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William Cobbett and the corn laws: A study of corn legislation in early nineteenth century Great Britain

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WILLIAM COBBETT AND THE CORN LAWS: A STUDY OF CORN LEGISLATION IN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY GREAT BRITAIN

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of History
of the
Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies
University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Rosalie Powell Stringfellow
June 1964
Accepted for the faculty of the College of Graduate Studies of the University of Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

Chairman

Graduate Committee

Name

Department

Representative of Graduate Council
The Corn Law controversy was one of the most important issues in Great Britain during the early nineteenth century. Previous research concerning this subject focused primarily on the repeal of the Corn Laws rather than the events surrounding the evolution of the laws. This work is the first attempt by any author to examine and evaluate William Cobbett's observations on the Corn Laws. As a prominent, influential, and often controversial writer, Cobbett accomplished more than to merely record events; his pen also contributed toward shaping public opinion. During a climactic period of extensive change in every phase of British life, the voice of Cobbett was heard. A study of Cobbett's observations on the Corn Laws, when viewed within the framework of the happenings of his day, not only illustrates the type of man Cobbett was, but reflects his effect on public thought, and reveals his interpretation of conditions surrounding the formulation of the Corn Laws.

This study begins with a background of British agriculture followed by an introduction to Cobbett, and a review of the economic and social changes that precipitated the enactment of the Corn Laws in the early nineteenth century. The primary laws under discussion are those of 1804 and 1815.
The emphasis of the study is on the reaction to pending legislation. Therefore, the work terminates with the passage of the Corn Law of 1815. Quotations from Cobbett's articles were selected from his famous Political Register.

Sincere appreciation is hereby expressed to Dr. A. Stanley Trickett, Chairman of the History Department, for his inspiration and guidance throughout my graduate work and whose encouragement was the impetus to the completion of this study. Also, to the Gene Eppley Library Staff, particularly Miss Dougherty who secured those many books through inter-library loan, thank you for your help and consideration.

Omaha, Nebraska
June, 1964

ROSALIE POWELL STRINGFELLOW
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO COBBETT'S ENGLAND

Brief History of Agriculture

Smooth and verdant downs in hills and valleys of endless variety as to height and depth and shape; rich corn-land, unencumbered by fences; meadows in due proportion, and those watered at pleasure; and, lastly the homesteads, and villages sheltered in winter and shaded in summer by lofty and beautiful trees . . .

With these words, William Cobbett described the Wiltshire countryside. This scene, no doubt, brought to memory the time of his youth when land was untouched by progressive agriculture, people had been content, and famine and distress were not stalking about the country.

In the eighteenth century the open field system of agriculture had altered little from the system established in the Middle Ages. The arable, meadows, and waste or commons remained. Separate owners, according to custom, farmed the scattered strips of arable land while the meadows were shared during the haying season and afterward used for pasture. The common land was of vital importance to the very poor; for there, regardless of status, a man could pasture

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a cow, hunt game for his table, or cut peat and turf for a winter fire. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, agriculture was a self-sufficing industry and the parishes remained isolated. The traditional farming community, centering in the village, included the lord of the manor whose holdings dated from feudal times; proprietors, and freeholders, generally designated as "yeoman," some of whom were men of great wealth; copyholders and tenant farmers, often of considerable status; and cottagers, squatters, and farm servants, who constituted the primary source of farm labor. Forces had been in motion for some time that would result in the disintegration of the inelastic common field system. Compact and rather modern farms, operated by tenant farmers, were gradually replacing cultivation of open fields by freeholders and tenants. Another important change was apparent; the commercial landlord was replacing the country squire. As the enterprising landlord altered his modus operandi to a

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4Hammond, op. cit., p. 4.

5Gonner, op. cit., p. 40; Cunningham, op. cit., p. 204; Wood, loc. cit.
more efficient basis the common fields and wastes, which had escaped enclosure during the medieval period and the era of the Tudors, were absorbed at an accelerated rate. The small farmers, "yeomen", copyholders, cottagers, and squatters were forced to abandon a way of life as the great proprietors, many of whom belonged to the aristocratic nobility, extended and consolidated their holdings. These men took great pride in their beautiful newly constructed Georgian houses surrounded by lovely gardens; the houses and grounds, indeed, presented a work of art. The country gentry with their power and prestige became the backbone of the landed interest.

In concert with the changing countryside, industrialization gained momentum. Consequently, new jobs became available in the metropolitan centers to laborers no longer having land ties. After 1765 market demands increased, and expanding trade was fed by manufactured as well as

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8 Cunningham, op. cit., p. 482.
agricultural products.\textsuperscript{8}

The eighteenth century also brought a generation of writers and experimentalists to the field of agriculture. Lord "Turnip" Townshend promoted turnip-growing in the fields; William Bakewell was a prominent livestock breeder; Coke of Holkham improved crops by deep plowing and using rotation; and Jethro Tull made advances in farm machinery. Tull published \textit{New Horse Hoeing Husbandry} in 1731 giving the results of his research which inspired others to experiment.\textsuperscript{9} About a century later, Cobbett visited Tull's farm; he commented that the cultivators of England were deeply indebted to Tull.\textsuperscript{10}

The contributions of these men helped change the face of the countryside. Arthur Young, famous agricultural writer, became the champion of improvements. The theory advanced by Young emphasized that the wealthier farmers became, the more the population would increase and the rents would be driven higher; thus spurring the farmer to improve his cultivation

\textsuperscript{8}Cunningham, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 482.


methods. He opposed slovenly methods of farming. From his pen came pamphlets and reports disseminating agricultural ideas, collecting statistics, and recording experiments. Increasing consumer needs gave progressive farming added impetus; additional land was required to feed an expanding nation and Young pointed the way. He was joined by two other prominent advocates of enclosure—Lord Sheffield and James Anderson. Sheffield pushed for greater cultivation of waste lands apart from legislation while Anderson urged that cultivation be extended by the passing of a new Corn Law.

History of the Corn Laws

Economic, political, and social conditions motivated the promulgation of the Corn Laws; producer, consumer, and government all played an active role during the various phase of Corn Law history. In Great Britain, corn generally

11 In 1772, Young wrote, "If it be demanded how such ill courses are to be stopped, I answer raise their rents. First with moderation and if that does not bring forth industry, double them. But if you would have a vigorous culture to go forwards, throw 15 or 20 of these farms into one, as fast as the present occupiers drop off." Arthur Young, A Six Months Tour Through the North of England (6 vols.; London: W. Strahan, 1771), II, 84.


connotes wheat but the Corn Laws refer to other grains as well.\textsuperscript{14} The laws included the prohibition of exporting or transporting of grain from one district to another; statutes against forestallers, engrossers and regraters;\textsuperscript{15} and the Assize of Bread,\textsuperscript{16} which regulated the size of the loaf by the price of corn until the reign of George III.

The first Corn Law was enacted in 1225; twenty-six acts were entered on the statute books prior to 1550. The development of the London market began to influence the grain trade as early as the sixteenth century. With the increase of internal trade and commerce, the Act of 1552 was passed against regraters; provision was made for grain to be transported freely from one port to another with licensing required by the government.\textsuperscript{17} In the Elizabethan reign, exportation of


\textsuperscript{15} Forestallers "anticipated the market by buying good outside; regraters bought to sell again in the same market; engrossers bought standing corn." Traill, op. cit., V., 670.

\textsuperscript{16} The Assize of Bread formed a portion of the system which regulated food and drink; Justices of the Peace "set the assize" or adjusted the weight quality and the price of bread to current wheat prices making additional allowances for the baker. Ernie, op. cit., p. 496.

\textsuperscript{17} Persons buying corn to sell again were subjected to heavy penalties; a third offense could result in forfeiture of the goods and imprisonment. 5 and 6 Ed. VI. c. 14.
corn was allowed upon payment of a duty of 1s. per quarter\textsuperscript{18} "in square rigged vessels, British owned, at such times as the prices thereof shall be so reasonable and moderate when no prohibition shall be made either by the queen’s proclamation or by order of judges of assize, or at the quarter sessions . . ."\textsuperscript{19} This measure was typical of the paternal bureaucracy of the Tudors, which kept a close hand over all affairs of the government. With the breakdown in conciliar government in 1641, the curtain had fallen on the day of internal regulations. The focus of legislation in 1660 and 1663 was on external trade; colonial expansion and commercial growth went hand in hand with the development of trade and markets abroad. The Act of 1660 was the first of the century to impose a duty on imports.\textsuperscript{20} The rate was 2s. per quarter when the price of wheat at the port of importation was below 44s.; 4d. was charged when the price was above 44s. Export of wheat was allowed if prices did not exceed 40s. per quarter. The import rate was raised to 5s. 4d. and the point below which the duty was to be collected was raised to 48s. by the Act of 1663. This measure also legalized the engrossing of corn and storage in granaries.\textsuperscript{21}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{18} The quarter is a measure of wheat equal to 8 bushels.
\textsuperscript{19} 13 Eliz. c. 13. (1570)
\textsuperscript{20} 12 Car. II, c. 4.
\textsuperscript{21} 15 Car. II, c. 7.
The statutory system of restricting exportation in the interest of the consumer became incompatible with developing mercantilism.\(^{22}\) As a result of the new policy, British agriculture was prompted to turn from sheep raising to cattle farming and corn production. Legislation favored the producer by permitting importation only when corn was above a certain price. Restoration legislation provided for expanding foreign markets and simultaneously stimulated agriculture.\(^{23}\)

The Act of 1670 for the Improvement of Tillage and the Breeding of Cattle raised the rates of duty and the prices at which these duties were effective as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From</th>
<th>To</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1663 5s. 4d. when price of wheat did not exceed 40s. per quarter at port of importation</td>
<td>1670 8s. per quarter when price was between 53s. 4d. and 80s.; and 16s. per quarter when below 53s. 4d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Exportation was permitted at all times providing the poundage was paid.\(^{24}\)

According to Gras in *Evolution of the English Corn*.


\(^{23}\)Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 5; Hasbach, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

\(^{24}\)22 Car. II, c. 13.
Market, the Act of 1673 "supplies a link" in the evolution from earlier corn laws which merely allowed exportation and the Bounty Act of 1689. During the five year period the law of 1673 was in force, over £60,000 was drained from the British treasury. The Act was not renewed at expiration, but was essentially reworded into the Act of 1689 (sometimes called the Act of 1688), a measure to later achieve a degree of importance.\(^{25}\)

The Act of 1689, which would remain on the statute books until 1814, was passed during the early months of the reign of William and Mary. When wheat was 48s. per quarter or under, rye 32s., and malt or barley 24s. at any port of England or Wales, a bounty was to be given of 5s. on each quarter of wheat, 3s. 6d. on each of rye, and 2s. 6d. on each of malt or barley. Export was to be in British ships, and to guard against fraudulent collection of payments, the corn could not be landed again. This was the first Bounty Act.\(^{26}\)

Justification for the granting of the bounty was offered and the measure was highly debated in the latter half of the eighteenth century when it began to affect commerce and agriculture and make serious demands on the British


\(^{26}\) Wm. and Mary, c. 12.
After 1750, the law was both praised as evidence of high statesmanship and criticized as "a bit of stupid governmental interference." Cobbett later stated that the law of 1688 "was passed with a view to give a premium to the country gentlemen in order to obtain their consent to the imposition of the land tax." Arthur Young declared in 1774: "The design was to give a premium to the landed interest of the kingdom, in return for the great exertion that they had made to place the crown on the head of King William." About a century after the Act was passed, Sir John Dalrymple, the writer, asserted that the 'bounty was demanded by the Tories ... in return for their consenting to a land tax.' Adam Smith's opinion was that the system of laws connected

27 "If the customs officers of the ports had insufficient money to pay the corn debentures, such were to be certified and paid by the receiver general in London." Barnes, op. cit., p. 23.

28 Ibid., pp. 10-11.


30 Gras, op. cit., p. 254, quoting Arthur Young, Political Arithmetic, 1774, p. 29.

with the bounty deserved "no part of the praise which has been bestowed upon it." 32

The reason for the protective duties and bounties, according to Hasbach, was to hold prices steady and stimulate corn production. 33 Gras attributes the framing of the Stuart-Orange agricultural policies to the expansion of foreign and domestic markets. 34 Conditions were conducive to growth and agriculture was thriving.

After the Peace of Paris was signed in 1763, it was finally decided that England instead of France was to lead in world colonization. British trade increased. Accompanying this was a rapid population rise between the years of 1750 and 1773 which produced extensive changes on the conditions of supply and demand. Therefore, it appeared wiser to guard the home front against possible scarcity and high prices than to hold out inducements for the promotion of exportation. 35 Annual enactments from 1765 to 1772 suspended the former Corn Laws for a brief period and admitted imports

32 A. Smith, Wealth, II, 133.

33 Hasbach, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

34 Gras, op. cit., p. 250.

duty free. Then the principle of the old Corn Law system established by the laws of 1660, 1663, 1670 and 1689 was altered. Thomas Pownall introduced this change with the Act of 1773 which lowered prices permitting grain importation. 36 When the price of wheat was above 48s. per quarter, the duty was 6d.; export was prohibited when the price was 44s.; and a bounty of 5s. was to be paid on exports when under 44s. per quarter. Edmund Burke supported the measure to prevent jealousy between commercial and agricultural interests and the bill was termed "Burke's Act." 37

The Act according to Arthur Young was founded on "radical mistakes." No provision was set for ascertaining the price of grain; consequently, fraudulent marketing activities followed. During a subsequent eighteen-year period, the most capable British lawyers could not say which law was to be used to regulate grain imports and exports. 38

The year, 1789, was "a foretaste of the war years to come." The price of wheat in Amsterdam, a free market for

36 Cleghorn, op. cit., p. 6.


38 Smith, Tracts, p. 293.
corn, had risen to 62s. a quarter. Bounties were given on imports by France with other countries starting public granaries. 39 Parliament reacted by passing temporary laws in 1789 and 1790 forbidding export of corn at any price. 40

Important alterations were made by the Act of 1791; all acts respecting the importation and exportation of corn were repealed; all duties were removed except those on malt. When wheat was 44s., a bounty of 5s. was to be paid; when above 46s. no export was allowed. On importation, a prohibitive duty of 24s. 3d. was levied when the price was under 50s. Proper registration was required on prices of grain. The maritime counties, including those in Scotland, were divided into districts with the price of corn regulated by a six-week average. Oats, only, were regulated by a twelve-week average. If Parliament was not in session, the King in Council was empowered to permit importation or prevent exportation should the average price of grain be at or above that established by law. 41

A chain of events, beginning with the French Revolution in 1789 and extending through the Napoleonic Wars, resulted in a series of legislative measures formulated to meet the increasing emergencies arising throughout Great

39 Fay, op. cit., p. 35.
40 29 Geo. III, c. 58; 30 Geo. III, c. 1.
41 31 Geo. III, c. 30.
Britain. Among these were the Corn Laws of 1791, 1804, and 1815.

Significance of Corn Laws in British History

The laws concerning corn may everywhere be compared to the laws concerning religion. The people feel themselves so much interested in what relates either to their subsistence in this life, or to their happiness in a life to come, that government must yield to their prejudices, and, in order to preserve the public tranquility, establish that system which they approve of. It is upon this account, perhaps, that we so seldom find a reasonable system established with regard to either of those two capital objects.

So wrote Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations*. 42

It would be next to impossible to decide whether the total effect of the Corn Laws promoted or retarded British agriculture. The early laws were based on moral principles related to the measures against usury; the object was to establish fair and just prices for the consumer. 43 As the country grew and prospered, legislation concerning the vital food supply extended deeply into the national life. The "smiling wheat-fields" with their human labor were a "precious boon for which England . . . thanked the Divine Providence and therefore she took such measures as she could to keep them smiling." 44

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43 Prothero, *op. cit.*., pp. 253, 255.
44 Fay, *op. cit.*., pp. 1, 7, 8.
Through the years, Parliament considered corn both as a food and as merchandise. The purpose of legislation was to guard against the distress of the poor and also to extend and promote tillage of the land. The country faced mounting problems after the outbreak of the French Revolution. At Whitehall, March 8, 1790, the Lords of the Committee of Privy Council, appointed to consider matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations recommended to the King:

The Committee of Your Majesty's most honourable privy council . . . offered to Your Majesty in a former representation their advice on such measures as, in their judgment, were necessary in order to apply an immediate remedy to the evils likely to arise from the difficulties, which had occurred in the execution of the laws of the kingdom, made for regulating the exportation and importation of corn, and to preserve Your Majesty's subjects from being exposed to that distress for want of this indispensable article of subsistence, which has of late been severely felt in several neighbouring countries; but the committee having in their investigation of this subject been let to consider the state of the corn laws, and the trade of corn in general and find that some further provisions are wanting to amend and improve the said laws . . .

The distress of the people required immediate action. Following legislation in 1791, the Board of Agriculture was formed in 1793 to investigate the suffering of agricultural laborers and to assist the farmers with improvements. A

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46 "Representation, & c.", C. Smith, Tracts, pp. 7-8.
circular letter, formulated to obtain information was answered by Mr. Chalmers who referred to the adverse effect of the corn on the English populace. He added that since the establishment of the bounty "seven millions of money have been paid by the public, not for a good purpose, but for a bad purpose." A number of reports and essays were published as a result of surveys and investigations by the government concerning the Corn Laws. Discussions in Parliament turned into lengthy debates.

The many books and pamphlets written during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries attest to the importance of the Corn Laws as a topic of discussion. Adam Smith expressed his views on the corn bounty in Wealth of Nations. Other famous authors were Parson Malthus, Observations on the Effects of the Corn Laws, 1814; David Ricardo, "Bounties on Exportation, and Prohibitions of Importation" in his Political Economy, 1817, and Charles Smith, whose Tracts on the Corn Trade, republished in 1804, were used by Parliament in directing the drafting of some of the bills.

In 1802, Cobbett initiated publication of the Political Register; this periodical eventually found its way to nearly every hearthside in the country. Composed of

47 "Mr. Chalmer's Estimate", Smith, Tracts, p. 289.
articles and letters on current issues, the Register devoted space to the subject of the Corn Laws. 48

CHAPTER II

COBBETT, THE MAN

Biographical Sketch

Fair Liberty was all his cry:
For her he stood prepared to die,
For her he boldly stood alone,
For her he oft exposed his own.

William Cobbett was born March 9, 1762 in the parish of Farnham—a quiet country town in Surrey near the western border of Hampshire. The long main street was overlooked by Farnham Castle; the "Jolly Farmer" Inn, facing the bridge over a stream, was Cobbett's home. His father, George Cobbett, in addition to being a farmer was landlord of the inn.

Cobbett's writings are filled with autobiographical

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2 This date has been accepted as the year of Cobbett's birth on the authority of his son, John M. Cobbett who wrote in the Political Register, 26 June 1835: "He was seventy-three years old; but as he never appeared to us certain of his own age, we . . . procured an extract from the Register of Farnham Parish, in which it appears that William was born one year before he was christened, that is, on the 9th of March, 1762." Cited by E. I. Carlyle, William Cobbett: A Study of His Life as Shown in His Writings (London: A. Constable and Company, Ltd., 1904), p. 293.

3 Ibid., pp. 1-2.
references; *The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine*, published in Philadelphia, *Advice to Young Men* and the *Political Register* all give accounts of his early years. "I was bred at the plough-tail and in the Hop-Gardens of Farnham in Surrey," wrote Cobbett. He believed this "spot" with its carefully trimmed hedges and beautiful gardens was not only the "neatest in England"; it was the most beautiful "in the whole world."  

Young Cobbett trudged to the fields each morning with a "bag of bread and cheese and bottle of small-beer swung over my shoulder" dressed in a "blue smock-frock and woolen spatter-dashes." His first occupation was to drive the birds from the turnip-seed and the rooks from the peas. This was followed by ploughing and helping the reapers with the harvest. From his early youth, Cobbett had a great attachment to the countryside and a genuine love of the soil. As he walked behind the plough-horses there was time for contemplation—"for reflection upon the world about him."  

