue, the real revival of his demagogy would be even more disconcerting to the academic admirer. Now I mean by the revival of Cobbett the revival of the things that Cobbett wished to revive. They were things which until a little while ago nobody imagined there was the slightest chance of reviving; such as liberty, England, the family, the honour of the yeoman, and so on. Many of the learned who, on the occasion above mentioned, were very indulgent to my own eccentric enthusiasm, would even now be a little puzzled if that enthusiasm became something more than an eccentricity. Cobbett had been for them a man who praised an extravagant and impossible England in exact and excellent English. It must seem strange indeed that one who can never hope to write such English can yet hope to see such an England. The critics must feel like cultivated gentlemen who, after long relishing Jeremy Taylor's diction, should abruptly receive an unwelcome invitation to give an exhibition of Holy Dying. They must feel like scholars who should have lingered lovingly all their lives over the lapidary Babylonian jests and vast verbal incantations of the wonderful essay on Urn-Burial; and then have lived to see it sold by the hundred as

the popular pamphlet of a bustling modern movement in favour of cremation.

Nevertheless, this classic preservation of Cobbett in an urn, in the form of ashes, has not been quite consistent with itself. Even now it would seem that the ashes were still a little too hot to touch. And I only mentioned my own little effort in academic lecturing because it concerned something that may be repeated here, as relevant to the first essentials of the subject. Many professors have in a merely literary sense recognised Cobbett as a model; but few have modelled themselves upon their model. They were always ready to hope that their pupils would write such good English. But they would have been mildly surprised if any pupil had written such plain English. Yet, as I pointed out on that occasion, the strongest quality of Cobbett as a stylist is in the use he made of a certain kind of language; the sort of use commonly called abuse. It is especially his bad language that is always good. It is precisely the passages that have always been recognised as good style that would now be regarded as bad form. And it is precisely these violent passages that especially bring out not only the best capacities of Cobbett but also the best capacities of English. I was and am therefore ready to repeat what I said in my little lecture, and to repeat it quite seriously, though it was the subject at the time of merely amused comment. I pointed out that in the formation of the noble and beautiful English language, out of so many local elements, nothing had emerged more truly beautiful than the sort of English that has been localised under the name of Billingsgate. I pointed out that English excels in certain angular

consonants and abrupt terminations that make it extraordinarily effective for the expression of the fighting spirit and a fierce contempt. How fortunate is the condition of the Englishman who can kick people; and how relatively melancholy that of the Frenchman who can only give them a blow of the foot! If we say that two people fight like cat and dog, the very words seem to have in them a shindy of snaps and screams and scratches. If we say 'comme le chat et le chien,' we are depressed with the suggestion of comparative peace. French has of course its own depths of resounding power: but not this sort of battering ram of bathos. Now nobody denies that Cobbett and his enemies did fight like cat and dog, but it is precisely his fighting passages that contain some of the finest examples of a style as English as the word dog or the word cat. So far as this goes the point has nothing to do with political or moral sympathy with Cobbett's cause. The beauty of his incessant abuse is a matter of art for art's sake. The pleasure which an educated taste would receive in hearing Cobbett call a duchess an old eat or a bishop a dirty dog is almost onomatopoeic, in its love of a melody all but detached from meaning. In saying this, it might be supposed, I was indeed meeting the purely artistic and academic critic half way, and might well have been welcomed, so to speak, with an embrace of reconciliation. This is indeed the reason why most lovers of English letters have at least kept alive a purely literary tradition of Cobbett. But, as it happened, I added some words which I will also take the liberty of mentioning, because they exactly illustrate the stages of this re-emergence of the great writer's fame from the field

of literature to the field of life. 'There is a serious danger that this charm in English literature may be lost. The comparative absence of abuse in social and senatorial life may take away one of the beauties of our beautiful and historic speech. Words like "scamp" and "scoundrel," which have the unique strength of English in them, are likely to grow unfamiliar through lack of use, though certainly not through lack of opportunity for use. It is indeed strange that when public life presents so wide and promising a field for the use of these terms, they should be suffered to drop into desuetude. It seems singular that when the careers of our public men, the character of our commercial triumphs, and the general culture and ethic of the modern world seem so specially to invite and, as it were, to cry aloud for the use of such language, the secret of such language should be in danger of being lost.' Now, when I drew the attention of those authoritative guardians of English literature, responsible for the preservation of the purity of the English language, to this deplorable state of things—to the words that are like weapons rusting on the wall, to the most choice terms of abuse becoming obsolete in face of rich and even bewildering opportunities in the way of public persons to apply them to—when I appealed against this neglect of our noble tongue, I am sorry to say that my appeal was received with heartless laughter and was genially criticised in the newspapers as a joke. It was regarded not only as a piece of mild buffoonery but as a sort of eighteenth-century masquerade; as if I only wished to bring back cudgels and cutlasses along with wigs and three-cornered hats. It was assumed that nobody could possibly seriously hope, or even

seriously expect, to hear again the old Billingsgate of the hustings and the election fight. And yet, since those criticisms were written, only a very little time ago, that sort of very Early English has suddenly been heard, if not in journalism, at least in politics. By a strange paradox, even the House of Commons has heard the sound of common speech, not wholly unconnected with common sense. Labour members and young Tories have both been heard talking like men in the street. Mr. Jack Jones, by his interruptions, has made himself a judicious patron of this literary revival, this attempt to save the heritage of English culture; and Mr. Kirkwood has said things about capitalists of which even Cobbett might be proud.

