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Wanted: Another Richard Cobden

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"THE REGION north of the human ear is the greatest home for the unemployed that has ever been discovered. There is something there to think with, but we just do hate to do it," said Strickland Gillilan.

"Thinking is something new to man and he does it badly," wrote H. L. Mencken. George Bernard Shaw added: "Few people think more than two or three times a year. I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week."

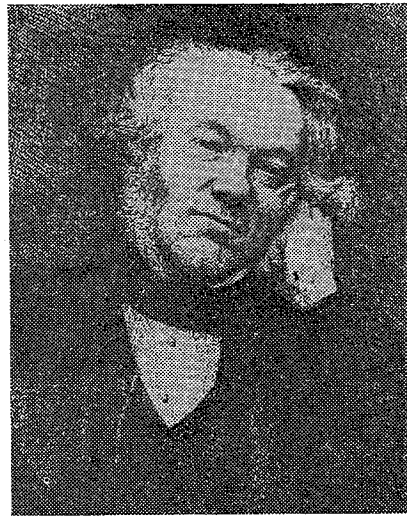
Richard Cobden was a textile salesman capable of thinking, and became such a successful one that he founded a firm of which he became a partner. He was also a keen student of economic principles and an authority on Adam Smith and his *Wealth of Nations*.

Cobden found that the free market, with equal opportunity and no special privilege would give everyone the greatest incentive to cooperate—and the best results for all. As a good place to start toward this goal he considered the repeal of the Corn Laws, or tariffs on the free trade in grain. ("corn" in Europe refers to any small grain, specifically the principle grain of the country, as, in England, wheat).

Great authorities told him the Corn Laws were embedded in English tradition and were not likely to be repealed. Cobden took the challenge however, and in seven years of educational work from 1839 to 1846 he taught enough business men and workingmen to perform the impossible. On June 26, 1846 the Corn Laws were repealed through a three-year sliding scale. This year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of his great accomplishment in adult education.

Cobden was the fourth of eleven children brought up on a small farm. His father lacked the ability to hang on to his modest fortune despite the native sense of his mother, and Richard was sent away to one of those wretched schools which Dickens made immortal. He grew to have a deep interest in the causes of poverty, and felt business a release from the misery of his school. He went from clerk to traveling salesman and continued his education with energy, in the coaches and commercial rooms of provincial hotels. Here was fresh and real matter to which he could apply his independent intelligence. The depression of 1825 and 1826 bankrupted his employers and also a man whom he greatly admired, Sir Walter Scott. One of his employers started a new partnership and sought out this able young man, who went on the road with samples of muslin and calico for two years before starting his own firm with two friends. Trade was hampered by a heavy duty on calicoes which he and other calico printers succeeded in taking off in 1831. Trade blossomed and Cobden was inspired to study Adam Smith to find out the natural laws which would make business satisfy human desires more effectively and bring each a greater prosperity.

The Corn Laws came forcibly to Cobden's



Richard Cobden

attention in 1835 when tariff-raised high prices for grain had brought a big planting of acreage and the weather had blessed Britain with a bumper wheat crop. Prices came tumbling down. The workingman could buy his food for half his previous expense since he lived largely on cereals. Labor was able to buy manufactured goods it had only longed for previously.

Cobden saw that these laws and high prices for grain had offered inducement to many to bid for the right to use more land to grow grain. Landholders were happy to dangle higher rents before each new bidder and garnered almost all of the benefits of higher prices. The working farmer who was supposed to be helped, saw no increase in his net profits or wages from the Corn Laws. Richard Cobden concluded that Adam Smith was right when he said that the collection of ground dues instead of other taxes, such as tariffs or excises or income taxes, was the only way to benefit everyone according to his energy and ability. He saw this as the longer objective toward an incentive management of society but he took free trade as his short term goal.

In 1835 Cobden went to see for himself the America he already admired. He had written a pamphlet, "England, Ireland and America," and had become known as an acute and original thinker—a liberal who wrote clearly and interestingly. After his return he was asked to speak at a public meeting. He consented but appeared tongue-tied and confused. This failure was a challenge to the concise writer who set out to master the art of telling his views as interestingly as he wrote them. Gradually he came to be much in demand as a speaker.

The fall of 1838 brought excited torchlight meetings, destruction of property and great alarms under the lead of the Chartists. Cobden was not disturbed, feeling that the political knavery of those in power required an anti-

dote, even though this rash group was misled. He said, "I think the scattered elements may yet be rallied around the question of the Corn Laws. It appears to me that a moral and even a religious spirit may be infused into that topic, and if agitated in the same manner that the question of slavery has been, it will be irresistible."

Later he wrote—"Let me pray you to strike a blow for us for education. I have unbounded faith in the people, and would risk universal suffrage tomorrow in preference to the present franchise. But we shall never obtain even an approach toward such a change, except by one of two paths—revolution or the schoolhouse. By the latter means we shall make permanent reform; by the former we shall only effect convulsive and transient changes, to fall back again like Italy, or Spain, into despotism or anarchy."

In January 1839 Cobden inspired the Anti-Corn Law Association to raise money for action. Within one month £6,000 had been raised—equal to about \$30,000 at the time, when such a sum had much higher buying power than today, in man hours of labor. This was to be a "Smithian society" to disseminate through the world the ideas of the great luminary, Adam Smith, for a just knowledge of the principles of trade. It was to concentrate on a partial application of these ideas toward the early abolition of the Corn Laws. In 1839, three members of the executive committee were visited by a nobleman who had taken an active part toward modification, but not repeal, of the Corn Laws. He asked what brought them to London. When they said the total and immediate repeal of the Corn Laws he answered, "You will overturn the monarchy as soon as you will accomplish that." Such was the gloomy outlook at the start.