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education was meager; his father taught him reading, writing, and the rudiments of arithmetic. The basic philosophy in the Cobbett household was hard work; through it was the building of strong character.  

At eleven years of age Cobbett worked at Farnham Castle, clipping the "box-edgings" and weeding the flower beds. His love of beautiful gardens eventually took him to Richmond to work for the King at Kew Gardens. In a little bookshop in Richmond, Cobbett spied a book—Tale of a Tub by Jonathan Swift. Taking the small saving from his pocket he purchased his first book which became his most treasured possession.  

An excursion to a fair in May of 1783 turned into a journey to London where Cobbett found his first employment as a writer. The following year he became dissatisfied with his work and enlisted in the army.  

Cobbett was stationed in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Canada. He devoted his spare time to reading and study, sacrificing food so that money would be available to purchase ink, pen, and paper. Cobbett arose at daylight in the summer and at four o'clock on winter mornings to enable him to read

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\(^8\)Cobbett, Porcupine, p. 21; Reitzel, op. cit., pp. 11-12.  
\(^9\)Reitzel, op. cit., p. 18  
\(^10\)Ibid., pp. 18-19.  
an hour or two before reporting for duty. Soon he was raised
to Corporal. Through continuous study and excellent management
of his time, Cobbett claims he was able to attain the rank of
Sergeant Major before he was twenty years of age. 12

While Corporal, Cobbett served as clerk to the regi-
ment. His military responsibilities were many and varied and
he performed numerous tasks that should have been the duties
of his superiors. He gradually lost respect for these officers
because of their intemperate habits and their inability to fol-
low simple instructions. In 1787, an affair occurred that
opened Cobbett's eyes to regimental justice. The quarter-
master was keeping a fourth of the men's provisions for him-
self. Cobbett was informed by some of the old sergeants that
this had been the practice for many years. He was advised to
make no attempt to rectify conditions until he was safely out
of the army and removed from the clutches of a court martial.
Cobbett secretly began collecting evidence from the regimental
accounts for use in bringing the quarter-master and his accom-
plices to justice. He was anxious to leave the army and bring
punishment to these offenders for the wrongs they were commit-
ing against the soldiers and against the public. 13 Meanwhile,

12 Cobbett, Porcupine, pp. 29-30; Reitzel, op. cit.,
pp. 25-28; Hughes, op. cit., pp. 44-45; Cobbett, Works, III,
251.

13 An account of Cobbett's plan and subsequent experi-
ence is related in a letter addressed to the "Independent
when stationed in New Brunswick, Cobbett met the girl who would one day become his wife. He declared: "I formed my resolution at once, to marry her as soon as we could get permission, and to get out of the army as soon as I could." But neither the discharge nor the marriage were to take place for another four years.

Finally in 1791 after Cobbett had completed approximately eight years in the service of his country, he received his honorable discharge. He proceeded immediately to London to press charges against the officers of his former regiment. When the time came for trial, the carefully collected documentary evidence had been transferred out of Cobbett's reach. The only alternative was to call the soldier who had assisted him in gathering the evidence as a witness for the prosecution. But this could never be; this soldier had not received his discharge and Cobbett was well aware that once he came forward his life would be in danger. Cobbett was beginning to realize that the "shocking abuses" in his regiment were but an extension of a corrupt system that existed throughout the government, and the time was not ripe for correction. With his new wife he

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15 In February 1792, Cobbett and Ann Reid were married at Woolwich. She remained in France until he was safely settled in the U. S. A. and then followed. Cobbett, Porcupine, p. 149.
decomped to America.

For seven and a half years Cobbett remained in the United States where he achieved prominence as a Tory pamphleteer.16 His fame had long preceded his return to England in July, 1800. John Wright, the anti-Jacobin bookseller, (who later became his partner) had acted as agent and the American writings had been regularly reprinted in England.17 Cobbett received a flattering reception upon his arrival in London, and he made the acquaintance of many literary supporters of the Government.18

William Windham, Secretary at War and a member of the Cabinet, befriended Cobbett and extended to him a dinner invitation. Cobbett was honored to accept and in his reply added:

As my first wish ever has been to merit the commendations of men distinguished for their wisdom and loyalty, for their unshaken attachment to ancient establishments and their unequivocal abhorrence of innovation, I need not say how great is the satisfaction I feel at hearing that my humble efforts are honoured with your admiration.19

Windham with Dr. French Laurence who was a member of Parliament, provided financial assistance for a new publication planned for the following year.20 Thus in 1802 Cobbett

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16 Cole, Life, pp. 48-51. 17 Ibid., p. 70. 18 Ibid.


20 Circulation plans were given in a letter from Cobbett to Windham, December, 1801. Ibid., 180.
founded an anti-Jacobin organ and the "most powerfully written political journal of the time"—the Political Register. 21 By 1804, Cobbett's writings had changed from anti-Jacobin to Radical. He was obsessed by the misery of the rural laborers who were down-trodden by heavy taxation and high prices, and held in the grips of an oppressive poor law. Among the remedies proposed by the government to aid the people, Cobbett considered the Corn Law of 1804 one of the worst; it was nothing but a piece of class legislation favoring the landed interest. He also denounced the "paper aristocracy" who were lining their pockets at the expense of others. "The more Radical the Register became the more its influence increased." 22 The Register became a "thorn in the side of the government." Cobbett symbolized the spirit of combative journalism in a fight against a blind and incalculable intolerance of authority. 23 The officers of the Crown scanned every publication in an effort to locate libelous or inaccurate statements to use as a basis for legal action against Cobbett. The awaited moment finally came when evidence sought by the government appeared July, 1809. Four squadrons of German Legion Cavalry had

21 Cole, Life, p. 10.


23 Melville, op. cit., II, 31; Hughes, op. cit., p. 18.
been summoned from Bury to suppress a mutiny at Ely among the local militia with five of the ring leaders "sentenced to receive 500 lashes each." \(2^4\) Cobbett made a fatal error when he expressed his indignation:

Five hundred lashes each! Aye, that is right! Flog them; flog them; flog them! They deserve it, and a great deal more. They deserve a flogging at every meal time. 'Lash them daily, lash them duly.' What, shall the rascals dare to mutiny, and that too, when the German Legion is so near at hand! Lash them, lash them, lash them! Base dogs! What, mutiny for the price of a knapsack! Lash them! flog them! Mutiny for the price of a goat's skin; and them, upon the appearance of the German soldiers, they take a flogging as quietly as so many trunks of trees! \(2^5\)

Treasonable libel was the charge against Cobbett. He did not believe he would be convicted; he wrote his partner John Wright: "Be sure to tell Hansard, or any of them, from me, that I hold the thing in contempt, that I am no more afraid of the rascals than I could be of so many mice. And, really, if we have an honest jury, it will be a famous thing altogether." \(2^6\)

The case was heard before Lord Ellenborough and a special jury in the Court of King's Bench, June 15, 1810; Cobbett conducted his own defense; he was confident that he would win. However, he was unaccustomed to public speaking.


\(2^5\)\textit{Ibid}.

\(2^6\)Letter from Cobbett to Wright, November 19, 1809, cited by Melville, \textit{op. cit.}, II, 35.
"He made a long defence, a bad defence, and his delivery of it and his demeanour were even worse than his matter," recorded Francis Place in his unpublished Autobiography. 27

"So ludicrous was he in one part that the jury, the judge, and the audience all laughed at him ..." 28 The verdict was guilty. Cobbett was sentenced July 9; the penalty was a fine of £1,000, imprisonment for two years in Newgate, and the posting of bail in the amount of £3,000 with two sureties of £1,000 required to assure peace would be kept for an additional seven years. But that was not all. Cobbett's printer, his publisher, and his bookseller were also imprisoned. Such was the attempt to obliterate the Register. 29

Cobbett took his pen in hand:

After having published seventeen volumes of this work embracing the period of eight years and a half, during which time I have written with my own hand nearly two thousand articles upon various subjects, without having, except in one single instance, incurred even the threats of the law, I begin the eighteenth volume in a prison. 30

During his imprisonment Cobbett wrote and published 364 essays and letters. People from 197 cities and towns flocked

27Melville, op. cit., 42. Place never spoke to Cobbett afterward.

28Ibid.

29Ibid., 42-45; Cobbett, Works, III, 375-388 gives a complete account of the proceedings of the trial. The printer, Hansard, was imprisoned for three months; Bud and Bagshaw each received two months imprisonment.

30Cobbett, Works, III, 375, quoting the Political Register, July 1810.
to visit him.\(^\text{31}\)

Over six hundred persons were present at a dinner party in London presided over by Sir Francis Burdett, a leader among independent Radicals, to celebrate Cobbett's release. Crowds greeted him along the way as Cobbett returned to his farm in Botley in Hampshire; when he reached his home the villagers had turned out to pay tribute. But nothing could erase the blow prison had dealt him; the tremendous financial and property losses were to never be regained.\(^\text{32}\)

The Register continued to be Cobbett's mouthpiece. He maintained interest in the welfare of the rural laborers; he argued against enclosure of the waste lands. The wastes provided an area where the laborers' children could grow up healthy and vigorous; otherwise, they "must be crammed into the stinking suburbs of towns, amidst filth of all sorts, and congregating together in the practice of every species of idleness and vice."\(^\text{33}\) Cobbett bitterly denounced the measures being formulated by the government to protect home-grown corn; he favored free trade of grain regardless of price. Administrative evils mounted and suffering increased throughout the land. Heavy tax burdens combined with unemployment complicated by the evils of the poor law system reduced many

\(^{31}\text{Cole, Opinions, pp. 205-206.}\)

\(^{32}\text{Cole, Life, pp. 181-182.}\)

\(^{33}\text{Cobbett, Works, IV, 262.}\)
people to deplorable conditions; some were unable to obtain life's barest necessities. Corruption in the government could only be eliminated by a complete reform of Parliament. Cobbett redoubled his efforts for the fight to come. The next move was to contact as many of the people as possible. The answer was a new Register—a two-penny edition priced to reach even the poorest of homes. This was accomplished by excluding all news matter and reducing the size of the paper to a single open sheet. In November 1816, the first issue—a letter addressed to the Journeymen and Labourers, came off the press. Circulation began to climb. The influence of the publication grew, and Cobbett through his writings became the leader of the laboring classes. Alleviation of their present distress was sought.

Cobbett's Paper Against Gold, 1815, pointed out the evils of the Funding System and the enormous National Debt which added to the misery of the people. In the Register, he declared that the laborers wanted higher wages—not charity. Uprisings swept the country. Rising resentment led to rioting against employers. The newspapers, including the Register, were filled with stories of riots, tales of the burning of

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34 A copy of the letter is published in Cobbett, Works, V, 1-17.


36 William Cobbett, Cobbett's Paper Against Gold (London: W. Molineaux, 1815), passim.
property, and accounts of the shooting and hanging of laborers.

Cobbett wrote, striking out at all forms of corruption. The country was on the verge of revolution when the long arm of the government reached out for him. "Corruption has put on her armour and drawn her dagger," he wrote. Cobbett knew he must either retreat or be silenced. He decided to retire to America and keep writing. Before leaving he said: "I can serve that cause no longer by remaining here; but the cause itself is so good, so just, so manifestly right and virtuous, and it has been combated by means so unusual, so unnatural and so violent, that it must triumph in the end." The following two years copy traveled from the United States and the Register continued to be published in England.

After returning to England in 1819, Cobbett decided to enter politics. He stood for the House of Commons at

37 Cobbett, Works, V, 199. "According to the House of Commons Committee of Secrecy, the aim of the conspiracy initiated by Cobbett was 'a total overthrow of all existing establishments, and a division of the landed, and extinction of the funded, property of the country.'" Cole, Life, p. 215.

38 Ibid., p. 192.

39 The Gagging Acts of 1817 which drove Cobbett from England is a complicated story told in The Last Hundred Days of English Freedom by Cobbett, written in exile and collected and published by J. L. Hammond in 1921. There was a four-month interval, from April to July 1817, in which no Registers were published at which time Cobbett was enroute to America and in the process of sending copy to England. Cole, Opinions, p. 34.
Coventry in 1820 and Preston in 1826, both without success. In 1832, in his twilight years, Cobbett was elected to the House from Oldham. The late hours of the Parliamentary sessions placed a serious strain on Cobbett's declining health. He became ill after a particularly grueling debate on agricultural distress and retired to his farm for rest. There he desired to see his fields, which he visited by being carried around the farm. A few days later on June 18, 1835, he died. Until the end he incited the laborers to protest their lot, but the cause which he had championed so long, and so gallantly, was left to his successors.

Opinions of Himself

Cobbett dwelt much upon himself; his writings contain numerous references to qualities he recognized as indispensable, and reveal much about his personality. The following quotation was taken from "Perish Commerce" which is the first article he is believed to have written as a Radical: "Who are you ... presumes to tell us we are all in error? Why, what signifies it who I am? The only question is am I right? If I am not, overset my arguments, and show the world I am

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40 Habitual early rising had always necessitated early retiring for Cobbett. In his opinion, the night was for evil, and not for the making of laws.

41 Cole, Life, p. 235; Cobbett, Works, VI, 812. Cobbett's Legacy to Labourers, published in 1835 was his memorial to the laboring class.
Cobbett not only stressed "right"; he prized "truth" as well. He attributed his popularity to "giving truth in clear language." On another occasion he stated:

Perhaps there is no pleasure so great as that which we derive from a conviction that we have produced a great effect upon the minds of great multitudes of persons; and especially when we are able to reflect that, . . . the effect has been produced by calm and dispassionate reasoning upon serious and important subjects. Who, besides myself, has, in our day, attempted to gain popularity by dint of fact and of argument, unmixed with anything to amuse the human mind? If, at any time, I have indulged in a sort of jest I have been almost ashamed of the monetary triumph thereby acquired. I have rested my reputation upon the success of truth supported by dry argument . . . "

From his early youth Cobbett had been "strong and laborious." Excellent physical health was one of his main assets; he reached a height of over six feet and was of fine physique. He took pride in his temperate habits and believed in eating well and living on a schedule. He boasted that "abominable brewers poison have been kept away from under this roof." Cobbett had no sympathy for "drunkards and gluttons." He declared: "If people will not restrain themselves from those indulgences which cause sickness, sick they will be and sick they ought to be."

Probably no man has written more about himself.

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42 Cobbett, Works, II, 368. 43 Hughes, op. cit., p. 16.

44 Cole, Opinions, pp. 42-43.

Cobbett revealed egotism when he wrote the following in answer to a reader's accusation:

"My correspondent asks, 'Why not be amiable?' Now I have no reason to think that I am not, and that I have not been amiable as most other men. Very pretty girls in two different countries used, when I was young, to be reasonably fond of me. I have never had a servant that did not like his or her master; and as to my family and friends, I leave them to say, whether there is the company of any person on earth in which they delight more than they do in mine. I do not believe, that I have experienced the breaking off of friendship with ten persons in the whole course of my life. Why should he therefore suppose, that I am unamiable: I am not overbearing ... I am not churlish or niggardly; I am not a gabbler, I am never melancholy or sulky; all that know me know my readiness to forgive ... Why the devil then, am I to suppose myself unamiable? ..."

Cobbett was willing to forgive any wrongs except those caused by envy. He detested envious people, and "found them insensible to every species of correction except that of the scorpion lash, laid on without ceremony and laid on as publicly as possible." The pen served well as both scorpion lash and sword as Cobbett's hand administered justice. He believed that "God is just; and as man is said to be made in the image of God, man should be just too; and to forget or not to punish as far as we are able, and legally can punish, moral offences, is a neglect of a sacred duty."

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46 Cole, Opinions, p. 46.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p. 45.
Historians and Contemporaries Comments

But you have a vast opinion of Cobbett too, haven't you? Oh, he's a giant! He has such prodigious strength; he tears up a subject by the roots . . . I should be terribly afraid to get into his hands.49

Both favorable and unfavorable opinions of Cobbett have been expressed by his contemporaries and also by historians who have studied his life,

Windham, the man who jointly financed the Political Register, "declared in the House of Commons that a statue of gold ought to be erected in honour of Cobbett for his writings in America."50 After Cobbett's return to England in 1800, the first means of reaching the British people was the Register. Contemporaries were impressed by the force of his writings. Few men were able to exercise a "greater influence upon popular thought during the troublous years of the first half of the nineteenth century than William Cobbett." stated Philip Snowden P. C. M. P., in his preface to Advice to Young Men.51

Cobbett challenged the people of his day by his manner of writing. Carless Davis in The Age of Grey and Peel, labeled Cobbett "a Radical of a kind." He further stated:

49 "Personal Reminiscences" by Hazlitt; from Conversations of James Northcote, 1830; first published in The Atlas, April 26, 1829, as cited in Hughes, op. cit., p. 25.

50 Melville, op. cit., II, 120.

51 Cobbett, Advice, p. v.
"But on many questions he had more in common with the old school Tory than with Hunt or Cartwright or Francis Place." Cobbett had no "obstinate conviction that many, if not most, of the evils of his time were the consequences of mistakes in economic policy." 52

In 1804 Charles James Fox wrote to Windham concerning Cobbett's economic views: "I think his speculation about increasing the dearness of Bread is good, and shall not be at all surprised to see the Loaf at nearly 2s. within a few months." Fox called Cobbett "an extraordinary Man" and added that if good was to be done he might be the powerful instrument to bring it to pass. 53

"Cobbett formed his views by opening his eyes," wrote the prominent historian, G. K. Chesterton. "It is the paradox of his life that he loved the past, and he alone really lived in the future ... he alone was in any living touch with times that were to come." 54 In the words of Chesterton, Cobbett was an "imperfect martyr" who lived and died by an "imperfect light." He added:


His courage was not consistent, complete, a thing working itself out by a perfectly clear principle. His heroic stature was not properly or perfectly proportioned; it was merely heroic. He sometimes fell below himself; but, it was because he had a far higher and more arduous standard of manhood than most men.\(^{55}\)

In drawing a comparison to Bentham, Brougham, McCaulay, and Mackintosh, Chesterton concluded that they only served their world; Cobbett "set out to fight the whole world."\(^{56}\)

From the pen of Carlyle, biographer of Cobbett came: "So powerful were his utterances so keen his perception of the trend of public thought that on several occasions he affected more by a single effort than others had accomplished by the labour of years."\(^{57}\)

Eminent historian, G. D. H. Cole selected Cobbett as his favorite personality.\(^{58}\) Most of Cobbett's writings available today are through Cole's untiring efforts. He expressed that it was "hard work to give a coherent account" of Cobbett's "development and of the revolution in his opinions." He explains that the story of Cobbett's life was "in great measure the story of the England of his time." He had a "Close contact with the great social movements of this most

\(^{55}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 85.}\)

\(^{56}\text{Ibid.}\)


moving period in English history." Cobbett represented and symbolized "a phase of the dissolution of old England." He exercised a great influence over the workers of his time for he shared with them the loss of a traditional way of life.\(^5\)\(^9\) Cole stated similarly to Davis\(^6\)\(^0\) that although Cobbett was a "great Radical" he was not related to others wearing the "Radical label," He "was a Radical . . . only because things had gone radically wrong, and no less than radical remedies would avail to put them right."\(^6\)\(^1\) He gave courage to the people for whose rights he fought by identifying himself with them. Cobbett's egotism, according to Cole, was a method of identifying himself with the suffering, praise, or blame of his fellow countrymen. Through writing about himself he became personally known to thousands of people. He was never dull when writing about himself. Regardless of the subject he selected, he had "the art of putting his personality across to his readers."\(^6\)\(^2\)

Cobbett was unable "to remain quiet or even calm in the face of criticism,"\(^6\)\(^3\) and criticism was abundant. In a letter dated October 11, 1820, Mr. Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

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\(^{59}\)Cole, Life, p. 11.  
\(^{60}\)Supra, p. 34.  
\(^{61}\)Cole, Opinions, pp. 26, 13.  
\(^{62}\)Ibid., p. 27; Cole, Life, pp. 25, 28.  
\(^{63}\)Cole, Life, p. 58.
the poet, who was "a strong enemy of Cobbett's" referred to a recent issue of the Register:

The Cobbett as the Register was called is assuredly a strong and battering production throughout, and in the best bad stylo of this political rhinoceros, with his coat armour of dry and wet mud, and his one horn of brutal strength on the nose of scorn and hate; not to forget the flaying rasp of his tongue!64

Others said Cobbett was violent and coarse. He replied:

Tender-handed press a nettle,
And it stings you for your pains;
Press it like a man of mettle,
And it soft as silk remains.