Now, I have only mentioned my premature lament over the bargee, that disreputable Tom Bowling, because it serves to introduce a certain equally premature rejoicing which explains much of our present position. The Victorian critics had insisted on regarding the violence of Cobbett as entirely a thing of the past; with the result that they find themselves suddenly threatened with that sort of violence advancing on them from the future. They are perhaps a little alarmed; and at least they are very naturally puzzled. They had always been taught that Cobbett was a crank whose theories had been thrashed out long ago and found to be quite empty and fallacious. He had been preserved only for his style; and even that was rude and old-fashioned, especially in the quaint Saxon archaism of calling a spade a spade. They little thought to have heard the horrid sound, the hideous word 'spade' itself, shake the arches of St. Stephen's as with a blasphemy. But the question is not

merely one of idioms but of ideas. They had always supposed at least that Cobbett's ideas were exploded; and they found they were still exploding. They found that the explosion which missed fire a hundred years ago, like that of Guy Fawkes three hundred years ago, still has a time fuse whose time was not quite expired; and that the location of the peril (I regret to say) was also not very far from the same spot as Guy Fawkes's. In a peril of that sort it is very important to understand what is really happening; and I doubt if the comfortable classes understand what is happening much better than they did in Cobbett's day—to say nothing of Guy Fawkes's. And one reason why I originally agreed to write this little book, is that I think it a matter of life and death that it should be understood.

The cudgel has come back like a boomerang: and the common Englishman, so long content with taking half a loaf, may yet in the same tradition of compromise confine himself to heaving half a brick. The reason why Parliamentary language is unparliamentary and Westminster has been joined to Billingsgate, the reason why the English poor in many places are no longer grumbling or even growling but rather howling, the reason why there is a new note in our old polite politics, is a reason that vitally concerns the subject of this little study. There are a great many ways of stating that reason; but the way most relevant here is this. All this is happening because the critics have been all wrong about Cobbett. I mean they were specially wrong about what he represented. It is happening because Cobbett was not what they have always represented him as being; not even what they have always

praised him as being. It is happening because Cobbett stood for a reality of quite another sort; and realities can return whether we understand them or not. Cobbett was not merely a wrong-headed fellow with a knack of saying the right word about the wrong thing. Cobbett was not merely an angry and antiquated old farmer who thought the country must be going to the dogs because the whole world was not given up to the cows. Cobbett was not merely a man with a lot of nonsensical notions that could be exploded by political economy; a man looking to turn England into an Eden that should grow nothing but Cobbett's Corn. What he saw was not an Eden that cannot exist but rather an Inferno that can exist, and even that does exist. What he saw was the perishing of the whole English power of self-support, the growth of cities that drain and dry up the countryside, the growth of dense dependent populations incapable of finding their own food, the toppling triumph of machines over men, the sprawling omnipotence of financiers over patriots, the herding of humanity in nomadic masses whose very homes are homeless, the terrible necessity of peace and the terrible probability of war, all the loading up of our little island like a sinking ship; the wealth that may mean famine and the culture that may mean despair; the bread of Midas and the sword of Damocles. In a word, he saw what we see, but he saw it when it was not there. And some cannot see it—even when it is there.

It is the paradox of his life that he loved the past, and he alone really lived in the future. That is, he alone lived in the real future. The future was a fog, as it always is; and in

some ways his largely instinctive intelligence was foggy enough about it. But he and he alone had some notion of the sort of London fog that it was going to be. He was in France during the French Revolution; amid all that world of carnage and classical quotations, of Greek names and very Latin riots. He must have looked, as he stood there with his big heavy figure and black beaver hat, as solemn and solid a specimen as ever was seen of the Englishman abroad—the sort of Englishman who is very much abroad. He went to America just after the American Revolution; and played the part of the old Tory farmer, waving the beaver hat and calling on those astonished republicans for three cheers for King George. Everywhere, amid all that dance of humanitarian hopes, he seemed like a survival and a relic of times gone by. And he alone was in any living touch with the times that were to come.

