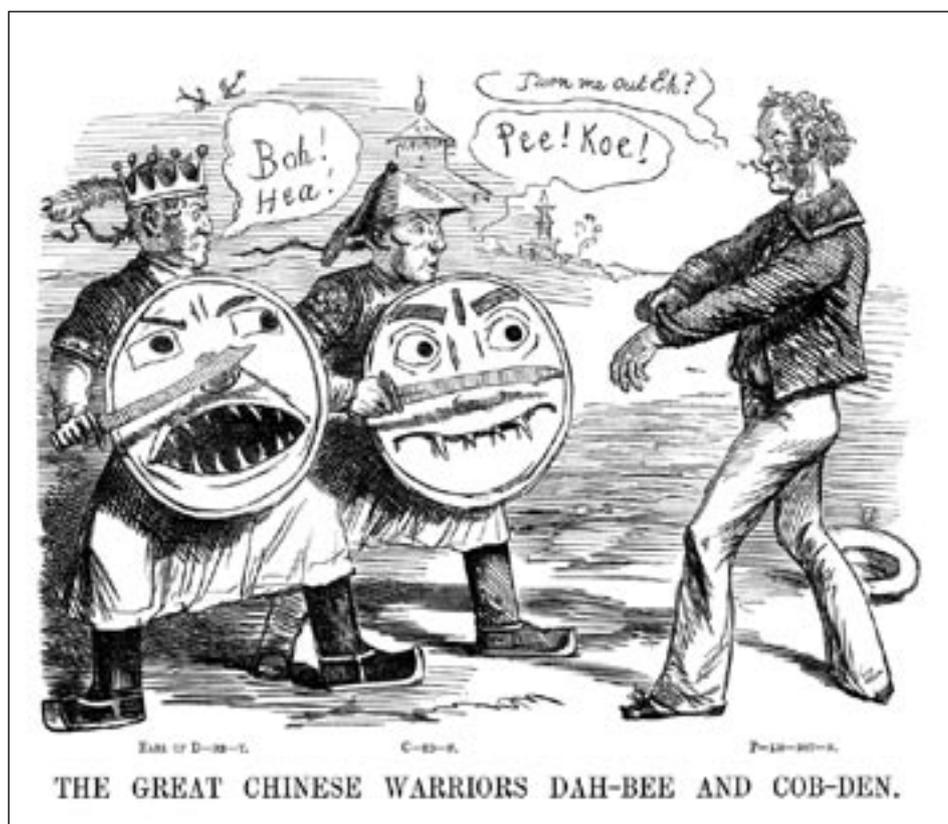


# RICHARD COBDEN AND

To mark the bicentenary of the birth of Richard Cobden (1804–65), one of the founding fathers of British Liberalism, **Simon Morgan** analyses Cobden's critique of British imperialism, which Cobden saw as at best a drain on British resources, and at worst a major cause of instability in British foreign relations and a threat to Britain's moral standing in the wider world. He argues that these views were shaped by Cobden's Christian belief in a Providential world order, and that an appreciation of this moral idealism is also crucial to understanding Cobden's beliefs in the essentially benign nature of the free market.



'The great Chinese Warriors Dah-bee and Cob-den', from *Punch* (7 March 1857). Reproduced with the permission of *Punch, Ltd.*

This year marks 200 years since the birth of Richard Cobden – one of the most important influences on the early Liberal Party, who promoted what became its three main shibboleths: free trade, peace and retrenchment.<sup>1</sup> Today, Cobden is remembered primarily for his leadership of the Anti-Corn Law League, which helped to usher in the long era of British free trade, and also for his outspoken criticism of Palmerston's aggressive foreign policies, a stance which has led A. J. P. Taylor to dub him one of the quintessential 'trouble-makers'.<sup>2</sup>

A key component of Cobden's critique of British foreign policy was his anti-imperialism,

which later inspired such prominent critics of Empire as J. A. Hobson.<sup>3</sup> This essay analyses that critique, arguing that imperialism was a major stumbling block to the realisation of Cobden's ultimate goal, the creation of a world order based on peaceful commercial intercourse between sovereign nations.<sup>4</sup> In the process, it demonstrates that Cobden's views on this issue owed much to his Christian beliefs in a world shaped by divine Providence – beliefs that informed much of his political and economic thought, but which have been downplayed by historians and biographers.

Cobden's critique of British imperialism may be broadly considered under two headings: the financial costs of colonial

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government, and the broader instability caused by British imperial ambitions, including the formal seizure of territory, the establishment of 'spheres of influence' across the globe, and the violent 'opening up' of markets in Asia to British manufactures.