Tis the same with vulgar natures;
Treat them kindly, they rebel;
But, be rough as nutmeg-graters,
And the rogues obey you well.

Cobbett was under continual attack because of his "inconsistency." He argued that the change had occurred in the person or situation—not in his opinion.66

During the Napoleonic Wars, Cobbett's writings created animosity in France, and that country demanded revenge:

64Cobbett, Works, I, 1. The article producing the agitation was written by Cobbett supporting Queen Caroline in her trial.

65Cole, Opinions, pp. 45, 47-48. Cobbett had found these lines in an old volume of "European Magazine" when he was stationed in New Brunswick, and repeated them many times afterward in the Register.

The French Minister, M. Otto by the express order of Buonaparte, [sic] applied to the English government to cause Mr. Cobbett to be prosecuted criminally for his satire on the great conqueror.67

Many years later another Frenchman, Elie Halevy, in A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century described Cobbett as "an old-fashioned demagogue"68 and a "sociologist of fantastic views."69

No man during his lifetime has brought on himself such a storm of abuse. "Bentham called him a vile rascal; Place called him an impudent mountebank." Men who had been his friends became his enemies.70 Pamphlets of all types were circulated against him. He was even attacked and slandered by a close imitation of the Register published falsely under his name. "He was 'fool,' 'vulgar,' 'incendiary,' 'knave,' 'libeller,' 'coward;' when rich, lucre was his object; when poor, they smote him for his poverty . . ."71

Hazlitt, a contemporary of Cobbett, made the following comments:

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69Ibid., p. 222.

70Cobbett, The Last Hundred Days; quoted from the preface by J. L. Hammond, p. 1.

I might say that Mr. Cobbett is a very honest man with a total want of principle; and I might explain this paradox thus. I mean that he is... in downright earnest in what he says, in the part he takes at the time; but in taking that part, he is led by headstrong obstinacy, caprice, novelty, pique or personal motive of some sort, and not by a steadfast regard for truth or habitual anxiety for what is right uppermost in his mind... his understanding is the dupe and slave of his momentary, violent and irritable humours... He sees things through the medium of heat and passion... and his whole system of thinking is deranged by the first object that strikes his fancy or sours his temper.72

Mr. Cobbett takes nothing for granted, as what he has proved before; he does not write a book of reference. We see his ideas in their first concoction, fermenting and overflowing with ebullitions of a lively conception. We look on at the actual process and are put in immediate possession of the grounds and materials on which he forms his sanguine, unsettled conclusions.73

Fresh theories give him fresh courage. He is like a young and lusty bridegroom, that divorces a favorite speculation every morning, and marries a new one every night.74

J. L. Hammond, who published several books on this period of history, portrayed Cobbett as "noisy, contentious, egotistical, in controversy" with "crude dogmatism, raw generalizations, boisterous unfairness." However, to this "formidable list of admissions" he added that Cobbett was one of the wisest men of his time. Although he was "obstinate and self confident" he was wise because he learned "as he went along and held a truer grasp of what was happening

72 "Hazlitt's Essay" (First published in Table Talk, 1821), cited by Hughes, op. cit., pp. 8-9.

73 Ibid., p. 11

74 Ibid.
in England than almost any one of his contemporaries . . . "75 Hammond wrote that Cobbett stood out "among the great forces of his time because he used a talent unrivalled in his age, in the effort to arrest the impoverishment of the English people and to destroy the fatal superstition of the day that the rich could be trusted to act for the poor. "76

"His talents for fastening his claws into anything or anyone by a word or an expression and holding them down to scorn or up to horror was unrivalled," stated the author, Sir Henry Lytton Bulwer. He praised Cobbett saying that although he varied in his opinions concerning men and doctrines "he is ever for making England great, powerful, and prosperous—her people healthy, brave, and free."77

The power wielded by Cobbett was felt throughout the land. At his death, Bulwer said: "He left a gap in the public mind which no one else could fill, . . . for his loss was not merely that of a man, but of a habit—of a dose of strong drink which all of us had been taking for years . . . ."78

75 Cobbett, History of the Last Hundred Days, p. 5, quoting from the preface by J. L. Hammond.

76 Ibid.

77 Hughes, op. cit., p. 17, citing Sir Henry Lytton Bulwer's Historical Characters, 1868.

78 Ibid., p. 16.
CHAPTER III

AGRICULTURE AND THE PRICE OF BREAD (1793-1804)

Changing Rural Structure

All the country from Holkam to Houghton was a wild sheep-walk, before the spirit of improvement seized the inhabitants; and this spirit has wrought amazing effects; for instead of boundless wilds, and uncultivated wastes, inhabited by scarcely anything but sheep; the country is all cut into enclosures, cultivated in a most husband-like manner...

Extension of cultivation, with the dedication of much of England's common land to the plough combined with the introduction of new crops, innovations in farm machinery, and improved farming practices, charted a new course for agriculture. The movement was zealously supported by both statesmen and economists. As additional lands were hedged or fenced, and experimental agriculture increased in momentum, economists recommended that the feudalistic practice of entail be abandoned; land should pass from one owner to another as freely as other forms of capital. The application of capitalism to agriculture produced extensive changes. The

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1 Arthur Young, South of England Tour (London: W. Strahan, 1772), pp. 3-4.


3 According to law the eldest son of a family was heir to the land without the right of sale, disposal or division; it was to remain intact to be passed from generation to generation.
latter decade of the nineteenth century witnessed the evolution of modern estates with an increasing emphasis on production. Opportunity was paving the way for agriculture to develop into an enterprising industry.

The inexorable growth of the industrial population drew heavily on the nation’s food supply with great quantities of agricultural produce consumed by people living in cities and towns. From 1750 to 1801 the population climbed from six and one-half to over nine million in England and Wales; about one-tenth were concentrated in the city of London. This rapid rise was accompanied by a radical shift in the population. A century earlier, three-fourths of the people had been living south of a line drawn from the mouth of the Severn River to The Wash. Expanding trade combined with employment in the industrial centers, completely altered the population distribution as great numbers migrated to the western and northern areas of England. An influx of Irish further added to the growth. At the close of the eighteenth century, Manchester had expanded from 50,000 to 100,000; Oldham from a village 400 to 20,000; Bolton from 5,000 to 17,000; and Leeds from 17,000 to 53,000. Parson Malthus aroused interest in population problems by publishing his

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4 Halevy, op. cit., pp. 219, 221.

5 Wood, op. cit., p. 5; Hasbach, op. cit., p. 53.

Essay on Population in 1798. Parliament compiled data enumerating people throughout the country. Official records listed a population of over 5,000 for 105 cities in 1801; London was the highest with 864,845. Thirty-five of these cities had over 10,000 inhabitants with 12 having over 30,000. The total population for England and Wales in 1801 was 9,343,578.7

Agricultural surveys indicated the growing importance of the London market. The city provided a general market for various types of foreign and domestic grain. The Corn Exchange was located at Mark Lane. This was a privately owned business organization and the corporate structure was composed of eighty shares owned by factors and dealers in corn. Produce was transported via the sea; most of the wheat came from farmers and a greater share of the oats and barley was shipped by merchants. London, along with Birmingham, was influential in determining the prices of commodities; these prices, in turn, determined agricultural profits.8

Improvements in communications and transportation were significant in the growth of internal trade and markets. After the Duke of Bridgewater's famous canal connecting Worsley and Manchester was opened in 1761, the price of coal from

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8Hasbach, op. cit., pp. 53-54; Fay, op. cit., p. 56.
Manchester dropped fifty per cent, and investors immediately turned to the construction of artificial waterways. Northern and central England was "threaded with 3000 miles" of canals. Also, over a thousand turnpike trusts covered the nation with a "network of highroads" by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The feasibility of transporting agricultural produce assured many people a more balanced diet than before. Furthermore, a plentiful food supply was obtainable during the entire year. Even the war with France failed to impede progress in transportation and improvements of the land. The eight years of war from 1793 to 1800 saw 1,124 improvements against 750 for the preceding eight-year period making the total increase 474. Construction of canals and harbors more than doubled; advances were made in enclosures and drainage; and the number of roads and bridges increased. Trade was carried on with mounting profits, success having been aided by domestic improvements.

Agriculture prospered and as it prospered it took on a new aspect. The acquisition of land enabled newcomers to push into the ranks of the old aristocracy, which not only controlled both Houses of Parliament, but was also responsible for filling positions in all branches of the government. The

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9 Wood, op. cit., p. 4.
10 C. Smith, Tracts, p. 274; Appendix B., p. 130.
nouveaux riches were able to outbid the greatest of the neighborhood landowners. In many cases the new owners did not live on the land but farmed it out to tenants and collected rents. Those who chose to live on their newly acquired estates became leaders of society. Men in the cities left their trades and began to farm; physicians, clergymen, lawyers, merchants, soldiers, and sailors invested in land to make an easy fortune. "The farming tribe," wrote Arthur Young, "is now made up of all ranks from a duke to an apprentice."  

The cost of cultivation climbed as it became popular to grow corn on the worst land with the best turned to pasture. Obviously, expenses were involved in producing corn on the poor sandy soils in Norfolk, Nottinghamshire, Suffolk, Yorkshire, and Lincolnshire as enclosure rendered these lands cultivable. Rents were raised to compensate for rising costs and to ensure a maximum profit margin.  

After 1792, the rent increase in Scotland was "remarkable in the case of inferior soils, on which great improvements have been made." Rental lands of a "second or third rate quality" had advanced out of all proportion to the rents

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12 Hasbach, op. cit., p. 56

13 Cleghorn, op. cit., p. 15.
charged on the older naturally rich arable land.\textsuperscript{14} In spite of this, expansion of agriculture received encouragement.

John Sinclair and Lord Sheffield advocated that if all wastes, unenclosed and unproductive land were brought into cultivation, the country would be self-supporting. The Board of Agriculture\textsuperscript{15} pressed for a law to facilitate enclosures of waste land and open fields. Some economists argued enclosures would benefit agricultural workers.\textsuperscript{16} As more land came under tillage, it is true that food supplies were increased, which contributed substantially to the national wealth. However, the profits were going into the pockets of the landlords and big farmers while the small farmers were becoming poor, and the poor were becoming paupers.\textsuperscript{17} Agricultural progress appeared to have brought only disaster to the laborer.

A commissioner of enclosures "lamented that he had

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{15}Halevy points out the Board of Agriculture was headed by "two eminent agriculturists"—Young and Sinclair. Others were: Duke of Bedford, Lord Lonsdale, Thomas Coke of Holkam and Pulteney; it was "a sort of corporation" subsidized by the state enabling landowners to deliberate their economic interests and promote their policies. Halevy, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 224.


\textsuperscript{17}Barnes, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 74; George Macaulay Trevelyan, \textit{British History in the Nineteenth Century, 1782-1901} (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922), p. 147.
been accessory to injuring two thousand poor people at the rate of twenty families per parish." He further stated that "numbers in the practice of feeding on the commons cannot prove their right; and many, indeed most who have allotments have not more than an acre, which being insufficient for the man's cow, both cow and land are usually sold to the opulent farmers."\(^{18}\)

According to David Davies, who was Rector of Barkham in Berkshire for many years, and as abstracted from his book The Case of the Labourers in Husbandry published in 1795, the landowner united several small farms into one and charged exorbitant rents to meet increased living costs. The rich farmer through engrossing many farms obtained a maximum of credit and comfort as he reaped profits from his combined farms. As a result, thousands of dispossessed families were gradually reduced to a class of day-laborers. Many thrown out of work resorted to the parish for their sole support. While the number of farm families decreased, the poor families proportionately increased.\(^{19}\)

Lands which had been collectively cultivated for many years according to a common agreement were redistributed by


law and the narrow strips were grouped into allotments; those having holdings of poorer value sold out and emigrated. In this manner property passed into the hands of men with capital, and the movement was toward a concentration of landed property in the hands of a few. The yeoman with a small stake in the community was turned into a landless laborer seeking wages; if employment could not be found in the country, he headed for the town to work in the new factory. As the country villages became deserted, Oliver Goldsmith was prompted to write:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.

An investigation conducted by Mr. John Walter on "Inclosure of Waste Lands and Formation of a Peasant Propriet- ary" stated: "The enclosure of waste lands does not appear to have produced the improvement in the condition of agricultural labourers which some economists expected as a consequence of the measure." Walter checked Parliamentary Returns and found the "amount expended on the relief of the poor rose from about two millions sterling in 1793 to four millions in 1803, and more than six millions at the end of

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20 Halevy, op. cit., p. 218.  
22 Oliver Goldsmith, The Deserted Village, 1770.  
the war in 1815." He added that the increased poor rates and the expanded cultivation could be attributed to one and the same cause—the advance in the price of wheat. A corresponding rise in the price of the loaf of wheaten bread had raised the poor rate. The farmer with an eye toward profit extended his wheat acreage. Walter questioned the wisdom of converting such great quantities of pasturage into tillage apart from the consideration of the poor; he doubted if the advantage to the country would be lasting.

Between 1793 and 1809 about four and a half million acres of land came under cultivation in England and Wales. Some of this land was enclosed by amicable agreement between the principal landlord and the freeholders and was non-parliamentary in nature. Parliamentary records showed that the average enclosure bills per year from 1793 to 1804, inclusively, was 72 with 96 from 1805 to 1813. Each of these bills averaged an extension of over 1200 acres. Although enclosures were economically profitable, and furthermore, necessary to provide food supplies for the growing population, and at the same time to meet wartime needs, unquestionably, many

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
28 Cleghorn, op. cit., p. 10.
small farmers were injured by this movement.\textsuperscript{29}

However, perhaps too much credit has been given to enclosures and agricultural improvements for the distress of the poor. What about the rapid population increase that resulted in the nation requiring more food and more jobs? Did industrialization not play a part in developing a new pattern of life for many families? Small industry was removed from the home and taken to the city, thus forcing people to buy products that they had formerly made; many lost a source of income that supplemented farming. W. Cunningham, historian, stated that "the entire decay of domestic manufactures proved a ruinous loss."\textsuperscript{30} Movement of labor to towns where considerable manufacturing was carried on was inevitable. E. C. K. Gonner wrote in his very thorough treatment of \textit{Common Land and Inclosure}:

In connection with the assertion that people were driven into the towns, an assertion which had been made at different times, . . . it must be remembered that with the divorce between agricultural and industrial occupations, and the early growth of factory organisation, [sic] towns both by reason of the sole opportunity offered for manufacture and also of a growing and spacious difference in wage were beginning to exercise that force of attraction which subsequently becomes the great cause of rural depopulation.\textsuperscript{31}

A comparative study of population in proportion to acres of

\textsuperscript{29}Traill, \textit{loc. cit.}; Nicholson, \textit{loc. cit.}

\textsuperscript{30}Cunningham, \textit{op. cit.}, II, 390.

\textsuperscript{31}Gonner, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 442.
land (excluding cities and towns) before and after 1800 in the counties of Bedford, Berkshire, Buckingham, Cambridge, Huntingdon, Leicester, Northampton, Nottingham, Oxford, Rutland, and Warwick showed for the total only a slight decrease in the number of persons per acre. Some of the individual counties listed gains. Migration may be attributed to the fact that farm wages were not able to keep pace with industrial wages in the cities. Also, many small farmers were uprooted from the land, casualties of competition in a new age of capitalistic agriculture.  

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, drouth and famine, and rising prices coupled with the initiation of a despicable poor law system were to bring further complications to the lives of the English people. 

Wages and Prices 

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the common field farmer had been transformed into a wage earner. The rapid rise in the price of provisions during the last decade of the previous century intensified the severity of the economic and social conditions of laborers who had left the land. From insufficient wages they were forced to buy all commodities necessary for their livelihood.  

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32 Gonner, op. cit., p. 378.  
33 Hasbach, op. cit., p. 116.
Wheat had become a necessity of the poor, but it was also the source of productive strength to a nation in war. 34 Lord Sheffield stated "that the only means of rendering Great Britain independent of foreign corn was to give a monopoly of the home market to the farmers 'not merely for their emolument, but for our own safety.'" 35

According to the Annals of Agriculture, the season of 1791 had produced an excellent harvest; combined with a large importation of grain the price was reduced to 40s. lld. per quarter. Meanwhile, expansion of tillage was encouraged with an extraordinary stimulus given enclosures. It was feared if prices dropped any lower cultivation of wheat land recently brought under the plough would be discontinued. Therefore, protection was deemed necessary and the Corn Law of 1791 was passed. 36 It contained the following provisions concerning import and export: 37

Export:  At or above 46s. prohibited; 44s. to 46s. without bounty; under 44s. with 5s. bounty
Import:  At or above 54s. 2nd. low duty 6d.; 50s. to 54s., 1st low duty, 2s. 6d.; under 50s., high duty 24s. 3d.

In 1792 an "extremely wet summer" injured the wheat

34 Fay, op. cit., p. 7.
36 Prothero, op. cit., p. 89. 37 31 Geo. III, c. 30.
crop causing an inferior harvest; at Michaelmas\textsuperscript{38} the price per quarter had risen to 53s. 4d. As a result of the scarcity an order in Council was issued the 9th of November 1792, prohibiting exportation until spring. Then the Act of 1793 was passed to forbid exportation of all kinds of grain during the Parliamentary session; importation was allowed at the low duty.\textsuperscript{39}

The following year a series of financial crises began: the restriction of cash payments, fluctuations in the foreign exchange, the alternate rise and fall of the premium on gold, and fortunes made only to be lost in the Stock Exchange. Ricardo observed and analyzed these movements and tested his theories.\textsuperscript{40} By supporting them with a series of observations, he made a fortune as well. He applied the same methodology in analyzing the new agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing. However, his theories of value, wages, and rent did not approximate true agricultural and industrial conditions. Thus, many writers were led into erroneous exaggerations.\textsuperscript{41}

In his study, \textit{Work and Wages}, Thorold Rogers observed: "The elder Mill [James Stuart] endorsed the dismal and absurd

\textsuperscript{38}Michaelmas was the feast of St. Michael, Sept. 29th.

\textsuperscript{39}3 Geo. III, c. 3.

\textsuperscript{40}David Ricardo, English political economist, is known for his chief work entitled \textit{Principles of Political Economy and Taxation} written in 1817.

\textsuperscript{41}Traill, op. cit., V, 630-831.
theoerem of Ricardo that the production of food was obtained only in diminishing quantities by increased labour and his son [John Mill] insisted on it with pious zeal . . .” 42

A later writer, G. R. Porter, was nearer the truth when he theorized "the rate of wages adjusts itself but slowly to the varying necessities of the working classes as influenced by the seasons . . ." 43 The prices of most commodities with the exception of corn were lower in 1793 than in the two preceding years. The quotation of the Windsor Market was 54s. 1d. per quarter at Lady-day 44 1793, and the ports were opened under the Corn Law of 1791. The price the following Michaelmas fell to 45s. which, under the same law, closed the ports. 45 The seasons of 1794 and 1795 were very significant in the history of the grain trade. A hot and dry summer with excessive drought in 1794 resulted in crop deficiency. As the wheat from the south and midlands reached the market early and in excellent condition, the prices did not rise sufficiently to force a decrease in consumption. The following spring after an extremely severe winter, the country became alarmed when it was

42 Rogers, op. cit., p. 158.


44 Spring quarter day, March 25, when rents and accounts were due in England.

learned that grain supplies were almost depleted. Wheat prices rose from 55s. 7d. in January 1795 to 77s. 2d. in a six-months period.46

Great Britain took drastic measures; all neutral ships carrying wheat to France were seized; however, ample profit was paid to the proprietors for their cargoes. This accomplished a dual purpose; relief was provided at home simultaneous with bringing scarcity to the enemy.47

Unusually severe weather conditions—a cold spring with late frosts followed by a cool rainy summer—resulted in a late harvest in 1795. Regarding his wheat crop, Edmund Burke remarked: "On threshing, I found things as I expected—the ears not filled, some of the capsules quite empty, and several others containing only withered, hungry grain ..."48 Scarcity pushed the price to 108s. 4d. by August. Starvation prices caused the people of London, who held the war responsible, to attack the carriage of the King as he was on his way to Parliament, October 29, 1795. An object smashed a hole in the carriage window; as the mob pushed forward they screamed "Peace! Peace!"49

In the King's speech before Parliament that day the

46 Ibid., p. 181-182.  
47 Ibid.  
49 Parliamentary History, XXXII, 153.
King said:

I have observed for some time past with the greatest anxiety the very high price of grain; and that anxiety is increased by the apprehension that the produce of the wheat harvest, in the present year, may have not been such as effectually to relieve my people from the difficulties with which they have had to contend.  

