

WILLIAM COBBETT

As this year marks the centenary of the death of William Cobbett the following extracts from his *Rural Rides* will be of interest. The first (written on 24th December, 1821) shows that cries of "agricultural distress" and appeals by farmers to the "collective wisdom" (Parliament) for tariffs and other assistance were as rife then as now.

* * *

For, in fact, it is not the *farmer*, but the *landlord* and *parson*, who wants relief from the "collective." The tenant's remedy is quitting his farm or bringing down his rent to what he can afford to give, wheat being 3s. or 4s. a bushel. This is his remedy. What can he want high prices for? They can do *him* no good; and this I proved to the farmers last year. The fact is, the landlords and parsons are urging the farmers on to get *something done* to give them high rents and high tithes.

* * *

We were getting ready to be off, to cross the country to Burghclere, which lies under the lofty hills at Highclere, about 22 miles from this city (Winchester); but hearing the bells of the cathedral, I took Richard to show him that ancient and most magnificent pile, and particularly to show him the tomb of that famous bishop of Winchester, William of Wykham; who was the chancellor and minister of the great and glorious king, Edward III; who sprang from poor parents in the little village of Wickham, three miles from Botley; and who among other great and magnificent deeds, founded the famous college, or school, of Winchester, and also one of the colleges of Oxford. I told Richard about this as we went from the inn down to the cathedral; and when I *showed him the tomb*, where the bishop lies on his back, in his Catholic robes, with his mitre on his head, his shepherd's crook by his side, with little children at his feet, their hands put together in a praying attitude, he looked with a degree of inquisitive earnestness that pleased me very much. . . .

After we came out of the cathedral, Richard said, "Why, papa, nobody can build such palaces *now*, can they?" "No, my dear," said I, "That building was made when there were no poor wretches in England called *paupers*; when there were no *poor rates*; when every labouring man was clothed in good woollen cloth; and when all had plenty of meat and bread and beer."

*Your support is invited for the
"Land & Liberty" Sustentation Fund.*

In several parts of *Capital* I allude to the fate which overtook the plebeians of ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants, each cultivating his own piece of land on his own account. In the course of Roman history they were expropriated. The same movement which divorced them from their means of production and subsistence involved the formation not only of big landed property but also of big money capital. And so one fine morning there were to be found on the one hand free men, stripped of everything except their labour power, and, on the other, in order to exploit this labour, those who held all the acquired wealth in possession. What happened? The Roman proletarians became, not wage labourers, but a *mob* of do-nothings more abject than the former "poor whites" in the southern country of the United States, and alongside of them there developed a mode of production which was not capitalist but depended upon slavery.—Letter of Karl Marx to the Editor of a Russian journal, 1877 (*The Correspondence of Marx and Engels*, p. 354).