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# SPEECHES

ON QUESTIONS OF PUBLIC POLICY

BY

RICHARD COBDEN, M.P.

EDITED BY

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AND

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IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

FREE TRADE, PEACE, GOOD WILL AMONG NATIONS

London

MACMILLAN AND CO.

1870

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OXFORD:

W. B. E. GARDNER, E. P. HALL, AND H. LATHAM, M.A.,  
PRINTERS TO THE UNIVERSITY.

V32M04

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## P R E F A C E.

THE Speeches contained in these two volumes have been selected and edited at the instance of the Club which was established for the purpose of inculcating and extending those political principles which are permanently identified with Cobden's career. They form an important part of that collective contribution to political science, which has conferred on their author a reputation, the endurance of which, it may be confidently predicted, is as secure as that of any among the men whose wisdom and prescience have promoted the civilisation of the world.

These Speeches are not in any sense compositions. Cobden was, in the strictest meaning of the words, an extempore speaker. He pretended neither to rhetoric nor to epigram, though the reader will find passages in these volumes the unaffected grace of which is as pleasing as the highest art, and illustrations which have all the force of the liveliest humour. But, as a rule, the speech is, as Sir

Robert Peel called it, when the speaker's career was in its beginnings, 'unadorned.' The style is homely, conversational, familiar, and even garrulous. But it is always clear, and invariably suggests such a comprehension of the subject which is discussed, as gives the exposition all the force of a debate. So cogent and exhaustive was Cobden's reasoning, that, in almost every case, they who attempted to resist the effect of his conclusions, were constrained to betake themselves to some irrelevant issue, or to awaken some prejudice against him. What he said, too, was stated with great geniality and kindness. If it was difficult to refute the speaker, it was impossible to quarrel with the man. He was as popular as he was wise. His manner was as modest as his speech was lucid.

There is no subject which Cobden treated, which he did not take care to know perfectly well. He was never unprepared, for he never spoke on any topic with which he was not thoroughly conversant. He read up everything which he talked about. Hence his facts were as indisputable as his inferences were precise. He was never obliged to repudiate a principle which he had once adopted or announced, for he never accepted a compromise on any question of public policy. Hence he has done more than any other statesman to make the administration of public affairs an exact science. And for the same reason, as he entered into Parliament in the full maturity of his powers, he never had to abandon a single position which he accepted, maintained, and affirmed.

Cobden's name is principally identified with the agitation which led to a Free Trade in Food. This is not the place to enter into the history of that great financial reform, because an examination of all the statements which were made in defence of that restrictive policy to which the Corn-laws were the coping-stone, would require, in itself, the space of a special treatise. Most of them, it will be found, are taken and refuted in the Free-trade speeches with which these volumes commence. A quarter of a century after the final overthrow of the system, we can have no conception of the warmth and vindictiveness with which that system was defended, and of the courage, readiness, and learning which were needed in order to combat protective theories, and finally to overthrow them.

The immediate object of the organisation with which Cobden was associated, was the repeal of all protective taxes. For the purpose of carrying out this work, Cobden sacrificed fortune and health. The labours which he undertook during the campaign against the Corn-laws, materially injured a constitution, which, like that of all his family, was never robust. The unremitting attention which he gave to the details of an agitation, which confronted such vast and such angry interests, left him no leisure for conducting the affairs of his own manufacture. But once embarked in political life, Cobden could not abandon it, or retreat from it. He knew very well, that after he had organised and carried out the campaign against the Corn-laws, there were other

violations of economical laws, which characterised the social system of this country, the correction of which was only less important than the repeal of those monopolies, though the machinery for correcting them was by no means equally available.

He saw, for example, that no ultimate benefit would ensue to the mass of the people by the abolition of all taxes on food, unless what he called by a pardonable metaphor, Free Trade in Land, were also established. By this he meant the removal of that artificial scarcity of marketable land, which is directly traceable to certain usurpations in the real or presumed interest of the aristocracy, by which the devolution of land is regulated according to the custom of primogeniture, and by which estates are restrained from alienation under the covenants of a strict settlement. Thus, in the last year of his life, and in the last speech which he made, he regretted his age and failing physical energies, since he was now debarred from entering on an agitation for the abolition of those customs and privileges which make land the monopoly of the rich, and condemn the English peasantry to hopeless labour.