Parliament discussed various remedies. Legislation was passed to purchase supplies from abroad; plans were made to buy 400 quarters of wheat and flour from Europe, and 500,000 quarters from America. The grain was to be imported in neutral vessels, and the measure to remain in force until September 30, 1796.  

Also, worthy of mention was the personal sacrifice the members of Parliament agreed to make; consumption of bread made from wheat would be reduced by one-third and all friends and acquaintances urged to do likewise.

The problems of the country grew more serious. Prices of commodities had risen in proportion to wheat and it was impossible for the working populace to live on their present wages. Rioting broke out among agricultural laborers when employers refused to raise wages to meet the cost of the essentials of life. Positive action was urgently needed.

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50 Tooke, op. cit., I, 183.

51 35 Geo. III, c. 4; Tooke, op. cit., pp. 184-185.

52 Parliamentary History, XXXII, 687-694.

53 Tooke, op. cit., pp. 185-186
However, a minimum wage was not fixed; allotments remained rare; radical changes did not occur in diets; supply and distribution remained uncontrolled. But the year of 1795 was to make an imprint on the minds of many people.54

The event occurred May 6, 1795 at the Pelican Inn at Speenhamland, for it was there that a policy was formulated that was gradually adopted throughout the country. This measure, synonymous with "rural pauperization," was the famous Speenhamland Act.55 Originally, the Berkshire Justices of the Peace with a few other men met to raise the laborers' wages and to free them from parish relief. These men observed that many parishes had not raised the laborer's weekly pay in accordance with the high prices of wheat and other commodities. Contrary to the original purpose of this group, it was decided to supplement the laborers' wages from the parish rates. The provisions were; When the gallon loaf of bread cost 1s., every "poor and industrious" man was to receive 3s.; the payment was to be from his work and the parish funds; he would also receive 1s. 6d. for each of the others in his family. Proportionate to the price of bread, the allowance would increase "on every penny which the loaf rises above a shilling" in the amount of 3d. for the man and 1d. per other family members. The ultimate failure of this plan brought into focus the

54Hammond, op. cit., p. 137.

A plan for a minimum wage was submitted a few months later by agricultural workers. First appearing in the Norwich newspaper and later reprinted in the *Annals of Agriculture* was the following:

At a numerous meeting of the day labourers of the little parishes of Heacham, Snettisham, and Sedgford, this day, 5th November, in the parish church of Heacham, in the county of Norfolk, in order to take into consideration the best and most peaceable mode of obtaining a redress of all the severe and most peculiar hardships under which they have for many years so patiently suffered, the following resolutions were unanimously agreed to:—1st. That—The labourer is worthy of his hire, and that the mode of lessening his distresses, as hath been lately the fashion, by selling him flour under the market price, and thereby rendering him an object of a parish rate is not only an indecent insult on his lowly and humble situation (in itself sufficiently mortifying from his degrading dependence on the caprice of his employer) but a fallacious mode of relief, and every way inadequate to a radical redress of the manifold distresses of his calamitous state. 2nd. That the price of labour should, at all times, be proportioned to the price of wheat, which should invariably be regulated by the average price of that necessary article of life; and that the price of labour, as specified in the annexed plan, is not only well calculated to make the labourer happy without being injurious to the farmer, but it appears to us the only rational means of securing the permanent happiness of this valuable and useful class of men, and, if adopted in its full extent, will have an immediate and powerful effect in reducing, if it does not entirely annihilate, that disgraceful and enormous tax on the public—the Poor Rate.

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57 Hammond, *op. cit.*; pp. 113-114.
Plan of the Price of Labour Proportionate to the Price of Wheat

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Price of Wheat per Last</th>
<th>Price of Labour per Day</th>
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<tr>
<td>14 l.</td>
<td>1s. 2d.</td>
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<td>16</td>
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The workers specified:

That a petition to parliament to regulate the price of labour, conformable to the above plan, be immediately adopted; and that the day labourers throughout the country be invited to associate and cooperate in this necessary application to parliament, as a peaceable, legal, and probable mode of obtaining relief; and in doing this no time should be lost as the petition must be presented before the 29th January 1796.

Unfortunately, their hopes were dashed by the Treason and Sedition Act, introduced by William Pitt that same month, which forbade public meetings and assemblies. No meeting exceeding the number of fifty persons could be held "for the purpose or on the pretext of considering or preparing any petition, complaints or declaration or other address to the King, or to both houses..." Scattered, and incapable of combined action with his fellow workers, the agricultural laborer believing every social force was against him, was left only with the law of parochial settlement and the allowance.

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58 Ibid. A last = 12 barrels. 59 Ibid. 60 36 Geo. III, c. 8. 61 Ibid.
Thorold Rogers wrote: "There is nothing in the history of civilisation [sic] more odious than the meanness of English landlords ... They have been abetted by the foolish farmers, and have finally sacrificed themselves to the rent-rolls of profligates and gamblers." As rising rents contributed to the growing prosperity of the landed interests, the distress among the working and poorer classes whose survival depended upon limited incomes was severe. The Annual Register, 1796, noted that "scarcity prevailed throughout the Kingdom and was woefully felt by the poorer sort, several of whom perished for want." Government action provided a measure of relief. Exportation of corn, meal, flour, and potatoes was prohibited until after the next session of Parliament; importation was duty free. The making of starch and hair powder from wheat was forbidden. The price of wheat per quarter fell to 76s. 9d., but in the spring of 1796, scarcity and fear pushed the price up to 100s. Importation of 800,000 quarters, combined with an abundant harvest reduced the average price to 57s. 3d. The decline continued until a

62 Rogers, op. cit., p. 144.
63 Annual Register, XLIII (1796), p. 9.
64 36 Geo. III, c. 3.
65 36 Geo. III, c. 6.
low of between 49s. and 50s. was reached in 1797. The prices varied only slightly during 1798. Then an early winter with heavy snows lasting late into the spring again started an upward movement of prices. Crops looked bad in May and the price further advanced. A cold wet summer and autumn resulted in crop destruction and prices climbed to 94s. 2d. by the end of the year, 1799. All other provisions rose in price the same period.

In order to check a nation-wide famine, Parliament initiated a relief program. The use of wheat or wheat flour by distilleries was prohibited in England and distillation from wheat, barley, other grain, meal, flour, or bran by distilleries was forbidden in Scotland. Exportation was suspended and free import allowed on all kinds of corn. To assist the poor in larger cities, public kitchens and soup houses were opened. Three other methods of fighting the distress were: (1) extension of the poor rates, (2) subscriptions for the purchase of wheat to be sold at cost to the needy, and (3) attempts to establish wheatless meals and days. The poor rate had risen £4,000,000 and yet, the people were starving.

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67Ibid., 213-214.
6839 and 40 Geo. III, c. 7, c. 8, and c. 9.
A Committee of the House of Commons recommended that all families use every power at their disposal to cut wheat consumption. Charity to the poor was to be given in rice, soup, or potatoes. The question of food for the poor took Cobbett's attention after his return to England in 1800.

He said that, rather than see the working people of England reduced to live upon potatoes, he would see them all hanged, and be hanged with them, and he would be satisfied to have written upon his gravestone: 'Here lies the remains of William Cobbett, who was hanged because he would not hold his tongue without complaining while his labouring countrymen were reduced to live upon potatoes.'

As far as Cobbett was concerned, potatoes were fit for only one thing—to be fed to animals.

The second great period of scarcity followed on the heels of the first. In February of 1800, Parliament reported on the Assize of Bread. A bill was passed prohibiting the sale of bread which had not been baked twenty-four hours before. The argument was that stale bread was more nutritious and also the expected saving would be from "one-eighth to one-third." Wheat had risen to 10s. 4d. by March. The Corn and Bread Committee made further recommendations: (1) making of starch to cease, (2) closing of distilleries, (3)

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regulation of the price of grinding wheat, (4) a bounty on grain imported from the Mediterranean, America, and the Baltic, (5) a bounty to the fisheries, and (6) removal of the duty on Swedish herring. These recommendations were immediately passed into law.72

The price of wheat continued upward; by July it had reached 134s. 8d.73 Bread riots broke out in many parts of England and Scotland. Petitions poured in begging "his majesty" to convene Parliament so that measures might be taken to alleviate the distress. The King summoned Parliament in November "out of a tender regard for the welfare of his subjects and a sense of the difficulties with which the poorer classes, particularly had to struggle."74 Subsequent debates in both Houses ascribed the high prices to the war, incompetent ministers, heavy taxation, bad seasons, and over-issuance of paper money. The Duke of Somerset recommended a review of the Corn Laws to determine whether amendment or repeal was in order. Then the Earl of Warwick proposed a price ceiling; the objective would be to bring prices in line with current wages. During the recent harvest he had observed that the farmers in his neighborhood were making as much as two hundred per cent profit. At the same time agricultural laborers were

72 Ibid.

73 Tooke, op. cit., I, 237; Barnes, op. cit., p. 85.

74 Annual Register, XLIII (1801), 2.
only receiving eight or nine shillings a week; the wage was so insufficient that "their families were actually starving." He suggested a limit on wheat of ten shillings per bushel. Lord Grenville stigmatized the proposal declaring it dangerous and extreme to propound such a measure.75

High prices in a time of war had intensified the severity of the economic conditions of the country. The people were crying for bread. It was declared in the House of Commons that "the denomination of the poor now extends half up the ranks of life: persons possessed of from 200l. to 700l. a year must now be classed among the poor."76 Sir Frances Burdett lashed out at the Pitt ministry; he blamed conditions on "those ministers who had squandered the public money," He said he had not far to look for the cause of the present distress. "It stared him in the face [looking at Mr. Pitt]. It was seated on that treasury bench."77

In the House of Lords, when a motion for peace was defeated, it was remarked: "Peace is essential to diminish the present Scarcity of Corn, for that although Scarcity may be produced by scanty Crops, yet that the Danger of impending famine is chiefly to be attributed to the War."78

75 Annual Register, XLIII (1801), 19-20.
76 Parliamentary History, XXXV (1800), 519-520.
77 Ibid., pp. 516-517.
78 House of Lords' Journal, XLII (1801), 378.
Beginning in February of 1800, rioting had spread to most sections of the country. In London, popular hatred was vented against forestallers, regraters, and engrossers. The people believed that the grain had been purchased when cheap and a holding action had resulted in the price rise. Those men who were convicted were prosecuted under the old Act of 1552. In Nottingham, "the food stalls in the market place were attacked; and granaries at the canal wharves were broken open. 'It was really distressing to see with what femine-impelled eagerness many a mother bore away corn in her apron to feed her off-spring,'"

The people were becoming desperate as they felt they could hope for no redress from constituted authorities. It looked as though the upheaval would surpass the years of 1795-1797 when the books King-killing and The Reign of George the Last had been popular. Local officers were alarmed in Romsey when the following notice was posted:

79Traill, op. cit., V, 670.

80Ibid.; Smart, op. cit., I, 5; Supra, p. 6. Although the Act was repealed in 1772, by a curious omission, it was possible to prosecute.

81Traill, op. cit., V, 670.

82Parliamentary History, XXXII (1797), 333.
DEATH TO TAKE THIS DOWN.
TAKE NOTICE

Bakers and Bigge Donns
and beware of fire and tongues
if you do not lower the bread
you will soon lose your blood

We dont care for your Volunteers
that will not put us in any fear
we will soon put the bakehouse in
one fire
if you dont lower it to our desire

and this is signed by,
we just one and twenty. 83

At Bath a poster announced: "Peace and Large Bread or a King
without a Head." 84 Such was the condition when "throughout
the country the glare of burning stacks and bakehouses
threw a vivid color over an exhausted nation." The quarten
loaf sold at 1s. 10½d. when at last peace was declared.
Then all was quiet. 85

On October 20, 1801, Cobbett wrote to Windham:

The King, upon reading the Preliminaries, lifted
his hands and eyes to heaven, and after remaining in
that attitude for some moments, dropped his hands upon
the paper with a heavy sigh, since which he has not
spoken to any living soul about the peace. The Duke
of Kent, and the Prince, and all the younger princes,
are shocked at the terms of this abominable peace,
and with you Sir, fully persuaded that the country
and the monarchy is exposed to great and almost imme-
diate danger . . . 86

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84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Letter from Cobbett to Windham, October 20, 1801
cited from Windham, op. cit., II, 176-177.
The question was: Could peace provide the solution to the country's economic crisis? An excellent harvest plus a large importation reduced average grain prices by the end of 1801.\(^{87}\)

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
75s. 6d. & \text{wheat} \\
44s. & \text{barley} \\
23s. 4d. & \text{oats}
\end{array}
\]

However, the decline in prices had started before the peace was signed and the treaty did not appear to have any real measure of influence on the price of grain. A comparison of averages for the preceding three year period was:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
1799 & 67s. 6d. \\
1800 & 113s. 7d. \\
1801 & 118s. 3d.
\end{array}
\]

The seasons of 1802 and 1803 were favorable and prices continued to decline:\(^{88}\)

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
52s. 3d. & \text{wheat} \\
22s. 9d. & \text{barley} \\
21s. 1d. & \text{oats}
\end{array}
\]

In 1804 the following prices were listed according to Gazette averages:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
49s. 6d. & \text{wheat} \\
22s. 9d. & \text{barley} \\
19s. 9d. & \text{oats}
\end{array}
\]

Never before had the price of wheat experienced such a great

\(^{87}\)The following grain was imported: Wheat, 1,424,766 quarters; Barley, 113,966; and Oats, 583,043. Tooke, op. cit., I, 237.

\(^{88}\)Ibid., p. 238.
fall in so short a period of time as from March 1801 to March 1804—155s. per quarter to 49s. 6d. 89

War hostilities had been renewed and war expenditures, accompanied by an increase of inconvertible Bank of England notes in 1804, made the price fall even greater than it appeared. Agriculture found itself again caught in a squeeze, but this time the landed interest was feeling the pain. Meetings were held to petition Parliament for remedies to solve agricultural distress. The answer to prevailing problems was introduced by Mr. Western in the House of Commons on May 5, 1804—a new Corn Bill! 90

89 Ibid., p. 256.
90 Ibid., p. 257; Supra, p. 72.
CHAPTER IV

FROM THE CORN LAW OF 1804

Cobbett and the Corn Law of 1804

Another of these laws is now passing, or has just passed. It was sincerely and devoutly to be wished, that conjugal love always burnt with as steady a flame as the love of law-giving.¹

Thus, Cobbett introduced his article on the "Corn Laws." Two years earlier he had written that the "multitude of laws had been, and with good reason reckoned amongst the greatest calamities of the French Revolution." He remarked: "There are a set of well meaning men . . . who would pass laws for the regulating and restricting of every feeling of the human breast and every motion of the human frame." The people of England would be bound "hair by hair as the Lilliputians did Gulliver till . . . when we awoke from our sleep, we should wonder by whom we had been enslaved."²

Only three or four years before, Corn Laws were passed "to prevent the exportation and lower the price of bread corn."³ Steps were now being taken by the government

¹"Corn Laws", Cobbett, Works, I, 516.


³Cobbett is referring to 39 and 40 Geo. III, c. 7 and c. 8, Supra, p. 61.
to reverse this policy. "Scarcity would not have been so severe," wrote Cobbett nor the "superabundance" so alarming "if courts of justice had never meddled with the matter."

He believed restrictions on exportation were removed "at a wrong time;" another wet season like 1799 could drive the quarterm loaf to a shilling before Christmas.  

Stimulated by high prices and accompanied by favorable seasons the harvest was the most abundant in England's history. Just as "the reins of power were put into his [Mr. Addington's] feeble hands," wrote Cobbett, "plenty began to return." Plenty had turned into an evil according to the government and the plan to lessen it was to pay a bounty from taxes.  

A brief peace terminated in 1803; England was again at war with France. Using the price of the loaf Cobbett made an analysis of the progress of plenty in peace and war as follows:  

| Peace | | War |
|-------|---------------|
| 1802  | 1st January   | 15. | 4d. | 1803 | 1st May | 9d. |
|       | February 1 | 0 | June | 9\frac{1}{2} | |
|       | March 10\frac{1}{2} | July | 9\frac{1}{2} | |
|       | April 11\frac{1}{2} | August | 9\frac{1}{2} | |
|       | May 9\frac{1}{2} | September | 10 | |
|       | June 10 | October | 10 | |
|       | July 10 | November | 10 | |
|       | August 10\frac{1}{2} | December | 9\frac{1}{2} | |
|       | September 10 | January | 9\frac{1}{2} | |
|       | October 10 | February | 9 | |
|       | November 10 | March | 8\frac{1}{2} | |
|       | December 9\frac{1}{2} | April | 8\frac{1}{2} | |
|       | January 9\frac{1}{2} | May | 8\frac{1}{2} | |

4Cobbett, Works, I, 516.  
5Ibid., p. 517.  
6Ibid.
Cobbett concluded:

How silly, then how stupid, was the cry of "peace and a large loaf!" And how scanty must have been the sense, or how abundant the baseness of those persons, who, calling themselves gentlemen, encouraged that cry! It was indeed the lowest of all political tricks: the most shameful means of sheltering themselves from public indignation: an appeal to prejudice, to ignorance, to selfishness, to laziness, and to gluttony, wherever they were to be found.7

Cobbett had maintained an uncompromising attitude to the Peace of 1802. As it followed, the Peace of Amiens was only a breathing-space in war hostilities, for when peace failed to alleviate distress, popular opposition to the war subsided.8 With the resumption of the war, Cobbett wrote a pamphlet entitled Important Considerations for the People of the Kingdom.9 He was again reminding the people of their cry of "peace and a large loaf," for it was not in a time of peace but during the continuance of war that the loaf had become large.10

Addington remained Prime Minister for about a year after renewal of the war. However, he did not have the

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7Cobbett, Works, I, 517.  
8Cole, Life, pp. 80-81.  
9Cobbett, Works, I, 304.  
10Cobbett wrote Windham July 20, 1804 calling his attention to the article which was to appear in the Register. Melville, op. cit., II, 211-212.
strength to provide leadership in a time of crisis. Pitt eagerly sought a return to power from the moment the peace ended. In May 1804, Pitt forced Addington's resignation and assumed office. A split resulted in the ministry; Pitt would have nothing to do with Fox and his followers. Grenville refused to take office without Fox and these men became the opposition. Pitt selected a new Cabinet from his own followers and from the former Addington government. Cobbett's attitude was influenced by this change, for his own political friends were now on the outside. Dislike of Pitt grew stronger, and Cobbett turned against the Tories.11

Squire Western, who introduced the Corn Bill of 1804, however, was a staunch Whig.12 He was a protectionist and a champion of the agricultural interest. He pointed out that it was impossible for the farmer to raise and sell corn at the same price as in 1791, the year the last regulative prices were established. A new measure was needed to prevent recurring scarcity, and to prevent thousands of acres from being deserted by the plough. Recommendations initiated by the House of Commons Committee, appointed in April "to consider . . . a Petition . . . for regulating the importation and exportation of corn and the payment of the duty on foreign corn imported, and of the bounty on British corn exported . . ." provided

11Cole, Life, pp. 82-83.
12Smart, op. cit., I, 94. Western was born in 1767, educated at Eton and Cambridge, and became Baron Western of Rivenhall in 1833.
the basis of the Bill. Among those serving on the Committee were: the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Castlereagh, Brome, and Corry. 13

The Committee studied the transition from scarcity to abundance and made a review of the Corn Law of 1791 to ascertain whether prices fixed at that time were adequate to meet existing conditions. It was reported that from 1791 to the harvest of 1803 corn prices had been quite irregular, but on the average the farmer had reaped a fair profit. The casual high prices had served as a stimulus to the agricultural industry bringing large tracts of waste land 14 into cultivation. This added to other causes, combined with the abundant harvests of the two previous years, had occasioned such a depression in the value of grain that it was feared agriculture would be discouraged unless Parliament took supporting action. The Committee recommended raising import prices to 63s. and 66s. and export prices to 48s. and 54s. per quarter. Viz: Below 63s. a prohibitory duty of 24s. 3d. was effective on imports; between 66s. and 63s., the duty was 2s. 6d.; and 6d. when above 66s.; exportation was prohibited when the price was at or above 54s.; and a bounty of 5s. was given on

13 House of Commons Journal, LIX (1804), 207.

14 Tooke, op. cit., I, 257. The number of enclosure bills were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1796</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
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<td>86</td>
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<td>1803</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1804</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
exportation when the price was under 48s. Henceforth, the aggregate average of the corn returns from the twelve maritime districts would regulate import and export prices instead of the individual district. 15

Actually, the Acts of 1791 and 1804 were to have the same significance wherein the points permitting free importation were raised; the *prima facie* was protection. Four reasons propounded necessitating higher regulatory prices in 1804 were: (1) the rise in the wages of labor, owing to the high cost of provisions (doubled within 30 years), (2) the general rise in prices, owing to the depreciation of money, which increased agricultural costs (Money had depreciated 13½ per cent.), (3) the increase in poor rates charged on the land (a rise of over £3,000,000 from 1783 to 1804), and (4) the desirability of assisting Ireland in securing the British market. 16

During a discussion of the bill in Parliament on June 20, 1804, Mr. Patterson spoke out in opposition. He claimed the poor rates were high because of allowances paid to military families; the high cost of provisions, also, was dependent upon temporary causes. He believed the prices of

15 *Parliamentary History*, XXXVI (1804), 365.