As regards the former, it was during his tour of the Mediterranean in 1836–37 that Cobden seems to have begun thinking about the cost of maintaining Britain's foreign possessions and garrisons. In his letters and diaries, he compiled information on the salaries of various colonial functionaries, noted cases of nepotism (such as the step-brother of the late Lord Canning, who was Captain of the Port of Malta), and deplored the expense of the elaborate fortifications at Gibraltar.<sup>5</sup> Once back home, he promised the Edinburgh publisher William Tait an article on the colonies.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the project was shelved indefinitely due to other calls on his time and pen. By the end of 1837 he was embroiled in the campaign for the Incorporation of Manchester under the Municipal Reform Act of 1835, and by the end of the following year in the campaign for the repeal of the Corn Laws.

Nonetheless, this was more the beginning than the end of Cobden's concern with colonial government. During the anti-corn-law campaign, Cobden realised that the colonies were not simply a job-creation scheme for younger sons of the aristocracy (though this was a theme to which he would return), but that colonial commercial interests were also a major bastion of monopoly and a barrier to freedom of trade.

He was particularly irritated by the way in which the West Indian planters, who had only liberated their slaves in 1837 after they had extorted a huge compensation package from the British government, now cynically manipulated anti-slavery sentiments to support the differential duty on colonial sugar – arguing that prohibitive duties on slave-grown sugar were necessary to offset the increased production costs of the newly freed colonial labour force. While Cobden deplored slavery, he contended that the real way to combat it was not through prohibition of slave-grown produce, but by demonstrating that free labour was more efficient. He argued that protection merely led to waste and inefficiency on the part of the planters, while the system of colonial preference also raised costs by preventing the purchase of food and other goods from the United States – meaning that the West Indian colonies had to depend on more expensive supplies from Britain. In the meantime, he thought, British ports should be opened to all sugar to give the British working classes access to cheap supplies of this commodity.

Cobden's views on the matter were rejected by the mainstream anti-slavery movement, though he remained on good terms with several of its leaders, particularly Joseph Sturge. Increasingly, however, Cobden was turning his attention to the whole issue of imperialism as a threat to peace and as a potentially limitless drain on the resources of Britain itself. This threat was twofold. First, each new colony or sphere of influence became a potential

flashpoint between Britain and the other great powers. In 1856–57, for example, he was particularly worried that Anglo-American imperial rivalries over the Mosquito Coast (now part of Nicaragua) might lead to an armed confrontation between naval vessels belonging to the two countries, and possibly to a full-scale war.<sup>7</sup> It was one of Cobden's foremost concerns in the 1850s and 1860s to avoid such confrontations. This was at the heart of his doctrine of 'non-intervention' in European disputes, of his attempts to promote a system of arbitration in the case of international disagreements, and also of his attempts to reform international maritime law to guarantee the rights of neutral vessels not carrying contraband of war against impediment by belligerent powers in times of conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Second, there was the all too real danger that imperial functionaries on the ground, whether civilian or military, might use their powers to acquire territories in the name of Great Britain, therefore allowing them to call on the military might of the home country to defend their acquisitions. One of the classic instances of this peripheral expansion was the carving out of a private empire in Borneo by James 'Rajah' Brooke of Sarawak, while he also held the official posts of Consul General of Borneo and Governor of Labuan. Cobden and John Bright were sickened by Brooke's reception as a hero in Britain and, along with Joseph Hume, orchestrated a campaign against him, which echoed, perhaps consciously, the Foxite Whigs' epic impeachment of Warren Hastings for alleged

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corruption during his tenure as the first Governor-General of India. In the end, Brooke escaped official and public censure, while Cobden's own reputation suffered as it was thought he had placed too much emphasis on the testimony of Brooke's personal enemies.<sup>9</sup>

Undaunted, Cobden revisited the theme in one of his lesser-known pamphlets, *How Wars are Got Up in India* (1853).<sup>10</sup> The bulk of this publication consists of an almost forensic reconstruction of the chain of events leading to the outbreak of the Burmese War in 1852. It cites the immediate cause of the war as the actions of Commodore Lambert, who had been dispatched to Rangoon on the authority of Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General of India, to investigate a claim for damages made by two British captains fined for misdemeanours committed in Burmese waters. Dalhousie gave Lambert specific instructions not to enter into hostilities; but after a perceived snub from the Governor of Rangoon, Lambert blockaded the port, seized a Burmese naval vessel and attempted to remove it from territorial waters, despite being warned that shore batteries would open fire if this were attempted. Shots were then exchanged and formal hostilities commenced. Cobden deplored Lambert's departure from his instructions, but also censured the Governor-General for retrospectively condoning his actions. Moreover, despite acknowledging the fact that it was contrary to British interests and would be an expensive drain on the resources of the Government of India, the acquisition of Burmese territory was accepted by Dalhousie as inevitable in order to maintain Britain's standing in the eyes of the Burmese.<sup>11</sup>