The same anxiety to carry out Free Trade to its legitimate consequences made Cobden an advocate of Financial Reform, and thus induced him to suggest the extension of one part, which is as yet the least equitable part of our financial system, and even to urge the absolute abandonment of the other part. He wished to see the United Kingdom a free port, rightly recognising that the more fully such a



result could be obtained, the greater might be the industry, and the greater must be the affluence of his countrymen. Hence he advocated direct instead of indirect taxation.

Again, Cobden had the greatest anxiety to improve the moral and material condition of the people, and he had certain very definite views as to the machinery by which the improvement could be effected. He was one of the earliest advocates of a system of National Education. But, in the face of facts, he saw that it could be universal, only if it were permanently freed from the risk of denominational intrigue. He knew, again, that excessive taxation presses with increasing weight on those whose income supplies the narrowest margin above the necessaries of life. By far the largest part of the public expenditure is levied for the maintenance of the Services, and he was never weary of demanding that the cost of these Services should be materially reduced. He saw that the apology for these Services was to be found in the Foreign Policy of this country; and from the earliest days of his political career he urged the country to adopt the principle of non-intervention. He clearly understood, that if the people of England busied themselves solely with their own defence, the charges on the revenue might be so reduced, that the industry and enjoyments of the people would be vastly augmented.

But he founded his arguments on behalf of international amity, justice, and peace on far higher

grounds than the material interests of society. He strongly held to the opinion that there is a retribution for national crimes, and he believed that the Foreign Policy of this country had been constantly immoral. He was persuaded that no advantage which can be obtained by War is equal to the loss, misery, and demoralisation which inevitably accompany it; and he knew that every end which warfare aims at, can be safely, honourably, and cheaply obtained by arbitration. He denounced War as barbarism, and he saw that the stimulants to War are almost invariably supplied by those violent and self-seeking partisans, who appeal to professional prejudice or a sordid patriotism in order to achieve their personal objects. After all means of averting War had failed, after every appeal to international law and public faith had been exhausted, a defensive War might, he held, be just and necessary; and defence, he very easily recognised, was far stronger than attack, far cheaper than aggression.

With the same end, he strove to do away with one of the professional incentives to War, the custom of confiscating unarmed vessels, belonging to the subjects of a belligerent Power, on the high seas. The retention of such a custom by a nation whose mercantile marine is larger than that of any other community, was, he saw, an act of astonishing folly, or still more amazing ignorance. To those who argued that the risk of loss by such a nation is a powerful preventive of War, he answered, that War is never

desired by a people, but by politicians and military men, whose ambition and cupidity are fired by the prospect of advancement or profit, and that it is in the interest of such persons that the present custom is retained. The experience of the late American War has taught us that this barbarous and indefensible practice has other and more serious consequences.

In the same spirit, and with the same purpose, he dissected the motives which induce Governments to contract, and money-dealers to negotiate, Public Loans. He saw that these obligations were generally created in order to subserve some aggressive or tyrannical policy; and he contrasted the inconsistency of the public conscience, which was always ready to sympathise by demonstration with an oppressed people, and yet did not scruple to lend money to the oppressor, in order to enable him to outrage humanity with safety. He held that the men who lend money to profligate Governments, occupy exactly the same place with those who make advances for infamous purposes, and that, until such time as the public conscience scouts their proceedings, they should at least be denied sympathy and assistance in recovering principal or interest from their defaulting debtors.

To these views of Mr. Cobden on War Expenditure and Foreign Policy, his opponents had nothing to answer, except by charging him with advocating peace at any price. It is almost superfluous to say that the charge was false, and nearly as superfluous

to state, that they who made it knew it to be false. The reader of these Speeches will find sufficient proof, that the speaker put no limit to the necessary cost of defence—that he simply wished to take away the motives and materials of aggression.