16 *Smart, op. cit.*, I, 94-95; *Cobbett’s Parliamentary Debates*, (1st series), II (1804), 780-781. Hereafter stated as *Parliamentary Debates*. 
corn and labor should be left to find their own level.\textsuperscript{17}

The fairness of the new method of regulating the price by the averages of the twelve districts was also debated. An objection was raised by Lord Stanhope who feared the bill would "fall heavily on the county of Lancaster," and other manufacturing counties that were dependent on foreign grain supplies.\textsuperscript{18}

Stanhope later expressed disapprobation on the grounds that poor rates and wages would increase proportionately as the farmers raised the price of grain. To encourage the growth of corn and decrease the price simultaneously, he proposed a counter measure: (1) public granaries in years of plenty which would provide food in years of scarcity and stabilize prices, (2) removal of all impediments to free warehousing of corn, (3) to encourage growth of corn and also to increase prices, "farmers should be forever discharged from the payment of all direct taxes, parish and county rates, cesses, dues, tythes, [sic] and parliamentary impositions whatsoever save only those rates of the nature of a penalty . . . "\textsuperscript{19} After expatiating for some time on the advantages of his resolution, he concluded his speech by a

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 783; cf. Annual Register XLVI (1804), 104-105.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19}Parliamentary Debates, II (1804), 1136-1138; cf. Annual Register, loc. cit.
motion "that the bill be rejected." Lord Mulgrave replied: "Thank God, very few persons now entertained the same principles with that noble earl... the resolutions just moved were useless, impracticable, and mischievous..." On this note the session adjourned.

The Corn Bill of 1804 was passed without further opposition. The effective date of the Act was to be November 15, 1804. The primary importance of this measure lies in the fact that it was a piece of class legislation rendered harmless only by the unusual circumstances that prevented its going into effect. The law was to remain inoperative until after the abundant harvest of 1813.

Immediately after the law passed, Cobbett published an article entitled "Price of Bread" in the Register emphasizing that "every law of that kind was injurious to the community, every law restraining, or granting a premium upon, either the export or import of corn." Cobbett continued:

The code of corn-laws and regulations present a mass of absurdities hardly to be equalled: and, what makes the matter worse they are absurdities which are characteristic of a shallow brain. One would think they had resulted from the deliberations of an assembly of shopkeepers and handicraftsmen. The nation has already paid dearly for those laws, to which no small portion of its present disgrace and danger may be fairly attributed, but it is very likely, that we shall soon experience effects more

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20 Ibid., pp. 1138-1139.
21 Ibid., p. 1143.
22 Fay, op. cit., p. 37; Barnes, op. cit., p. 89.
He criticized Pitt for insincerity and inconsistency; the Minister ascribed the rise in prices to the deficient harvest and at the same time insisted on the passage of a bill to maintain corn prices. Cobbett lashed out at Pitt:

Considering . . . the critical state of the nation, the Minister should have been cautious how he adopted any measure that might afford a plausible pretext for making the monarchy answerable for the effects of an unproductive season; he should have listened with great caution to the advice of contractors and corn-merchants, or to that other new race of beings who have sprung up from the dunghill of paper-money and who are called speculating farmers; yes, he should have listened to these persons with great caution, and even with distrust, when their object was to obtain a law evidently for the sole purpose of advancing their own interests, though the well-being of the whole nation should thereby be hazarded. Were I to allow that corn-laws, as they are quaintly termed, are at all necessary; and were it possible for me still further to allow, that, in times of plenty, it is wise for the people to tax the produce of their labour, I should then certainly say, that last Christmas would have not been an improper time for the passing of a law to open the ports for exportation; but, to pass such a law upon the eve of the harvest . . . of which no very favourable opinion was entertained . . .

The summer was rainy and damp. Cobbett observed the wheat crop showed signs of excessive blight. He remarked that the Law of 1804 would never operate at all except indirectly upon the supply of the speculator and "directly upon the minds of the people, who, though they see whole fields of wheat blackened with the blight; though they see the rain fall day after day, insisted on the passage of a bill to

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23"Price of Bread", Cobbett, Works, I, 517. Reprinted from the Political Register, August, 1804.

24Ibid., pp. 518, 519.
day rotting the crop on the ground, do still ascribe and will continue to ascribe, the rise of bread to the law lately passed by Parliament . . . "25 While the Bill was before the House of Lords, the price of wheat and bread had risen; stock had climbed the moment the Bill had been passed in the House of Commons. The Law had "already done mischief" although it was not to take effect until the middle of November.26 Cobbett attacked the Prime Minister on his lack of judgment in persevering a measure that could only be detrimental in view of the scanty harvest; it was based on abundant crops, a condition which did not exist. The law could only serve one group—the "greedy speculators." He argued that the cost of provisions would inevitably rise; a time of distress would result; and the government would be blamed.27

Cobbett brought to the attention of his readers the attempt by the Government to provide a solution to the previous scarcity: "in plunging and groping about after adequate causes for the late scarcity, the wiseacres of the board of Agriculture with Lord Carrington at their head" had arrived at two solutions which they formulated into recommendations—"the want of a general enclosure bill, and the want of a fixed compensation to the clergy in lieu of tithes in kind!" Cobbett accentuated that although the general enclosure bill had not been passed and the tithes had not been commuted, corn

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25Cobbett, Works, I, 519. 26Ibid. 27Ibid.
had become cheap again. He repeated that it had become "so much too cheap, that the parliament has passed a law to raise taxes upon the people to defray the expences [sic] of sending it out of the country!" He would not be surprised to see the above remedies propounded again should the quartern loaf rise to eighteen pence. 28

Some of Cobbett's predictions were to come true. The harvest of 1804 was very deficient owing to blight and mildew. A corn factor reported: 29

London, Oct. 30, 1804

From the general bad quality of the new wheat presented at Mark Lane, I am sorry to say that the injury from blight appears to have been more extensive than was supposed when I wrote you last. The best samples are inferior to last year's; and the great bulk of what has been yet produced will not yield more than two thirds of the fine flour which the average of last year produced. The consequence of this, the price of wheat has very considerably advanced, notwithstanding the considerable supply of foreign wheat which has been quickly brought to market.

The price had climbed: 30

From March 1804 49s. 6d. 22s. 8d. 19s. 9d.
To December 1804 86s. 2d. 43s. 10d. 26s. 1ld.

The rise came immediately after the effective date (November 15, 1804) of the Corn Law. Considerable dissatisfaction prevailed

28 Cobbett, Works, I, 522, 524, 525.

29 Tooke, op. cit., I, 262 quoting The Farmer's Magazine which contained many accounts of the results of the harvest, and the corresponding effect on prices.

30 Ibid.
among the people. The price climb continued through the winter months of 1804 and 1805. A petition condemning the recent Corn Law and requesting repeal was presented to the House of Commons by the manufacturers of Stockport.\textsuperscript{31} City officials, Chambers of Commerce, manufacturers, tradesmen, and laborers were represented by a series of petitions from Leeds, Manchester, Paisley, Leicester, Salford, Lanark, Bolton, Wigan, Middleton, and other towns. Complaints were made regarding the high prices of flour and "bread corn," and the high duties on the warehousing of grain. Many demanded repeal of the law. According to the Secretary of War, the petitioners were complaining of evils that had not come into existence, which to an extent was true. The computed averages showed the price of wheat at 92s. 4d.; this was considerably above the 54s. set by the Law of 1804 and the ports were closed to exportation.\textsuperscript{32}

Some of the corn factors admitted the cause of scarcity was because of crop failure:\textsuperscript{33}

Mr. John Dixon, cornfactor (who had stated his opinion that the first rise had been caused by the corn bill), was asked, 'Do you know of no other causes of the rise?' — Answer, 'I know of no other causes, except in allusion to the general blight, which was not

\textsuperscript{31}\textit{House of Commons Journal, IX (1805), 83.}

\textsuperscript{32}\textit{Ibid., pp. 97, 110, 115, 119, 161, 172, 174, 176, 201.}

\textsuperscript{33}\textit{Tooke, op. cit., I, 263 citing extracts of evidence collected in May, 1805.}
known till a few weeks before the harvest.'

Mr. Joseph Stonard, corn factor, said, 'I do apprehend that the advances from the 2d of July to the 6th of August were in consequence of the bill then before the house; that the subsequent advances arose from the unfavourable weather, and the apprehensions of a defective harvest.' 'Did you hear in the first week of July of the wheat harvest being likely to be defective?'—'I recollect on the second Tuesday in July, from the excessive cold rain, and from what I heard afterwards of its being pretty general through England, I believed that to be the cause of the great defect in the crop of wheat!'

Mr. Peter Giles, corn factor, said, 'I think wheat and oats advanced in July from 8s. to 10s. per quarter; but not wholly occasioned by the agitation of the bill.'

Crop failure had been sufficient to cause the rise in corn prices without the aid of the Corn Bill wrote Thomas Tooke. The writer also stated that the price rise could not be credited to the theories of currency and war demand. 34 Cobbett did not completely agree with this, for he continued to assert in the Register that the issuance of paper-money aided speculators in keeping the price of provisions high. 35

Corn Trade and the War

The price of wheat rose above 98s. 4d. a quarter in August 1805. Cold summer weather led to apprehension of another deficient crop. 36 In the month of July, Britain had imported great quantities of wheat. The Times (London) reported that never had such a great importation occurred in

34 Ibid., p. 265. 35 Cobbett, Works, I, passim.

36 Tooke, op. cit., I, 266.
"so short a space of time than took place last week. No fewer than 17 vessels of that valuable article have arrived . . . ." The October 21st Times stated that "the importation of wheat last week amounted to about 15,000 quarters." Not since 1800 and 1801 had England imported such large quantities of grain.

Economic forces instead of legislation were to determine grain prices for the remaining years of the war. The strain of war resulted in Pitt's death January 23, 1806. The ministry of All the Talents formed under Grenville, including Fox and Sidmouth, assumed control; the leader, Fox died in office that same year. A short time later, the Crown exerted its power and boldly cleaned house; Tory successors responsible for directing the remainder of the war were Perceval, Liverpool and Castlereagh. During the years that followed, a system of licenses by both belligerents were to control and regulate prices and terms

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37 The Times (London), July 19, 1805.

38 Ibid., October 21, 1805.


of the grain trade.\textsuperscript{42} Results of the battle of Trafalgar secured England from invasion; however, concurrently a period of acute social distress and commercial strain was inaugurated.\textsuperscript{43}

The Prussian Government had contributed to the difficulties by prohibiting British ships from entering its rivers or ports. This exclusion which affected the grain supply from the Baltic region, was further extended on November 21, 1806, by Napoleon's Berlin Decree.\textsuperscript{44} As the main source of foreign grain had been cut off, the slightly deficient drop in England in 1806 and wheat crop failure in Scotland in 1807 held the price above 66s, fixed by the Corn Law of 1804. During 1806, Sir John Newport's Act was passed; this Corn Law permitted free exportation of Irish corn to England and Scotland.\textsuperscript{45} The new measure also established a single ruling price based on the British system of averages. An order in Council was issued on January 7, 1807 which forbade trade with any country in the possession of France or with French

\textsuperscript{42} Fay, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 37.

\textsuperscript{43} Tooke, \textit{op. cit.}, I, 266; Traill, \textit{op. cit.}, V, 673. Mathieson, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 133-134.

\textsuperscript{44} Napoleon declared by his Berlin Decree the British Isles were in a state of blockade. No correspondence or trade was allowed between them and France nor "her dependent countries." Traill, \textit{op. cit.}, V, 708.

\textsuperscript{45} 46 Geo. III, c. 97.
The grain trade received another blow when following the bombardment of Copenhagen, the Danes closed the Sound. Then the Russians placed an embargo on English merchandise after the Treaty of Tilsit. The wheat crop of 1808 was excessively damaged by stormy, wet weather at harvest time. The operation of the Continental system was tightened; combined with the American Embargo the price of wheat remained between 80$ and 100$. Hopes for a good harvest in 1809 were shattered by continuous rains during the harvest which caused sprouting and mildew in much of the wheat. It was remarked that the grain was unfit for anything except the distillery, and distillation was forbidden. The plight of the British people appeared desperate. The government could not provide relief by legislative enactments, because it was useless to suspend laws against importation.

Late in 1809, relief came from an unexpected source. France had produced a bumper crop of wheat; prices had dropped so low that dissatisfaction was voiced by the farmers who were unable to pay their taxes. To bring relief to his country, and perhaps for other reasons, Napoleon offered to export wheat to England under a system of licenses. Although a heavy

46 Traill, op. cit., V, 673.

47 Tooke, op. cit., I, 267–271.

48 Ibid., p. 268. Contemplating a serious shortage of food, a House of Commons Committee recommended this law be passed in 1808.
export duty was charged the British government, vessels were granted licenses by Great Britain to transport the grain from France. Two million quarters shipped from France were indeed welcomed by the British people. Enormous imports combined with a fair crop in 1810 resulted in a drop of 25s. to 30s. in the price of wheat between August of 1810 and June of 1811. Importation had averaged 600,946 quarters of wheat and flour per year for the previous nine-year period.  

Foreign trade evolved into a type of gambling; it was impossible to anticipate Napoleon's next move or its effect on prices. Therefore, when the Spanish Colonies in South America became independent, and vast markets were unexpectedly opened to British trade, speculation sky-rocketed. Over fifteen millions in loans on discount were held by the Bank of England in 1809 and the figure of twenty millions was reached in 1810 with substantial security not being required. A flood of bankruptcies occurred the following year. The Government intervened and the Chancellor of the Exchequer issued six millions in Exchequer Bills.  

The year of 1810 had been especially severe for Great Britain. In addition to a harvest failure the previous year,  

49 Parliamentary Debates, XV (1811), 396; Barnes, op. cit., p. 91; Smart, op. cit., I, 198; Tooke, op. cit., I, 298. The home supply was sufficient to furnish an average of eight bushels per person for 11,168,779, but the total mean population for the period had climbed to 11,769,298.  

50 Traill, op. cit., V, 828-829.
rot had caused a considerable loss of sheep. By the month of August, hay was selling for 51 per load; wheat was 116s. per quarter; wool brought 2s. 1d. per pound; beef and mutton were 8½d.; and cheese sold for 8d. Famine was thwarted only by immense imports of wheat in the amount of 1,567,126 quarters. July and August of 1811 were rainy and cold and by August 1812, the average price of wheat had reached 159s. The finest quantities were bringing 180s. at Mark Lane. Strangely enough, the enemy again provided relief; imports began to pour into England from France.

Prices had remained high for some time and landlords and farmers assumed this condition would continue; rents had risen with some having increased fivefold since 1790. Land speculation became general; many risked their property as huge sums were invested in improvements and lands. The mercantile system was in command as capital and labor were jointly applied to wring produce from the soil; worthless ground was planted with corn and fine pastures were surrendered to the plough.

However, the stage had been set; it was time for a repeat performance of the unfortunate experience of 1792-1801. Scarcity of grain resulted in the Acts of 1809 and 1810; the Crown was granted the right to suspend exportation

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51Tooke, op. cit., I, 323. 52Curtler, op. cit., p. 243.
54Hasbach, op. cit., p. 175.
and allow free importation. Prohibition of grain for distillation purposes was extended to December 31, 1810; then it was re-enacted on February 7, 1812 to remain in force a year; subsequent legislation extended this Act to December 31, 1813. Once more, Parliament forbade starch or hair powder to be manufactured from wheat or food products. A series of poor harvests saw the country again in the depths of distress.\(^55\)

From 1805 until 1813 the Corn Law policy had faded into the background. After the petitions against the Act of 1804, Parliamentary speeches, pamphlets, Annual Register and newspaper accounts are few. This, of course, may be ascribed to Napoleon's Continental System which closed off the principle grain supplies as Great Britain struggled for survival. Under emergency measures exports had been forbidden and imports permitted duty free. From 1808 to 1813, the average price of wheat remained above 96s. per quarter.\(^56\)

\(^{55}\) The Acts referred to include 49 Geo. III., c. 27, 50 Geo. III, c. 19, 50 Geo. II., c. 5, 52 Geo. III., c. 3, 52 Geo. III, c. 127, and 53 Geo. III, c. 7.

\(^{56}\) Barnes, op. cit., p. 92; Tooke, op. cit., II, 398. The mean price for each of these years from 1808 to 1813 was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1808</td>
<td>85s. 3d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1809</td>
<td>106s. Od.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>112s. Od.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1811</td>
<td>108s. Od.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1812</td>
<td>118s. Od.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1813</td>
<td>120s. Od.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Select Committee of 1813

There was no prospect of relief from scarcity or famine prices when a Select Committee of the House of Commons was appointed to "enquire into the Corn Trade of the United Kingdom." Their report was issued on May 11, 1813. As this committee was later to achieve a degree of importance it is imperative to have some knowledge of its origin. No record of the appointment of the Committee or of a reason for its origination can be located in the Parliamentary Debates. A check of the House of Commons Journals revealed that on March 22, 1813, a Select Committee was proposed to inquire into the Corn Trade of Ireland; an amendment changed the word "Ireland" to "United Kingdom." A total of thirty-three members served on this committee; twenty-seven were added at a later date. Sir Henry Parnell was Chairman; others were Castlereagh, Vansittart (Chancellor of the Exchequer), Peel (Chief Secretary for Ireland at this time), Huskisson, Newport, Canning, Gratton, Baring, Wellesley-Pole, Thornton, and Giddy. The Committee was criticized by Lord Archibald Hamilton during the first debate of 1813. He declared they were men who by the nature of their background and positions would not have an accurate knowledge or understanding of the subject under

57 House of Commons Journal, LXVIII (1813), 337.
58 Smart, op. cit., I, 373; Barnes, op. cit., pp. 117-118. Sir Henry Parnell was an Irish landlord.
investigation. The interests of Ireland were paramount as the Committee was planned.