All those reformers and revolutionists around him, talking hopefully of the future, were without exception living in the past. The very future they happily prophesied was the future as it would have been in the past. Some were dreaming of a remote and some of a recent past; some of a true and some of a false past; some of a heroic past and others of a past more dubious. But they all meant by their ideal democracy what democracy would have been in a simpler age than their own. The French republicans were living in the lost republics of the Mediterranean; in the cold volcanoes of Athens and Thebes. Theirs was a great ideal; but no modern state is small enough to achieve anything so great. We might say that some of those eighteenth century progressives had even got so far as the reign of Pepin or

Dagobert, and discovered the existence of the French Monarchy. For things so genuine and primarily so popular as the French Monarchy are generally not really discovered until they have existed for some time; and when they are discovered they are generally destroyed. The English and to some extent the American liberals were living in one sense even more in the past; for they were not destroying what had recently been discovered. They were destroying what had recently been destroyed. The Americans were defying George the Third, under the extraordinary idea that George the Third ruled England. When they set up their republic, the simple colonists probably really did think that England was a monarchy. The same illusion filled the English Whigs; but it was only because England had once been a monarchy. The Whigs were engaged permanently in expelling the Stuarts, an enjoyable occupation that could be indefinitely repeated. They were always fighting the battles of Naseby and Newbury over again, and defying a divine right that nobody was defending. For them indeed Charles the First walked and talked half an hour, or half a century, or a century and a half, after his head was cut off and they themselves could walk nowhere but in Whitehall, and talk of nothing but what happened there. We can see how that long tradition lingered in a light and popular book like Dickens's Child's History of England; and how even the child was still summoned to take part in that retrospective revolution. For there were moments when even Mr. Dickens had the same obsession as Mr. Dick.

But the point is that these idealists—most of them very noble idealists—all saw the future upon the simple pattern

of the past. It is typical that the American band of comrades were called the Cincinnati, and were named after Cincinnatus the Consul who threw away the toga to take the plough. But Cobbett knew a little more about ploughing. He knew the ploughshare had stuck in a stiff furrow; and he knew as nobody else knew upon what sort of stone it had struck. He knew that stone was the metal out of which the whole modern world would be made; unless the operation could be stopped in time. He knew it indeed only blindly and instinctively; but nobody else knew it at all. Nobody else had felt the future; nobody else had smelt the fog; nobody else had any notion of what was really coming upon the world.

I mean that if you had gone to Jefferson at the moment when he was writing the Declaration of Independence, and shown him the exact picture of an Oil Trust, and its present position in America, he would have said, 'It is not to be believed.' If you had gone to Cobbett, and shown him the same thing, he would have said, like the bearded old gentleman in the rhyme, 'It is just as I feared.' If you had confronted Carnot with Caillaux, the old revolutionist would have wondered what inconceivable curse could have fallen on great France of the soldiers. If you had confronted Cobbett with some of our similar specimens, he would have said it was what might be expected when you gave over great England to the stockjobbers. For men like Jefferson and Carnot were thinking of an ancient agricultural society merely changing from inequality to equality. They were thinking of Greek and Roman villages in which democracy had driven out oligarchy. They were thinking of a medieval manor that had become a medieval commune. The

merchant and man of affairs was a small and harmless by-product of their system; they had no notion that it would grow large enough to swallow all the rest. The point about Cobbett is that he alone really knew that there and not in kings or republics, Jacobins or Anti-Jacobins, lay the peril and oppression of the times to come.

It is the riddle of the man that if he was wrong then, he is right now. As a dead man fighting with dead men, he can still very easily be covered with derision; but if we imagine him still alive and talking to living men, his remarks are rather uncomfortably like life. The very words that we should once have read as the most faded and antiquated history can now be read as the most startling and topical journalism. Let it be granted that the denunciation was not always correct about Dr. Priestley or Dr. Rush, that the abuse was not really applicable to Mr. Hunt or Mr. Wright; let us console ourselves with the fact that the abuse is quite applicable to us. We at least have done all that Cobbett's enemies were accused of doing. We have fulfilled all those wild prophecies; we have justified all those most unjustifiable aspersions; we have come into the world as if to embody and fulfill in a belated fashion that highly improbable prediction. Cobbett's enemies may or may not have ruined agriculture; but anyhow we have. Cobbett's contemporaries may or may not have decreased the national wealth, but it is decreased. Paper money may not have driven out gold in his lifetime, but we have been more privileged than he. In a mere quarrel between the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century he may easily appear wrong; but in a quarrel between the

nineteenth century and the twentieth century he is right. He did not always draw precise diagrams of things as they were. He only had frantic and fantastic nightmares of things as they are. The fame of Cobbett faded and indeed completely vanished during our time of prosperity or what is counted our time of prosperity. For in fact it was only the prosperity of the prosperous. But during all that time his version of the doubts about what Carlyle called the profit-and-loss philosophy practically disappeared from the modern mind. I have mentioned Carlyle but as expressed by Carlyle the same doubts were not the same thing. Carlyle would have turned capitalism into a sort of feudalism, with the feudal loyalty on the one side and the feudal liberality on the other. He meant by the profit-and-loss philosophy a small and mean philosophy that could not face a small loss even for the sake of a great profit. But he never denied that there could be a great profit, he never contradicted the whole trend of the age as Cobbett did. On the contrary, Carlyle called the capitalist by a romantic name, where Cobbett would have called him by a shockingly realistic name. Carlyle called the capitalist a captain of industry, a very sad scrap of Victorian sentimentalism. That romantic evasion misses the whole point, the point that Cobbett kept steadily in sight all his life. Militarism would be much less respectable and respected if the captain of a line regiment had pocketed the rent of every acre that he fought for in Flanders. Capitalism would be much more respectable and respected if all the master builders climbed to the tops of towers and fell off, if there were as many capitalists knocked on the head by bricks as there were captains killed at the