It was a common saying about Cobden, that his range of political action was narrow. A glance at the topics treated in these volumes, a little reflection on their magnitude, will be a sufficient proof that this charge also is unfounded. But Cobden's political speeches cover only a small number of the subjects on which his opinions were strongly and clearly formed. They who had the advantage of his familiar intercourse, and who regularly corresponded with him, know how universal was his knowledge on political subjects, how lucid and sagacious were his interpretations of political events. When, in time to come, his correspondence is given to the world, it will be found to be a copious and profound history of his public life, and of the facts to which he contributed, or which he witnessed. There was hardly a subject of social interest on which he had not thought deeply, on which he did not speak and write wisely. But clear and wise as he was, his manner was inexpressibly gentle and modest.

There is one misstatement which was freely made against Cobden during his lifetime, and which has been reiterated since by such shallow people as form their opinions at secondhand. He was supposed to have been very moderately informed, to

have ridiculed all learning, to have despised culture, and to have overvalued the educational importance of modern politics. At the time when it was first promulgated, the calumny was convenient and ingenious. It was intended to discredit Cobden's reputation as a statesman among educated persons. To repeat it now, is to be guilty of an act of gross carelessness,—an act of which no responsible and competent person would be guilty.

What Cobden did comment on, once and again, in terms of increasing severity, is the utter ignorance, on subjects of great political importance, which prevails among young men who have graduated at the older Universities, and who, under the peculiar parliamentary institutions of this country, are presented to seats in the House of Commons, or purchase admission into it, or succeed to analogous positions in the House of Lords. The system which introduces these personages to the Legislature, puts them also into the Administration. Now, Cobden used to argue that the particular knowledge which the older Universities impart to such people, is of absolutely no use to them in the responsible place which they occupy, and that, considering the magnitude of the interests with which they deal, it is of paramount importance that they should have some knowledge of their own country and its history, and should furthermore gain similar information about those other countries with which their own has relations. He commented also on the danger which this

country runs by incompetence and ignorance on the part of Ministers and Members of Parliament, and he might, had he wished to strengthen his case, have pointed to the absurd and mischievous misconceptions which prevailed among statesmen and politicians of the academical type as to the circumstances of the American War. Now, Cobden did not stand alone in this judgment. One of the commonest charges against the English is what foreigners call their insular habits, by which is probably meant, a boisterous self-complacency, and a contemptuous disregard for the opinions of other nations. There are persons who consider this coarse and ignorant pride, patriotic.

But, on the other hand, no man honoured with a more generous and modest deference that culture which he confessed to lack, but which he saw made in certain cases, as it always should be made, the substratum and method of practical experience. The scholarship which was coupled with a knowledge of modern facts, and which was made the means for arranging and illustrating such facts, was in Cobden's eyes an invaluable acquisition. For pedantry he had a hearty contempt. For learning, which is of no age or country, he had an exaggerated respect. But the difference between pedantry and learning lies in the fact, that the former is satisfied with a narrow portion of the facts which constitute the history of the human mind, while the latter grasps all the inductions of social philosophy, or at least strives to do so.

If exact and careful knowledge of history constitutes learning, Cobden was, during the years of his political career, the most learned speaker in the House of Commons. Dealing as he did with broad questions of public policy, he got up his case accurately and laboriously. His facts, culled from all sources, were judiciously selected, and were never challenged. A cautious student of political economy, he knew that this science, the difficulty of which he fully recognised, was or ought to be eminently inductive, and that an economist without facts is like an engineer without materials or tools.

It was originally intended that all the Speeches contained in these volumes should have had the advantage of Mr. Bright's revision. Mr. Bright has done this service to those which are contained in the first volume. But, after he had given the same assistance to a few sheets in the second, he was unhappily seized with illness, and has been unable to give his further supervision to the work. It is hoped that this loss will not detract too much from the value of this publication.

A few of the Speeches were corrected by the speaker himself. But not a few, delivered on the spur of the occasion, have been extracted from newspaper reports, and have sometimes required the corrections of conjectural criticism. Mr. Cobden was a rapid speaker, and, as his voice became feebler, he was not always easy to report accurately.

The thanks of the Editors are due to the Proprietors of the *Manchester Examiner and Times*, who were good enough to put the files of this influential paper at their disposal.

JAMES E. THOROLD ROGERS.

OXFORD, *April 14, 1870.*



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