From the debates of 1814, it is apparent that the Irish merchants desired to open their ports; they expressed bitter opposition to the existing restrictions on exportation. Parnell pointed out that the previous autumn numerous orders could have been filled for Irish grain in South America. In fact, Ireland desired to develop a world-wide market. The quantities of imports appeared to take pre-eminence in the first committee report as reference was made to a tabulation of the total foreign grain imported for a 21-year period. The Report opened by saying that "what first attracted the attention of your Committee . . . was that the value of foreign corn imported into Great Britain during that period 1792-1813 amounted to £58,634,135; that the average price for the same period has been 77/3; and that the average price . . . the last four years has been 105/5."

The Committee had examined all the Corn Laws. They studied means for increasing production that would enable the country to be self-supporting. It was recommended that the

59 Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, XXVI (1813), 662. Hereafter stated as Hansard. After 1812, Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates became the property of Hansard, Cobbett's printer.

60 Ibid., XXVII (1814), 708.

61 Ibid., p. 716.

62 Smart, op. cit., I, 374.
growth of tillage which had taken place during the previous ten years be further increased by expanding cultivation to the grass lands. Attention was brought to the fact that Ireland had in the past five years supplied one-third of England's corn imports valued at £6,500,000; this was made possible by an astonishing increase in the growth of corn in Ireland as she had only furnished one-seventh of this amount during the previous sixteen years.63 Historian, C. R. Fay made the observation that the report did not clarify that Ireland had supplied mainly oats, while wheat and flour were imported from foreign markets. Fay said that it was obvious that the Committee was attempting to "dress the Irish corn export in a wheat setting" as "wheat was the national food-stuff."64 The Committee was no doubt refering to wheat when they stated that limited production in England had resulted in the deficient corn supply and consequent high prices.

After an analysis of the production situation in Ireland and England, the Committee gave their deduction from a study of the Corn Laws. Between the years of 1670 and 1765 "the several laws together formed a system for regulating the corn trade upon the principles of restraining importation and encouraging exportation." Conversely, the system, after 1765

63 Smart, op. cit., I, 374.

64 Fay, op. cit., p. 3. Information from the Custom House records showed 334,886 barrels of wheat exported from Ireland in 1813 and 1,058,325 barrels of other grain.
had encouraged importation, and discouraged exportation by either prohibiting or limiting bounties. It was observed from 1701 to 1764 "prices were steady and moderate"; the average price was 33s. 3d.; between the years 1769 and 1794 the average price was 44s. 7d.; while in a nine-year period from 1804 to 1812 inclusive, the price was 88s. 1ld. Great Britain, under the former system, produced sufficient corn for home supply and exported considerable quantities to foreign markets. However, the latter Corn Law policy found the country unable to supply her people and out of necessity relying on vast imports. Based on these findings the committee concluded:

The various evils which belong to so great an importation from foreign countries, to so great an expenditure of our money, in promoting improvement and cultivation of those countries at the loss of a similar extent of improvement and cultivation of our own, and to the established high prices of corn, are so numerous and so mischievous, that everyone will readily allow they are deserving of the serious attention of Parliament.65

They recommended the expediency of returning to the principles abandoned in 1765 in view of the "strong coincidence of plenty and low prices with a system of restricted importation, and of scanty supply and high prices with the contrary system."66 In view of this the committee proposed six resolutions: (1) repeal of the duties and bounties payable under the law of 1804;

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65 Smart, op. cit., I, 375, quoting Report from the Select Committee appointed to enquire into the Corn Trade of The United Kingdom (ordered to be printed 11th May, 1815).

66 Ibid., p. 377.
(2) division of Ireland into four maritime and four inland districts for the purpose of taking corn prices and sending these to the Receiver of Corn Returns; (3) regulation of export and import prices by the twelve maritime districts of England, four maritime districts of Scotland and four maritime districts of Ireland; (4) no exportation if the price of wheat was above 90s. 2d. a quarter (5) a high duty of 24s. 3d. payable on imports if wheat was under 105s. 2d., a duty of 2s. 6d., when prices were between 105s. 2d. and 135s., and if at or above 135s. 2d., a duty of 6d.; and (6) no foreign flour or meal was to be imported into Great Britain. 67

According to Smart, "the most charitable judgment that could be passed on such a Report is that it was disingenuous." 68 It is also interesting to look at the method of obtaining the information on which the resolutions of the report were based.

First, five questions were mailed to the Board of Agriculture and the Farming Society of Scotland. Second, evidence was gathered from five witnesses. (Italics mine.) They were: Edward Wakefield who was the only one mentioned by name, an Irish civil engineer and corn miller, an Irish distiller and corn merchant, an Irish farmer, and the fifth answered questions only on the subject of freight rates between Ireland and

67Hansard, XXVI, 659, 660, 661. The export price was to be readjusted February 1, each year determined by the adding of one-seventh to the previous 20 years. Import prices were to be fixed each February 1, by the Receiver of Corn Returns according to the averages.

68Smart, op. cit., I, 377.
England. The fourteen pages of evidence related only to Ireland and consisted "mainly of speculative opinions" for increasing Irish corn production. Sir Henry Parnell, chairman of the Committee, first presented the Report on June 15, 1813.

Parnell did not have long to wait until, without legislation, the so-called problem of under-production in England was to vanish. The abundant harvest of 1813 exceeded all expectations. The markets were flooded with grain and by December the price had fallen to 73s. This was more than a fifty per cent drop from the 155s. recorded average for August of 1812. The crash came. Enormous land investments had depended on a continuance of the high prices. The fall in prices immediately changed the agricultural industry from a state of prosperity to a condition of severe depression. The farmer was unable to meet his commitments. Lord Ernle wrote:

Bankers pressed for their advances, landlords for their rents, tithe-owners for their tithe, tax-collectors for their taxes, tradesmen for their bills. Insolvencies, compositions, executions, seizures, arrests and imprisonments for debt multiplied. Farmhouses were full of sheriffs' officers. Many large farmers lost everything, and became applicants for pauper allowances...

Furthermore, while the government was making the largest war-time expenditures in an effort to wipe out Napoleon and his

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69 Smart, op. cit., I, 378. 70 Hansard, XXVI, 644.

71 Tooke, op. cit., II, 32.

72 Ernle, op. cit., pp. 322-323.
forces, the great fall in corn prices had occurred.\footnote{Tooke, \textit{op. cit.}, I, 341.} At a time least expected—in a wartime economy—came the inception of the most serious depression England was ever to experience. It was only a brief time until many of the people were clamoring for a new Corn Law.
CHAPTER V

FIGHT AGAINST THE CORN BILL OF 1815

Evolution of the Bill

Panic seized the farming community in 1814. Demand for the abundant crop of the previous year had not materialized. England had become a dumping ground for foreign grain which poured into the harbors at the rate of a hundred thousand quarters a week. The price of corn continued downward, but the cost of horses, stock, implements, and labor remained high. Landlords demanded relief; they wanted assurance that the competition of the foreign farmer would not drive the price of corn to an even lower level.¹

On May 5, 1814, Sr. Henry Parnell started the debates on the Corn Laws in the House of Commons by coming forward with the following resolution: "That it is expedient that the exportation of corn, grain, meal, malt, and flour, from any part of the United Kingdom should be permitted at all times, without the payment of any duty, and without receiving any bounty whatever."² George Rose immediately objected and reminded those present that the new resolution differed from those forwarded by Parnell last year. He further denounced

¹Smart, op. cit., p. 408. ²Hansard, XXVII (1814), 665.
the proposal as being "seriously injurious to the best interest of the country." The measure would sweep away a system of laws that had been in operation for a period of almost five hundred years. He added that "no proceeding of any sort" should be based on the report submitted last year, which was filled with inaccuracies and inconsistencies.

Rose was astonished at the prior resolutions; it was his understanding that the Select Committee headed by Parnell was inquiring into the internal corn trade of Ireland. He declared, "I had not the remotest apprehension of any innovation respecting the corn-laws of the country generally till I heard the resolutions moved." Rose was willing to concur with any proposal to improve agriculture in Ireland, if such measures were necessary but he hoped that it could be accomplished without bringing danger to the "whole empire." The secrecy under which the Committee had been working and the haste with which they were urging for legislation was contrary to established principles. Disturbed by the Committee action, Rose came prepared to present his argument. "The subject is a dry one," he remarked, "but as it affects all descriptions of people in the Kingdom, I trust I shall be permitted to go fully into it . . ." His lengthy speech

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3Ibid., p. 666.
4Ibid., XXVI, 659-661; Supra, pp. 91-92.
5Ibid., XXVII, 668. 6Ibid., p. 670. 7Ibid., p. 667.
continued with a review of the conditions surrounding proposals leading to corn legislation, a resume of methods and length of time involved in considering and approving the major corn bills, and a summary of each Corn Law enacted since the year of 1225. A complete account of corn prices taken from Eton College records was presented; he criticized the committee for their erroneous use of *Tracts on the Corn Trade* for price information.\(^8\) Earlier prices were based on the nine-gallon bushel; however, in the year of 1792 an act was passed adopting the eight-gallon bushel.\(^10\) Prior to 1792 it would be necessary to deduct one-ninth from the price in order for the statistics to be consistently accurate. Mr. Chalmers whose prices were also referred to appeared to have subtracted two-ninths from the Windsor price.\(^11\) Rose accused Parnell of not providing the proper guidance which was ordinarily required of the chairman of a committee making an inquiry.\(^12\) After exposing the fallacies of the report and pointing out the instances of flimsy evidence, Rose gave his views on the Corn Laws. He maintained that the corn grower required protection to the extent of insuring a price sufficiently high to pay his rent and obtain a reasonable profit.

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\(^{10}\) 31 Geo. III, c. 30.  
\(^{11}\) *Hansard*, XXVII, 677.  
but after this was accomplished the consumer should have the assurance of adequate supplies and "at a price not exceeding the protecting one." The application of this dual principle demanded regulation of both importation and exportation. He accused the committee of attempting to captivate the consumer with promises of cheap bread through increased cultivation, while at the same time raising price levels against importation and reducing those for exportation to assure the producer a higher price for his corn. No one would be misled by this incongruous policy. Rose urged against the report in his closing remarks; he appealed to the members of the House to proceed "in a manner consistent with the infinite importance of the subject."

Parnell "stepped boldly forward" to defend his position, with an equally long and tedious speech. He began by stating that when the committee was first appointed, the object was the examination of the Corn Laws of Ireland. Afterward, when the investigation was extended to Great Britain, "those members who were added to it were perhaps selected without due consideration." He denied the inaccuracies and careless work of his committee, pointing out that "Mr.


14 Hansard, XXVII, 707.

15 Ibid., pp. 708, 709.
Chalmer's work was one of great accuracy and research. ¹⁶

Parnell claimed that artificial conditions created by the war made it impossible for the agricultural interest to survive a heavy importation of foreign corn. He opposed unrestrained importation of grain as the purchasing power of the landed interest would be reduced; manufacturing and trade would suffer. Although regulations would palpably raise the price of corn, he did not anticipate a subsequent wage rise. In the ensuing discussion, Parnell used as the basis of his arguments Adam Smith's three exceptions to free trade which were: (1) domestic goods which were taxed should result in equal taxes on similar imported goods; (2) a high duty should not suddenly be removed from an import commodity; and (3) an industry essential to the national defense required protection. The proposed changes in regulation of corn importation were justified, said Parnell, under all three of these exceptions. He gave some opinions regarding former corn legislation. The purpose was to secure a plentiful supply and low prices by giving protection to the farmer which encouraged additional land to be brought under cultivation. He felt that both the interest of the consumer and producer had been protected and promoted in the past. ¹⁷ Following the conclusion of the

¹⁶Ibid., p. 710.

discussion a vote was taken on Parnell's resolution. It was
approved. A second resolution was then presented:

That the several duties, now payable in respect
of all corn, grain, meal, and flour imported into
the United Kingdom should cease and determine, and
that the several duties in the following Schedule
shall be paid in lieu thereof: —18

Quebec, British Colonies or North America

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Per Qr.</th>
<th>Rye, Beans and Peas</th>
<th>Barley, Beer, Bigg</th>
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Other Foreign Countries

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<th>Rye, Beans and Peas</th>
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Huskisson offered an amendment to this resolution stating "the
fluctuation of price was an evil." His recommendation was
that the present price of 63s. should be retained as the point
at which the prohibitory duty of 24s. 3d. would be effective,
and as the price of corn rose an equivalent amount should be
subtracted from the duty. For example, when the price of corn
per quarter was 64s., the duty would be 23s. 3d.; the duty
would diminish in a corresponding proportion until the price
of wheat reached 86s. At this point the duty would be

18Hansard, XXVII, 722. "Bigg" is a variety of barley.
automatically eliminated. Members of the House of Commons affirmed the new amendment, although many strongly objected.\(^{19}\)

The measure as amended appeared too weak to provide the British farmer against an influx of foreign corn. When the debates were resumed, May 13, it was ordered that a bill be drafted on the first resolution; and three days later Vansittart, Chancellor of the Exchequer presented the bill for the first reading. The substance of the measure was that exportation of grain and flour should be permitted from any part of the United Kingdom at all times without duty or bounty.\(^{20}\)

Rose expressed his concern for "the monstrous mischief with which the Bill was likely to be attended."\(^{21}\) His speech of May 5, published in pamphlet form had been presented to members of the House. Mr. Coke of Norfolk held a copy in his hand. He ridiculed the speech "as rather malicious, if not seditious." This was followed by a laugh.\(^{22}\) Mr. Western voiced surprise at the doctrines "in the pamphlet or speech of the right hon. gentleman." Although it was not "openly seditious" he asserted it was "an artful but unjust mode of reasoning."\(^{23}\)

Western continued to speak. He gave a recapitulation

\(^{19}\)Ibid., p. 723.

\(^{20}\)Hansard, XXVII, 723, 879, 891.

\(^{21}\)Ibid., p. 891. \(^{22}\)Ibid., pp. 891-892.

\(^{23}\)Ibid., p. 894.
of the Acts of 1670, 1773, 1791 and 1804. He had never regarded the interests of the corn grower as separate from the welfare of the consumer. It was important, however, to maintain a fair average price for the grower. To accomplish this, he advocated bounties which would promote the demand beyond the actual necessity of the people. The interest of the landed class remained foremost in the mind of Western.

When the House re-assembled the following day, May 17, Western expressed disapproval of the graduated scale advocated by Huskisson's amendment. He felt it would not offer adequate protection. The decision was then made to drop the amendment and accept the resolution in the original form.

On May 18, it was voted to have a bill brought in based on the resolutions. Petitions had started to arrive from all parts of the kingdom. For the first part of the year over 170 petitions opposing the measure were recorded by the Journal of the House of Commons. Therefore, it was deemed wise to postpone action on the measure for another six months. Rose requested on May 20 that a committee be appointed to make additional investigations as there was not

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24Western was author of the Corn Bill of 1804.
27Supra, p. 100  28Hansard, XXVII, 955.  29Ibid.
30Barnes, op. cit., p. 126.
31Smart, op. cit., I, 414.  32Barnes, loc. cit.
sufficient evidence to proceed, and further action should be deferred for a year. His recommendation was defeated.\textsuperscript{33} Rose endeavored three days later to attach a clause to the pending bill setting a price at which corn could be exported. The clause was rejected and on May 23 the bill passed the House of Commons as follows: "that all foreign corn, grain, meal, and flour should at all times be imported and warehoused free of all duty, until taken out for home consumption; and should at all times be exported free of all duty."\textsuperscript{34} With this first alteration in the Corn Laws freedom of export had been secured for the Irish landowners. The initial step had been taken toward a total revision of the Corn Law system.

The Times of London that same day contained the following:

In my former remarks, I predicted that if the present measures for making a total alteration in the Corn Laws were persisted in, in the spirit then shown, a very few days would see the tables of the two Houses of Parliament covered with petitions . . . yet there are persons so desperate that they would endeavour to force on the measures alluded to, not only by precipitation, but by intimidation. They would brand every opposition to an unreasonable monopoly of the public food with the name of sedition.

They have even dared to stigmatise as seditious the conduct of a gentleman whose long and laborious public life leaves us in doubt which most to admire, the

\textsuperscript{33}Hansard, XXVII, 994.

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., p. 1010. This bill became the Corn Law of 1814, passed the Lords June 13, and received the royal assent June 27. 54 Geo. III, c. 69.
hardihood or the folly of the slanderer. This violent and factious calumny, I trust, will not deter any upright servant of the public from doing his duty. The true sower of sedition urges the precipitate adoption of measures, which must of necessity throw the whole empire into confusion, and render the landowners of the country objects of suspicion and hatred to the manufacturing and mercantile interests, without any real benefit to the great body of the agricultural population. . . .

During the evolution of the Corn Bill, Cobbett began writing a series of articles in the Register. The first of these entitled "Corn Laws" appeared in May. Cobbett wrote: "this subject would require greater space than I am able to allot to it. So much nonsense had been published about protecting the farmer; so much unparalleled trash, that I hardly know where to begin." As a corn grower, Cobbett opposed protection. The price was determined not by regulations or laws but by the size and quality of the crop. He adduced if the prices of 1792 were to be restored, taxes should first be adjusted according to the standard of 1792. Taxes that year were under fourteen millions while the amount raised in taxes had climbed by 1813 to sixty-nine millions. The tax force came out of the consumer's pocket, for those who ate the loaf paid the tax. It was necessary for the price of wheat and tax on wheat products to rise to meet payments on the

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35 The Times (London) May 23, 1814. This is a portion of the same article Cobbett reprinted in the Political Register also in May.

36 Cobbett, Works, IV, 303.
government debt. Cobbett alleged that the only one to profit
by the rise in prices and receive the gain would be the
Government. Mr. Coke and other advocates of the bill were
operating on an erroneous assumption for their endeavors
would not result in the protection of the farmer but of the
"fundholder". Cobbett declared: "I am no advocate for the
law that is now pending." 37

The question of Corn Law revision was re-opened on
February 17, 1815 in a series of nine resolutions based on
the recommendations of the House of Commons Committee. Frederick John Robinson, also known as Viscount Goderich, Robinson,
Vice President of the Board of Trade, introduced the resolu-
tions stating that the extensive investigations since the pre-
ceding year had eliminated former prejudices and misrepresenta-
tions. He was convinced that all classes would benefit from
the protection of the home market; he denied the plan was a
class measure. A summary of the nine resolutions was as fol-
lows: foreign corn and flour imported and warehoused free of
duty; grain could be sold from warehouses when the price allow-
ing importation was reached; fixed price was 80s. for wheat,
55s. for rye, peas, and beans, 40s. for barley, beer or bigg,
and 26s. for oats; if prices fell below these points, no im-
portation permitted until a new average was taken from the

37 Ibid., p. 304.
returns; and corn from the North American Colonies was admitted at 67s. instead of 80s. with the price of other grains also lowered.\textsuperscript{38}

The debates in the House of Commons focused primarily on the problem of the Corn Laws from the introduction of the resolutions until the tenth of March. Arguments increased in intensity as debates lasted into the night, and sometimes continued into the early morning hours. Finally all the resolutions were passed and the bill was drafted. The first reading was on March first and the second on March third. Both in Parliament and outside the opposition continued to fight.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{Cobbett's Correspondence}

Cobbett wrote a letter to Mr. Coke which was published in the \textit{Register} advising him to leave the passage of the Corn Law to those who favored "raising great sums of taxes from the produce of corn."\textsuperscript{40} Coke's position on the measure had lowered the people's estimation of him and opened him to public attack. Cobbett told him: "If the Ministers thought, that, by passing a law, they could keep up the price of corn, they, upon that notion, acted wisely; because they, by keeping up the price of corn, kept up their taxes; and they discovered no

\textsuperscript{38}\textit{Hansard}, XXIX, 806-808.

\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 808-813, 831, 960-961, 978-989.

\textsuperscript{40}\textit{Cobbett, Works}, IV, 321.
little address in getting the landowners for their allies. The landlords would finally share the blame and bear the brunt of the attack; they would be the losers. Cobbett urged Coke to seriously consider the outcome of the measure.