For espousing such anti-imperialist views, Cobden has often been criticised as a 'Little Englander', interested only in the balance sheet rather than in Britain's international prestige. However, this is a misconception. Cobden believed that Britain's

power stemmed from the extent of its trade and manufactures, rather than from the possession of extensive overseas territory; hence he saw it as an essential task to inform the public that colonies actually cost money rather than making it. Moreover, Cobden's writings demonstrate that he had a rather jealous eye to Britain's moral reputation abroad. While this may seem unsurprising given his range of foreign contacts, including leading liberals in France, Italy, Germany and the United States, it was also essential for the triumph of his free-trade ideas that Britain be seen as open and honest, rather than as a self-serving and devious bully. Increasingly, he saw imperialism as the greatest threat to this wider moral standing.

He was critical of Britain's propensity to take a firmer line over trivial issues when dealing with technologically less advanced nations than she would with other great powers, such as the United States. Indeed, he pointed out that, at the time of the Burmese war, Britain was involved in a stand-off with the United States in Central America, where the initial readiness to trade threats could only result in an embarrassing climb-down and by which 'our cannon will have been the cause of our humiliation'.<sup>12</sup> He grew particularly angry when the slaughter of large numbers of primitively equipped native peoples by heavily armed and highly trained British troops was greeted as a proud victory. In *How Wars are Got Up* he cited the response of General Cass in the US Senate to the Burmese war, started over a claim for compensation of less than £1,000, as an example of the damage done to Britain's moral influence: 'The whole history of human contests ... exhibits no such national provocation, followed by such national punishment ... *Well does it become such a people to preach homilies to other nations upon disinterestedness and moderation.*'<sup>13</sup>

Cobden consistently highlighted the hypocrisy of a nation

supposedly guided by Christian morality brutally imposing its will on other peoples and races across the globe. With regard to Brooke's activities in Borneo, he told his fellow peace campaigner Henry Richard:

It shocks me to think what fiendish atrocities may be committed by English arms without rousing any conscientious resistance at home, provided they be only far enough off, and the victims too feeble to trouble us with their remonstrances or groans.<sup>14</sup>

Though the influence of Cobden's religious notions on his political thought is seldom talked about, the number of times his letters and other writings hint at divine retribution for Britain's imperial activities in the east is striking. In the conclusion of his pamphlet on the Burma war, he appealed to the national conscience 'which has before averted from England, by timely atonement and reparation, the punishment due for imperial crimes' to put an end 'to the deeds of violence and injustice which have marked every step of our progress in India'.<sup>15</sup> In a letter to Henry Richard, he put it more forcefully: 'If God really rules this earth (as I solemnly believe He does) upon the principle of a self-acting retributive justice, then British doings in India and China involve a serious reckoning with us or our children.'<sup>16</sup> Cobden's words came to seem unusually prescient on the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, even to those who did not share his belief in a divine and retributive Providence.

Cobden's Christian morality may be disturbing to modern eyes, and indeed it led him to some distinctly illiberal statements over preferring the Christian despotism of Russia to the Islamic despotism of the Ottomans. However, the notion of a divinely ordered creation was central to his beliefs in the international division of labour and the benign operation of the free market. The

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theory ran that each region of the globe had been bestowed by the creator with certain natural advantages and resources, enabling it to produce particular goods more economically than others. Each region could then exchange their specialities with other regions in return for goods that they were unable to produce economically themselves.<sup>17</sup>

However, while many Evangelicals, including humanitarians such as Lord Shaftesbury, saw Britain's acquisition of an overseas empire as a Providentially ordained opportunity to spread the gospel among the heathen, Cobden's belief in non-intervention caused him to reject the so-called 'civilising mission'.<sup>18</sup> Instead, he saw a moral corruption at the heart of even such a supposedly benign and enlightened form of imperial rule as the British Empire purported to be, and its fundamental discrepancy with the New Testament message of peace and love. Unfortunately, during the Indian Mutiny it was the Old Testament god of battles and bloody revenge that held sway. The real and imagined atrocities of the rebels were met with even more brutal suppression, legitimated by an intense and disturbing public blood-lust. Cobden counted himself lucky that his defeat at the Huddersfield election earlier that year, a result of his unflagging opposition to the Crimean War, meant that there was no onus on him to address the public on the Mutiny. However, to his credit he continued to advocate restraint on the part of British forces trying to relieve the beleaguered garrisons at Cawnpore and Lucknow.