Cobden was indefatigable in corresponding with writers from all parts of England, and in culling the important points from each. His league published an able paper, poured out pamphlets and sent speakers everywhere. He was convinced that this "schoolhouse" was the best way. His associates came to feel that his talents would educate faster if he spoke from a seat in Parliament. Stockport people and Bolton people both got assurance to Cobden that he would be elected from either if he would but stand. He declined. The pressure continued more strongly until he consented and was elected, or "returned" from Stockport, with triumphant eclat over a military major, in 1841. The Tories, with help from the Whigs, organized a great administration which Cobden and the league slowly broke to pieces in five years of debate, argument and persuasion. The bitter condition of the working classes in 1841 was brought forcibly to the attention of the M. P.'s in his maiden speech and definitely related to the Corn Laws. He pointed out that the bread tax paid by the family of a noble landholder amounted to only 1/24th of 1 per cent of their

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income, while the effect of the tax on the family of the laboring man was not less than 20 per cent. A fact of this kind left a sting in the minds of his hearers. Cobden's persuasive appeals to logic continued through the years, but he had an old friend, a weighty Quaker from Rochdale, who had great influence through his ability to sway men with emotions as well as argument. His name was John Bright.

In the fall of 1841 Cobden went to visit John Bright whose young wife lay dead upstairs. Bright later remarked, "Mr. Cobden called upon me as his friend and addressed me as you might suppose with words of condolence. After a time he looked up and said, 'There are thousands of houses in England at this moment where wives, mothers and children are dying of hunger. Now, when the first paroxysm of your grief is passed, I would advise you to come with me, and we will never rest until the Corn Law is repealed.' I accepted his invitation. I felt in my conscience that there was a work which somebody must do . . ."

For the next five years Bright said that they devoted themselves without stint for every working hour to the discussion of this question.

The picture of these two plain business men leaving their homes and businesses, going up and down the country to convert the nation, had about it something of the apostolic. It caught the public imagination. It dramatized economic principles so that everyone discussed the Corn Laws and tariffs. Cobden combined fervor and imagination with logic. He sifted interviews and correspondence all day long, alert for a useful fact, a telling illustration, or a new fallacy to expose.

The secret of Richard Cobden, scores of people agreed, was persuasiveness. He made his way to men's minds and hearts by simplicity, earnestness and conviction, with a facility for apt and homely illustration. He made his arguments easy of admission and undeniable. Men

were attracted by his mental alacrity, and by the instant readiness with which he turned to grapple with a new objection. He was never at a loss and he never hesitated. Disraeli called this "Cobden's sauciness." It was effective because it sprang not from presumption but from mastery of the subject.

Smart journalists often disparaged Cobden as a common manufacturer without an idea in his head beyond buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest. The most refined man of letters in Europe, however, Prosper Merimee, saw a great deal of him at Cannes one winter. "Cobden," he wrote to an intimate, "is a man of extremely interesting mind; quite the opposite of an Englishman, in this respect, that you never hear him talk commonplaces and that he has few prejudices."

Cobden spoke vigorously against what he called the land-tax fraud, or evasions of land value taxes, from time to time; but he believed with Bacon that if you have a handful of truths you should open but one finger at a time. The finger which he kept open was always pointing the possible benefits that would accrue through repeal of the Corn Laws.

He asked all to contribute time and money in order to save the rest from confiscation. "There are not a hundred men in the Commons," he said, "or twenty in the Lords, who at heart are anxious for total repeal [of tariffs]. They are coerced by the out-of-doors opinion. The only way in which the soul of a great nation can be stirred is by appealing to its sympathies with a true principle in its unalloyed simplicity." Such was the faith of this remarkable man, and he continually dramatized it by his utterances.

In 1844 Richard Cobden had reminded the House that Ireland had levied an import duty of 18 shillings on every quarter (8 bushels) of foreign wheat. Would it be believed that a country periodically on the verge of famine had a law virtually prohibiting the importation of bread? In 1845 the potato crop failed in Ireland, the crisis was upon them, and repeal was inevitable. Cobden, called upon that same year to make an important speech before Parliament, felt nervous and uncertain, but a friend assured him that this nervousness would wear off, and it did. He threw himself into the familiar argument and delivered a powerful address. When he sat down, Sir Robert Peel, who, as head of the government, had been taking notes to answer him, crumpled up his papers and said to his assistant, "You may answer him. I cannot."

Probably there never was an economic or political issue on which the average English citizen was so well educated. When finally on June 26, 1846 Peel's delayed repeal was passed, he stated that this repeal of the Corn Laws was a tribute to Richard Cobden's "reason and eloquence."

Cobden did the impossible, and he did it in seven years. Faced with a choice between bankruptcy or the surrender of his cause, he did not hesitate to sacrifice his business. While he did not solve the real problem of the Enclosures (10,000,000 acres grabbed by noblemen and their friends) he did point a method — the widespread education of business men. Now, a hundred year later, we have a permanent program in adult education through the Henry George School of Social Science with branches in 22 American cities. One of these days, perhaps very soon, a successor to Cobden or Bright may step out of our classes.