Cobbett addressed a letter to "My Worthy but Deluded Neighbours" who were in the process of framing a petition against the Corn Bill. He criticized the petition as being based on erroneous resolutions. He objected to the proposed bill and told them that all such laws in his estimation were useless and injurious to the country. He wanted the people of Southampton to realize that their resolutions were not focused on the "true causes of the distress." Cobbett explained that the association of the high price of corn with the war period implied that they believed that corn was less expensive during a time of peace. Many had fallen into that error. The only connection between peace and plenty was the "connection between peace and fruitful seasons." Cobbett asked:

What does plenty mean? Why: abundance proportioned to our wants. And what can possibly make the time more abundant than another, except the difference in the seasons? Will any one say, that the blights or the mildews pay any respect to peace or

\[\text{\textsuperscript{41}}\text{Ibid.}, \ pp. \ 323-324.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{42}}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 324.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{43}}\text{Ibid.}, \ pp. \ 306-307.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{44}}\text{Cobbett, Works, VI, 308.}\]
war? Was it peace that gave us the feeding showers, the hot suns, the fine harvest of last year? Or is it war which has given us the cold dry winds of this last month of May, and the white frosts which we have had, until within these four days? Does peace give us greater quantities of apples and peaches than war does? Why, then, should it give us greater quantities of corn? . . .

Cobbett reviewed the conditions of the country after the restoration of peace in 1801. "Mr. Addington had given us PEACE and PLENTY . . . Bread had been dear in the last two years of the war; and, the moment peace was made, it became cheap. These two facts were put together, and the point was settled for ever." For some reason, the actual cause of plenty, the abundant harvest of that year, had been overlooked. Cobbett gave a list of the average prices of the quartern loaf in periods of peace and war from 1750 to 1804 and pointed out that only in one instance was the loaf higher during war. He again emphasized that far too much attention had been paid to the "stupid notion" that peace brought plenty in 1801.

For several pages, he continued his criticism of the Southampton petition, tearing apart the resolutions statement by statement. In conclusion, Cobbett stated he would gladly have joined in a petition against the bill, "but I cannot put my name to a mass of heterogenous matter, the offspring of ignorance and the

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., pp. 308-309.
source of delusion." 48

The letter was answered, but not in the manner Cobbett expected. The answer came in the form of three "most abusive anonymous letters." One correspondent referred to Cobbett's prison term at Newgate; Cobbett failed to understand how this tied in with his arguments on the Corn Bill. The other writers did not appreciate his efforts to correct their erroneous opinions. If the people of Southampton chose to reject these arguments, Cobbett suggested they could attack Mr. Huskisson who had made the same statements in Parliament. The main reason Cobbett opposed the legislation, he replied to his correspondents, was that the public would be turned against "landlords, farmers, miller, and bakers, and have thus taken their attention away from the real causes of public distress." 49

Cobbett attacks the Report of the Committee of the House of Lords on Corn Bill

In September, 1814, Cobbett obtained a copy of the Report of the House of Lords Committee whose objective was to bring into existence a law "to prohibit importation of corn, until our own corn will sell at such a price as shall enable the grower to grow it and pay his rent and taxes." 50 Cobbett

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48 Cobbett, Works, IV, 320.  
49 Ibid., pp. 324-327.  
50 Cobbett, Works, VI, 328.
felt this action would injure the country as the measure would close the ports to foreign corn in order to raise the prices to the high levels of the past five or six years. He gave as his objection the following: "that it being a benefit to mankind in general, that countries should be at liberty to supply each other with their products, such a law would be hostile to that great and beneficent principle." Cobbett saw nothing wrong with a person of fixed income buying foreign food products if that would enable him to eat and live better. He emphasized that the high taxes and increased poor rates were a direct result from the war. Since the landlords and farmers had been such staunch supporters of the war that created the National Debt, they should also willingly pay the cost of the war declared Cobbett. They were willing to pay their share of the taxes, he added, but insisted on high prices for their corn so they could avoid any distress, loss, or discomfort.52

Cobbett called the Report of the Committee, "this jumble of crude matter; this mixty maxty of guess work, facts, and speculations; this book of the philosophy of conceited farmers and land-surveyors." The main point of the report according to Cobbett was "that something should be done to prevent wheat from being sold under 10s. a bushel."53 The Report mentioned

51Ibid., p. 329.  
52Ibid., pp. 329-330.  
53Ibid., p. 333.
an attempt had been made to bring persons before them who had petitioned against the bill. None had appeared. The conclusion, therefore, was that perhaps the petitioners only objected to a hurried passage of the bill—not to the bill itself. If so much difficulty had been encountered during the Committee investigation in locating people who had opposed the bill, Cobbett suggested that maybe insufficient effort had been put forth. He said:

My objection to the Corn Bill was pretty well known to their Lordships. I dare say they had heard too that I was a farmer; and I have the presumption to suppose, that they must have thought me pretty nearly as capable of affording them information upon the subject as some, at least of the moral philosophers whom they examined. Their Lordships did not call me before them . . . if the Bill be for the protection of the farmer, I must have been the best possible witness, seeing that my declared opinion was against the Bill.54

Cobbett observed that the Report asserted the farmer would be motivated to supply all the wants of the nation if he could be guaranteed a price of 10s. per bushel. If supply were the object and that could be furnished at a low price from France, Cobbett asked, "why would you say to her, 'You shall not supply us with cheap bread, because our farmers are ready to supply us with dear bread?'"55 At the least, this was incongruous. Britain would then explain to France, "... If we buy bread of you at sixpence a loaf, our farmers will turn sulky upon our hands, and will not grow us any wheat."56

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54Cobbett, Works, IV, 333-334. 55Ibid., p. 334. 56Ibid.
Cobbett stated there was something revolting to human nature in forcing people "to purchase their food dear when they can purchase it cheap."\(^{57}\) An attempt was being made to deceive the people by the writers and members of Parliament who were encouraging acquiescence to corn legislation. The real cause of the push for high prices was being obscured. Cobbett told his readers, "it is the Government, and not the Farmer who stands in need of high-priced corn."\(^{58}\) What the farmer needed was relief from heavy taxation—not higher corn prices. Cobbett wrote: "... if there be but one man in all England found to petition against such a measure, I will be that man."\(^{59}\)

People and Petitions

On Thursday, May 5, 1814, while Rose was making his speech in the House of Commons against the proposed changes in the Corn Laws, activity was apparent in the House of Lords. Earl Grey came forward with a petition from tradesmen, manufacturers, and others of the town of New Castle-upon-Tyne against the Corn Bill. The petition was signed by 11,000 persons. It was stated that had the signers not been in such haste to present the petition, many more signatures could have been procured from people in the adjacent areas and villages.\(^{60}\)

\(^{57}\)Cobbett, Works, IV, 337.

\(^{58}\)Ibid., p. 343.  

\(^{59}\)Ibid.

\(^{60}\)Hansard, XXVII, 652-653.
A fortnight later, in the House of Commons a petition was presented by Mr. Prothero signed by 22,445 of the inhabitants from Bristol who feared much harm from a change in the Corn Laws. Prothero was sarcastically complimented on the manner which which he handled his constituents by both Parnell and Western. A petition from the city of London was forwarded the following day by Mr. Sheriff Magnay requesting "that no alteration might be made in the corn laws during this session."

Opposition pamphlets began to appear. Some of importance were Substance of a Speech Against the Proposed Alteration of the Corn Laws, Intended to Have Been Spoken in the House of Commons on June 6th, 1814 by J. Broadhurst; An Inquiry Concerning the Propriety of Increasing the Import Duty on Foreign Corn, by John Naismith; and An Inquiry into the Policy, Efficiency, and Consistency of the Alterations in Our Corn Laws; in a Letter to Sir Henry Parnell. Arguments advanced by these pamphlets were: it was unnecessary to keep up prices to insure high rents as the rents could be reduced without ill effects to landlords after wartime taxes were reduced; higher prices of corn would not necessarily stimulate agriculture as rents would be advanced; insufficient information had been secured to accurately set a price on protection.

61 _Hansard_, XXVII, 966-999.

62 _Ibid._, p. 990.
which would offset the tax burdens the landowners had to bear; and cutting off foreign supplies of corn by a high duty could bring ruinous results to industrial and commercial interests. 63

In writing about the Corn Bill on May 23, 1814, The Times informed its readers:

The true and only object of these projectors, whom I presume to be owners of lands in Ireland, must have been to keep up their rents to the exorbitant rate which they have reached in consequences of the war . . . . They hope to drive the English agriculturists in a great degree out of their own market; and at all events their object is to exclude all foreign competition . . . . I am not in the slightest degree adverse to the fair claim which the Irish cultivator has to preference; but I say his claim must be confined within the limits which he himself points out, that of being enabled to supply us with food at moderate prices . . . . 64

Following were six important points that should be brought to the legislators' attention: (1) increased rent of land compared to other articles, (2) "peculiar advantage" of the Irish landowner who paid no land tax, poor rates, or tithes on grassland, (3) the actual state of the English poor rate, (4) the rate of factory wages, (5) relation of wages and poor rates to the price of bread the past 20 years, and (6) the fixed points which permitted foreign importation. The article concluded:

If these were not considered by Parliament, they will undoubtedly be laid hold of by designing men out of doors who will be furnished with the strongest of all possible

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63 Barnes, op. cit., p. 127. Writers expressing different views were T. R. Malthus and William Spence. The latter refuted the objections to the Corn Bill.

64 The Times (London), May 23, 1814
pleas, if it should happen that laws so extensively affecting the public interest, should be adopted without even the form of investigating those great and important topics to which they plainly relate.

So many petitions had been received in the House of Commons by the sixth of June that the Chancellor of the Exchequer suggested these be referred to a committee. During that month petitions opposing changes in the Corn Laws continued to pour in from all parts of the Kingdom. Among those expressing against alteration were the town of Sunderland, the parish of St. Luke and the parish of St. Andrew. On June 13, 1814, the Earl of Lauderdale entered a protest against the Corn Bill in the House of Lords Journal. Seventy to eighty petitions had been received in the House of Lords by the end of the month. The decision was made to refer these to a committee. Earl Stanhope concluded that the large number of petitions received was substantial evidence of proof that the proposed alteration of the Corn Laws was in error.

Not all the petitions received opposed corn legislation. On July 20, Stanhope brought to the attention of the House of Commons...
Lords a petition he had presented the previous day from the corn growers of Peterborough which stated:

On account of the heavy expense attending the growth of corn and the low state of the markets, an adequate price could not be obtained; that if such a state of things continued, much mischief would arise to the public, as well as to individuals...70

A letter was received by the House of Lords from Devonshire containing the following: "that greater distress existed among the farmers than had been known for 20 years—that the corn was unsaleable, and that cattle had fallen to half its former price."71

The number of petitions continued to mount. Such a large number had been received on the subject of the Corn Laws, with more remaining to be presented, that the Duke of Norfolk moved on February 15, 1815 for additional information before the House of Commons could legislate. The request was for the returns of the average price of grain in the maritime districts from November to February, both inclusive.72

On the first of March, Sir James Shaw brought forward a petition from the ward of Cripplegate requesting that no alteration be made in the existing Corn Laws until the House could determine the effect peace might have on commercial, trading and agricultural interests. Prothero stated that he

70 Ibid., p. 797.  
71 Ibid.  
72 Ibid., XXIX, 759.
held in his hand a petition signed by 40,000 persons from Bristol opposing Corn Law alterations because of "its ruinous tendency to the rest of the community." 73 A petition from Coventry made appeal on behalf of the commercial and trading classes of the community. This was presented on March third by Mr. Peter Moore and contained over 9,000 signatures. The petitioners feared that the promoters of the bill were trying to hasten the measure through without allowing the country time to express an opinion. Moore added that from his observations the fear was justified; he was definitely opposed to the principle of the bill. After a lengthy discussion, Huskisson replied: "As to the petitions which had been presented on the subject, God forbid that the House should not pay attention to the petitions of the people." Their arguments would be weighed, but the final judgment would rest with Parliament. 74

Mr. Baring presented a petition on March 8, 1815 which bore the signatures of nearly the whole adult population of Carlisle and the surrounding community. About 6,000 people expressed their opposition to any alteration of the Corn Laws. Furthermore, criticism was leveled at the Board of Agriculture which was considered "a very great nuisance." Evil, and not good had been produced by the Board tampering with the Corn Laws. Another statement made by the petitioners was: "Your

73 Ibid., pp. 1172, 1173, 1174. This was the second petition from Bristol presented by Prothero.

74 Hansard, XXIX, 1242.
petitioners are satisfied, that any hope of success in restricting the importation of corn, must arise from the people not being fairly represented,—from the want of parliamentary reform."75 Baring added "no argument—no fact that ever before had been submitted to that House—proved so clearly the insufficiency of the present representation of the country, as the number of petitions which had been on this occasion submitted to parliament, without producing any effect whatever."76

On March tenth, the Westminster petition containing 42,473 signatures was brought forward by Sir Francis Burdett. He apologized for the rioting of his constituents and said he had advised them to cease this crude opposition to the Corn Bill and concentrate on eliminating the greatest of all evils by Parliamentary reform.77

Cobbett found that he would not have time to call together any number of people to sign a petition protesting the Corn Bill. He desired to formally present at least to one of the House of Parliament his reasons for objecting to the bill. Therefore, he personally drew up a petition rejecting protection and forwarded it to Earl Stanhope in the House of Lords. In spite of the fact that 581 gentlemen of Hampshire had signed a Requisition, the High Sheriff refused to convene a meeting so that the county as a whole could sign and submit a petition.

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75Ibid., XXX, 53.  
76Hansard, XXX, 54.  
77Ibid., pp. 107-109.
Cobbett said it was therefore, left to him to sign on behalf "of a great majority of the inhabitants of Hampshire."\textsuperscript{78} The Requisition which became a part of the petition, dated March 17, 1815, stated:

Sir,—We, the undersigned Freeholders and other Landholders, Tradesmen and Manufacturers of the County of Southampton, perceiving, that, in various parts of the Kingdom, evil-disposed, or misguided, persons are endeavouring to prevail on the Legislature to impose Duties on the Importations of Corn, and being convinced, that such a measure would grievously oppress the labouring classes, would be ruinous to Tradesmen and Manufacturers, would, in the end, be injurious to the Growers of Corn and the Owners of Land themselves, and might possibly disturb the peace of his Majesty's Dominions, request that you will be pleased to convene a meeting of the County on a day as little distant as may be convenient, in order to take into consideration and to discuss the propriety of presenting a Petition to the two Houses of Parliament, earnestly praying, That no such measure may be adopted, and also praying for a repeal of laws, hostile to our rights and liberties, passed during the late wars, and for a constitutional Reform in the Commons' House of Parliament.\textsuperscript{79}

In addition to his plea against the passage of the Corn Bill, Cobbett brought to the attention of Parliament the distressed condition of the mass of people under the present poor law system. Independence and patriotism had been sacrificed to pauperism. Cobbett pointed out also, that he was aware of the fact that the cultivators and landowners needed additional income to meet the tax demands. He hoped the public expenses

\textsuperscript{78}Cobbett, Works, IV, 348. Reprinted from a March, 1815 Political Register. Appendix D, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{79}Ibid., p. 349. The Petition is printed in full. See Appendix D, p. 132.
would be reduced and the taxes lowered without raising the price of corn. He concluded by saying:

Your Petitioner humbly prays, that your Lordships will not pass any law to prohibit, or restrain the importation of Corn; and, as the nation, once more, happily sees the days of peace, he also prays for the repeal of all the laws, laying new restrictions on the Press, passed during the late wars; and further, he most humbly but most earnestly prays and implores your Lordships to take into your early consideration, the subject, which, in point of real importance, swallows up all others: namely, the state of the Representation of the people in the Commons' House of Parliament.

Cobbett wrote in the Register: "Thus it appears to me that I have done everything which I had the power to against this Bill, which, I am afraid, will, in spite of all our efforts, become a law." Mob violence again broke out across the country. Rioting increased in intensity. Members of Parliament favoring the legislation were attacked as angry mobs descended on their property. Robinson, the author of the Bill, narrowly escaped as soldiers stationed around his home used gun fire to force the crowds back. Nevertheless, the Bill passed the House of Commons.

When the measure came before the Lords, attempts continued to be made to thwart its passage. On March 20, two

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80 Cobbett, Works, IV, 350.
81 Ibid., pp. 350-351.
82 Ibid., p. 351.
83 Barnes, op. cit., pp. 137-139.
hours were spent receiving petitions. The Bill was then read for the third and final time. The vote was 128 in favor and only 21 opposed. The minority entered the following protest in the House of Lords Journal:

Monopoly is the parent of scarcity, of dearness, and of uncertainty. To cut off any of the sources of supply can only tend to lessen its abundance; to close against ourselves the cheapest market for any commodity, must enhance the price at which we purchase it; and to confine the consumer of corn to the produce of his own country is to refuse to ourselves the benefit of that provision which Providence itself has made for equalising to man the variations of season and climate.84

The Bill became law March 23, 1815. Provisions were to shut foreign corn out of the British market until wheat sold for 80s., rye, peas, and beans, 53s., barley, beer, and bigg, 40s., and oats 27s. per quarter with Colonial prices fixed at 67s., 44s., 33s., and 22s., respectively.85 "The Corn Bill was passed with soldiers drawn up round the Houses of Parliament; it was passed in spite of thousands of petitions against it; it has caused a mass of misery indescribable . . . . "86

84Protests of the Lords, p. 482; Entire Protest quoted in Appendix E, p. 135.
86Cobbett, Works, VI, 513. These words were written by Cobbett in 1826.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

During the early nineteenth century social, political, and economic movements in Great Britain became entangled with the problem of the country's food supply and these entanglements were complicated by the shift in arrangements governing agriculture—especially the growth of capitalism. From 1793 to 1815 momentous changes occurred which affected the future of the Corn Laws. The two most significant were: (1) growing animosity and class consciousness between the upper and lower classes following the distress and resultant rioting which took place during the famine years of 1795-1796 and 1799-1801, and (2) the enormous impetus given the enclosure movement by deficient harvests and the war years accompanied by the social and economic changes among the agricultural classes.

Progressive agriculture with its emphasis on profits and commercialism had created an atmosphere in which the rural worker was exploited. William Cobbett witnessed the suffering of the people; he saw, he felt, and understood their plight. After 1804, he came forward to champion the cause of the rural laborer. That same year the first of his articles against the Corn Laws appeared in the Political
Register. Foreseeing that the proposed legislation was a class measure designed to drive the price of grain high to benefit the landlords and those whose livelihood depended on higher taxes, Cobbett also realized an opposite and adverse effect would beset the rural laborer.

Cobbett favored free grain trade at all times and denounced the Corn Laws as injurious to both farmer and laborer as well as ruinous to the entire community. He familiarized his readers with the evils of the pending legislation which would close the ports to foreign grain until near famine prices were reached. In his fight against the proposed measure of 1815, Cobbett adroitly rallied the rural laborers to his side. Writing in his blunt and often infuriating style, he attacked those who were in power, meanwhile punctuating his articles with questions meant to make his readers think, act, and finally fight, rather than allow themselves to be driven deeper into distress and poverty. As Cobbett devoted his strength and energy toward wiping out the evils of the country, he alienated many of the landlords, but at the same time consolidated and united the laboring people for which he stood. Cobbett's violent opposition to the Law of 1815 helped open the eyes of the population to the necessity of Parliamentary Reform. For Cobbett, this was not the end of a fight. It was only the beginning. Through his writing, Cobbett became leader of the Reform movement.
In conclusion, one question remains to be answered. Was Cobbett right in his stand against the Corn Laws? Several years earlier he had written: "The only question is am I right? If I am not, overset my arguments, and show the world I am wrong."¹ Even though Cobbett was at times alone in his denunciation of the Corn Laws, his most bitter critics could not prove him wrong. In fact, less than a year passed after the enactment of the Corn Law of 1815 when his predictions began to come true.²

¹Cf., p. 30.
APPENDIX
### APPENDIX A

#### PRINCIPAL CORN LAWS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Statute</th>
<th>Provisions</th>
<th>Price of Wheat at date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1660</td>
<td>12 Car. II, c. 4</td>
<td>Attempted to raise revenue by permitting imports and exports subject to high duties.</td>
<td>56 s. 6 d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1663 | 15 Car. II, c. 7 | An Act for the Encouragement of trade—
1. Permitted engrossing, i.e., buying in one market to sell in another when wheat was at or under 48s., and other grain in proportion.
2. Took off the high duties on importation, and imposed an ad valorem duty in their stead.
3. Permitted exportation of wheat (subject to a reduced duty of 5s. 4d. per quarter) when wheat was at or under 48s., and other grain in proportion. | 41 s. 8 d. |
| 1670 | 22 Car. II, c. 13 | Act for the Improvement of Tillage and the Breeding of Cattle | 37 s. 0 ½ d. |

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Statute</th>
<th>Provisions</th>
<th>Price of Wheat at date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1670   | 22 Car. II, c. 13     | (1) Permitted importation of wheat subject to a duty of 8s. per quarter when wheat was between 53s. 4d. and 60s., and 16s. per quarter when below 53s. 4d.  
(2) Prohibited exportation when the home price of wheat was 53s. 4d. or above it. Other grain in proportion. | 37 0½               |
| 1699   | 1 Wm. & Mar. c. 12    | Bounties were offered of 5s. on every exported quarter of wheat when the prices were at or below 48s., 2s. 6d. per quarter of barley or malt, 24s., 3s. 6d., rye, beans, or peas, 22s., 2s. 6d., oats or oatmeal, 15s. Imports continued to be governed by the Act of 1670. This Act remained in force till 1814, but it was suspended during each of the following years:—1698, 1699, 1709, 1741, 1756, 1757, 1759, 1763-67, 1768-69, 1771, 1773. | 46 8               |
| 1773   | 13 Geo. III, c. 43    | Burke’s Act                                                                                 | 51 0               |
|        |                       | (1) Prohibited exports and abolished the bounty when the quarter of wheat was at or above 44s., of rye 28s., of barley 32s., of oats 14s.  
(2) Permitted exports and continued the bounty when prices were below the above limits.  
(3) Permitted imports of foreign grain at a duty of 6d. a quarter when home-grown wheat was at or above 48s. and other grain in proportion.  
(4) Imposed the prohibitory duties of 12 Car. II, upon |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Provisions</th>
<th>Price of Wheat at date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1773</td>
<td>13 Geo. III, c. 43</td>
<td>foreign produce imported below those prices. (5) Allowed foreign corn to be imported duty free for exportation.</td>
<td>51 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791</td>
<td>31 Geo. III, c. 30</td>
<td>(1) Rearranged the scale of duties on imports, 6s., per quarter on wheat at or above 54s., 2s. 6d. between 54s. and 50s., 24s. 3d. below 50s. (2) Permitted wheat to be exported up to 46s. without bounty, and up to 44s. with bounty. (3) Provided proper registration of prices of grain.</td>
<td>48 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1804</td>
<td>44 Geo. III, c. 109</td>
<td>Imposed higher duties on foreign imports, 6s. a quarter when home prices were at or above 66s., 2s. 6d. between 66s. and 63s., 24s. 3d. below 63s. It also permitted exports up to 54s.</td>
<td>62 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1806</td>
<td>46 Geo. III, c. 97</td>
<td>Free export and import of corn permitted between Great Britain and Ireland.</td>
<td>79 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1814</td>
<td>54 Geo. III, c. 69</td>
<td>Corn, grain, meal, and flour (bread and biscuit added by Treasury Order), to be exported at all times without payment of duty, and without receiving any bounty.</td>
<td>73 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[b\] Ernle, *op. cit.*, p. 494; Tooke, *op. cit.*, II, 42.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Statute</th>
<th>Provisions</th>
<th>Price of Wheat at date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>55 Geo. III,</td>
<td>Mr. Robinson's Act, passed under a protest from ten Peers, entered on the</td>
<td>65 s. 7 d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 26</td>
<td></td>
<td>Journals of the House; prohibited the importation of foreign wheat while home prices stood at the following figures per quarter:— wheat, 80s.; barley, 40s.; oats, 26s.; rye, beans, and peas, 53s. British North American corn was admitted on a lower scale,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

NUMBER OF ACTS OF PARLIAMENT FOR IMPROVEMENTS DURING THE WAR YEARS FROM 1793 TO 1800 AS COMPARED TO THE PREVIOUS EIGHT YEARS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1793</th>
<th>1794</th>
<th>1795</th>
<th>1796</th>
<th>1797</th>
<th>1798</th>
<th>1799</th>
<th>1800</th>
<th>Tot. of 8 Yrs.</th>
<th>Prec. 8 Yrs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roads, Bridges, &amp;c.</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canals, Harbours, &amp;c.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclosures, Draining, &amp;c.</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paving, and other parochial improvements</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>171</strong></td>
<td><strong>136</strong></td>
<td><strong>139</strong></td>
<td><strong>129</strong></td>
<td><strong>151</strong></td>
<td><strong>107</strong></td>
<td><strong>129</strong></td>
<td><strong>162</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,124</strong></td>
<td><strong>750</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Cited by Charles Smith, *Tracts on the Corn Trade*, p. 274.
Fig. 1. Average Price per Quarter of Wheat for a 30-year period (1790-1820)*

*Data from Prothero, op. cit., pp. 244-245.
APPENDIX D

COBEBT'S PETITION AGAINST THE CORI BILL*

The Petition of WILLIAM COBEBT, of Botley, in Hampshire, dated on the 17th day of March, 1815,
HUMBLY SHOWETH:
That your Petitioner on the 10th instant, delivered to the High Sheriff of Hampshire, signed by your Petitioner himself, and by five hundred and eighty-one other inhabitants of the County, many of whom are freeholders, landholders, and land-cultivators, a Requisition in the following words; to wit:

'Sir,—We, the undersigned Freeholders and other Landholders, Tradesmen and Manufacturers of the County of Southampton, perceiving, that, in various parts of the Kingdom, evil-disposed, or misguided, persons are endeavouring to prevail on the Legislature to impose Duties on the importation of Corn, and being convinced, that such a measure would grievously oppress the labouring classes, would be ruinous to Tradesmen and Manufacturers, would, in the end, be injurious to the Growers of Corn and the Owners of Land themselves, and might possibly disturb the peace of his Majesty's Dominions, request that you will be pleased to convene a Meeting of the County on a day as little distant as may be convenient, in order to take into consideration and to discuss the propriety of presenting a Petition to the two Houses of Parliament, earnestly praying, That no such measure may be adopted, and also praying for a repeal of laws, hostile to our rights and liberties, passed during the late wars, and for a constitutional Reform in the Commons' House of Parliament.'

That the said High Sheriff has refused to call such Meeting of the County, and that, therefore, your Petitioner, deeply impressed with the injurious tendency of any law to prohibit, or restrain, the importation of Corn, has thus humbly presumed to make his individual appeal to the Wisdom, the Justice, the Humanity of your Lordships.

That your Petitioner does not presume to be competent to judge of the precise degree in which the Merchants, Traders, and Manufacturers of this kingdom may be affected by the proposed law; but while common sense tells him, that it must seriously injure these classes of the community, that it must

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*Cobbett, Works, VI, 349-351.
so enhance and uphold the price of shipping, freight, and manufactured goods, as to transfer the building of ships, the employment of ships, the making of goods, together with vast numbers of persons in search of better living on their incomes, leaving their share of the taxes to be paid by those who remain, and that, too, out of diminished means arising from a diminished demand for their produce, their manufactures, and their professional labours; while common sense says this to your Petitioner, his own experience, as an owner and cultivator of land, enables him to state with more precision, to your Lordships, the grounds of his conviction, that any law tending to raise, or keep up, the price of Corn, will prove in the end, to be no benefit, but an injury to the owner and the cultivator of the land.

That your Petitioner has seen, with great surprise, that, in certain Petitions obtained privately and sent from this County, it has been asserted, that the Expenses of a farm remain nearly the same as when Corn was at the late high price. Your Petitioner's observation and experience enables him most positively to contradict this very material fact. When Wheat sold at an average of 100 shillings a quarter, the weekly wages of a labourer are from 10 to 12 shillings. The price of Brickwork, which was 50 shillings a Rod, or Perch, is now 40 shillings. The price of Smith's and Wheelwright's work is experiencing a proportionate fall; and the price of plough and cart-horses has fallen a full third.

But, there is another great head of expense, to which your Petitioner is particularly anxious humbly to solicit the attention of your Lordships, as it is intimately connected, not only with the comfort of the great mass of the people, but with their political, civil, and moral conduct; namely, The Poor's Rates, which, in the Parish of Bishop's Waltham, where the land of your Petitioner principally lies, have been reduced in such a degree, that your Petitioner has had to pay, in the said parish, during the year just now expiring, one-fifth less than he had to pay during the last year; with the pleasing prospect of a progressive diminution in this head of expense and in the vast numbers of those persons, who are now included under the degrading appellation of paupers; who, in entering the pale of pauperism have, in general, left behind them all those sentiments of independence, of patriotism, of love of liberty, of hatred of oppression, for which the very lowest classes of Englishmen were, in former times so highly distinguished, and have, along with the name and garb of paupers, assumed the tone and the manners of slaves.

For the practical, the undeniable proof, that high prices have an immediate tendency towards the creating of paupers; your Petitioner humbly begs leave to refer your Lordships to the official documents amongst the records of your Right Honourable House, where it clearly appears, that pauperism, kept in check for a long series of years by the native
spirit of the people, was let loose like a torrent over the land by the enormous prices during the late wars, which, in depriving men of their food, deprived them, and even their children of that shame, which had before kept them from the Poor-List; and, therefore, your Petitioner cannot but view with profound sorrow, that a legislative act should be in contemplation, having, as he firmly believes, a tendency to prevent for ever the restoration of the labouring classes to their former state of comfort, of independence of mind, and of frankness and boldness of manners.

Your Petitioner is well aware, that, unless prices be raised and upheld, it will be impossible for the owners and the cultivations of the land to pay the taxes that will exist after the Property-Tax shall have ceased; he is well aware, that to ensure them a high price for their Corn is the only means of enabling them to pay these taxes; but, then, he is clearly convinced, that a very large part of those taxes might be dispensed with; that the army and navy, which swallow up so considerable a portion of them, might be reduced to the state in which they were previous to the late war, and that the whole of the public expenses (exclusive of those attendant on the National Debt) might be reduced to what they then were, namely, six millions a year; and thus without raising the price of Corn, the credit, the safety, the honour of the nation, might all be amply provided for and secured.

For these reasons your Petitioner humbly prays, that your Lordships will not pass any law to prohibit, or restrain the importation of Corn; and, as the nation, once more, happily sees the days of peace, he also prays for the repeal of all the laws, laying new restrictions on the Press, passed during the late wars; and further, he most humbly but most earnestly prays and implores your Lordships to take into your early consideration that subject, which, in point of real importance, swallows up all others: namely, the state of the Representation of the people in the Commons' House of Parliament.

And your Petitioner shall ever pray,

Wm. COBBETT
APPENDIX E

PROTEST OF THE LORDS ON THE CORN LAW OF 1815*

DL

March 20, 1815.

The Corn Law of 1815 (55 George III, cap. 26) contains twelve clauses, of which the most important are the first, permitting corn to be warehoused at any time; and third, allowing foreign corn to be brought into the English market free of duty when wheat should be at 80s., Rye, Peas and Beans, 53s., Barley, Bere and Bigg, 40s., and Oats 27s. a quarter but not allowing importation when prices are lower, and fixing Colonial prices at 67s., 44s., 33s., and 22s. Numerous petitions (161) were presented against and for the Bill, the vast majority being hostile. It was opposed in the Lords and Commons, but carried by large majorities. On the third reading its rejection was moved by Lord Stanhope and the Marquis of Buckingham, but the Bill was carried by 128 to 21.

The following protest was inserted:

1st. Because we are adverse in principle to all new restraints on commerce. We think it certain that public prosperity is best promoted by leaving uncontrolled the free current of national industry; and we wish rather, by well-considered steps, to bring back our commercial legislation to the straight and simple line of wisdom, than to increase the deviation, by subjecting additional and extensive branches of the public interest to fresh systems of artificial and injurious restriction.

2ndly, Because we think that the great practical rule of leaving all commerce unfettered, applies more peculiarly, and on still stronger grounds of justice as well as of policy, to the Corn trade than to any other. Irresistible indeed must be that necessity which could, in our judgment, authorize the Legislature to tamper with the sustenance of the people, and to impede the free purchase and sale of that article, on which depends the existence of so large a portion of the

*Protests of the Lords, II, 481-483.
community.

3rdly, Because we think that the expectations of ultimate benefit from this measure are founded on a delusive theory. We cannot persuade ourselves that this law will ever contribute to produce plenty, cheapness, or steadiness of price; so long as it operates at all, its effects must be the opposite of these. Monopoly is the parent of scarcity, of dearth, and of uncertainty. To cut off any of the sources of supply, can only tend to lessen its abundance; to close against ourselves the cheapest market for any commodity, must enhance the price at which we purchase it; and to confine the consumer of corn to the produce of his own country, is to refuse to ourselves the benefit of that provision which Providence itself has made for equalizing to man the variations of season and of climate.

4thly, But whatever may be the future consequences of this law at some distant and uncertain period, we see with pain that these hopes must be purchased at the expense of a great and present evil. To compel the consumer to purchase Corn dearer at home than it might be imported from abroad, is the immediate practical effect of this law; in this way alone can it operate; its present protection, its promised extension of agriculture, must result (if at all) from the profits which it creates by keeping up the price of Corn to an artificial level; these future benefits are the consequences expected, from giving a bounty to the grower of Corn, by a tax levied on its consumer.

5thly, Because we think that the adoption of any permanent law for such a purpose required the fullest and most laborious investigation. Nor would it have been sufficient for our satisfaction, could we have been convinced of the general policy of so hazardous an experiment; a still further enquiry would have been necessary to persuade us that the present moment was fit for its adoption. In such an enquiry, we must have had the means of satisfying ourselves what its immediate operation will be, as connected with the various and pressing circumstances of public difficulty and distress with which the country is now surrounded; with the state of our circulation and currency; of our agriculture and manufactures; of our internal and external commerce; and above all, with the condition and reward of the industrious and labouring classes of our community.

On all these particulars, as they respect this question, we think that Parliament is almost wholly uninformèd; on all we see reason for the utmost anxiety and alarm from the operation of this law.

Lastly, because if we could approve of the principle and purpose of this law, we think that no sufficient foundation has been laid for its details. The evidence before us, unsatisfactory and imperfect as it is, seems to us rather to disprove than to support the propriety of the high price
adopted as the standard of importation, and the fallacious
mode by which that price is to be ascertained.
And on all these grounds we are anxious to record our
dissent from a measure so precipitate in its course, and,
as we fear, so injurious in its consequences.

Augustus Frederic, Duke of Sussex
William Frederic, Duke of Gloucester
William Wyndham Grenville, Lord Grenville
Richard Colley Wellesley, Lord Wellesley
(Marquis of Wellesley)
George Capel, Earl of Essex
George Byng, Viscount Torrington
Alexander Hamilton, Lord Dutton
Richard Grenville Brydges Chandos, Marquis
of Buckingham
Henry Bromley, Lord Montfort
Peter King, Lord King
Frederic Howard, Earl of Carlisle
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5 and 6 Ed. 6, c. 14.
13 Eliz. c. 13.
1 Wm. and Mary, c. 12.
29 Geo. III, c. 58.
30 Geo. III, c. 1.
31 Geo. III, c. 30.
33 Geo. III, c. 3.
35 Geo. III, c. 4.
36 Geo. III, c. 3, c. 6, and c. 8.
39 and 40 Geo. III, c. 7, c. 8, and c. 9.
44 Geo. III, c. 109.
45 Geo. III, c. 86.
46 Geo. III, c. 97.
49 Geo. III, c. 23.
50 Geo. III, c. 19.
52 Geo. III, c. 3, and c. 127.
53 Geo. III, c. 7.
54 Geo. III, c. 69.

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After 1812 Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates
were changed to this title.

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Reports of committee appointments, accounts of
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found in these journals.

House of Lords Journal. 1813-1814.
Various accounts and papers published in the
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in this study.

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Corn Law protests included with names of
signatories.
Books


Burke agreed with the doctrines of free trade in corn advocated in the writings of Adam Smith.


Author's best descriptive writing; relates the details of his army career.


Six letters addressed to the working people of England. Cobbett's dedication to the laborers revealed throughout his writing.


A criticism of the funding system of Great Britain.


Story of Cobbett's struggle to continue his writings for reform of the government.


Account of Cobbett's early years with autobiographical articles written while in the U.S. 1793-1800.


An outstanding work describing the life and times in England.


Complete abridgment of the 100 volumes comprising the Political Register and Porcupine edited by Cobbett's sons. Many articles contained in these volumes are devoted to the subject of the Corn Laws providing invaluable source material.
Collection of writings from various publications to present Cobbett's opinions on many subjects including himself.

Contemporaries comments to which is added some of Cobbett's outstanding writings.

Effects of the enclosure movement on the changing countryside recorded by a contemporary writer.

Comprised of extractions from Cobbett's writings with linking passages by editor.

Cobbett was familiar with this famous work which presented a study of Corn Law policy. Smith's writings had an impact on the thinking of his day.

Extremely valuable source material. Used by Parliament in formulating the Corn Laws of 1804 and 1815. Contains supplements including writings by Mr. Chalmers with other significant documents concerning the Corn Laws.

A work of great merit. Contemporary of Cobbett's writes on the state of the Corn Trade. An analysis of economic conditions, crop information, and records of prices incorporated into this study.

Correspondence of a very close friend of Cobbett's. Includes several letters to Cobbett.
Pamphlets

 Presents history of land distribution, giving information on enclosures of waste lands and the condition of agricultural laborers.

 This essay was first published by order of the Highland Society of Scotland, 1822. An intensive study of economic conditions leading to the passage of the Corn Laws.

 Published as a result of doctrinal differences between the author and Ricardo in 1814, in reflection of the growing acuteness of the Corn-Law controversy of 1813-1815. Discussion focuses upon the immediate problem of the proposed corn duties upon economic classes.

 Author refutes the objections against the Corn Bill of 1815.

Newspapers

*The Times* (London) 1791-1815.  
 Usually indicative of government opinion. Advertisements and letters to the editor reveal public thinking.

Miscellaneous

Goldsmith, Oliver. *The Deserted Village*, 1770.  
 Poetry vividly portrays the changing life and times of England.
B. SECONDARY WORKS

Books

A complete treatment of the Corn Laws and events leading to the legislation.

Contains chapters on Cobbett's England.

Author traces the economic, social and political history of England through the latter decade of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century periods.

An excellent portrayal of the life and character of Cobbett. Author's careful analysis of Cobbett's writings give this book merit.

One Englishman interprets the spirit of another Englishman. A vibrant narrative embracing the story of Cobbett's life and the times in which he lived.

Biography of Cobbett, worthy of commendation. The strands of his life entwine with the story of England to give this book added meaning.

Provides basic background material. Several sections devoted to the agricultural development of Great Britain.


Prothero, Rowland E. *The Pioneers and Progress of English Farming.* London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1888. Although this is a well written work, it contains inaccuracies. These have been corrected in his later book published under his title, Lord Ernle.

This book is a reprint of Chapters VIII, XII, XV, XVII, XVIII, XIX, and XX of *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*. Good on laboring conditions of those employed in agriculture.


A work of significance accurately evaluating the period under study.


Brief biographies of prominent Englishmen.


Examines social conditions with their economic and political implications in the period of Corn Law controversy.


Considered the best general history available. Presents a picture of village life and changing phases of agriculture with its subsequent involvement in the Corn Laws.


Contains two chapters on Cobbett's England.


Useful as background material. Gives valuable information regarding economic and social conditions of the period preceding the Corn Laws.

Unpublished Material


Contributes to an understanding of Cobbett.