The Mutiny spelt the end for the system of dual government that he had attacked in *How Wars are Got Up*: the power of the East India Company was ended and henceforth India was to be ruled by a Viceroy responsible directly to the British government. Nonetheless, Cobden was content to let Bright busy himself with the details of governmental reform in India, while he himself continued

to believe that the British had no right to be there at all. Ironically, by paving the way for the abolition of the East India Company and establishing more clearly the link between India and the British government, the Indian Mutiny actually seemed to strengthen the equation of colonial possessions with British prestige.

During the 1850s and 1860s, Cobden was forced to witness the subversion of his free-trade ideals to justify the aggressive foreign policies of Lord Palmerston. Particularly after the Don Pacifico affair of 1850, when the government blockaded Greek ports to obtain redress for a nominally 'British' merchant, supposed transgressions against British interests, or the need to protect freedom of commerce, were frequently used as justifications for British aggression, while colonial expansion itself was defended as a way of acquiring markets for surplus manufactures.<sup>19</sup> Nowhere was this more blatant than in the Far East, where China and Japan were kept open to western trade by naval bombardments of the ports of Canton (1856) and Kagoshima (1863) respectively. Cobden argued that free trade had to be achieved peacefully and voluntarily in order to achieve the ideal of lasting peace based on mutual interdependence.

He was also farsighted enough to realise that the easy victories achieved in the east by western arms were primarily due to a technological advantage that was purely temporary.<sup>20</sup> Though his belief in divine Providence persuaded him that particular races had been endowed with physical characteristics that suited them to life in particular latitudes, a theory that he used to attack white colonies in the tropics as 'unnatural', Cobden was more or less unburdened by the theories of the inherent racial superiority of Europeans which guided his later nineteenth-century counterparts. He therefore realised that it was only a matter of time before free trade in weapons allowed the



**Richard Cobden in youth and middle age.**

Chinese and Japanese to possess advanced armaments, at which point the balance of power would shift as decisively as the Mosquito Coast episode demonstrated it already had done in the case of Britain's relationship with the United States.

To Cobden, Britain's expanding empire was not a source of national strength, but of weakness. The cost of the colonies,

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their governments and garrisons, were at best a drain on precious resources, which, instead of being invested in peaceful and productive commercial pursuits, merely helped to sustain that most parasitic of classes, the British aristocracy, by providing employment for their younger sons in both civil and military posts. While the consequent high levels of taxation dragged Britain down, other powers free of colonial entanglements, such as the United States, would have a clear field to usurp Britain's commercial dominance. At worst, the colonies were a Sword of Damocles that could precipitate Britain into a war at any moment.

However, the colonies also had a more insidious impact on the nation's strength by sapping its moral authority in the wider world. Armed interventions and massacres would only undermine that authority, regardless of whether they were carried out under the banner of 'free trade' or the 'civilising mission'. This meant that formal empire was unacceptable in any circumstances – an aspect of his thought that subsequent admirers, especially those brought up with a belief in the benefits of British imperialism, found difficult to swallow, even if they accepted the validity of Cobden's economic arguments.<sup>21</sup>

Cobden's attitude towards informal empire is more difficult to pin down. Indeed, some of his arguments during the 1840s seemed to suggest that Britain could in effect subordinate the entire world economy to her needs by using free trade to ensure that potential competitors became suppliers of raw materials and foodstuffs, rather than being encouraged by British tariffs on those items to develop their own manufacturing base. Ultimately however, he was a believer in Adam Smith's doctrine that the well-being and prosperity of each individual nation depended on the well-being and prosperity of every other nation. It was to Britain's advantage that other

states developed economically so that they could afford more of her goods; the exploitation of the weak by the strong, whether directly through imperial domination or indirectly through the imposition of unfair conditions of trade (as in China), would eventually prove to the detriment of all.

It seems fitting to finish with Cobden's own words on this subject, contained in a letter to G. and C. Merriam and Co. of the United States on receiving from them a copy of Webster's *Dictionary*:

A public man can no longer labour with success for the benefit of his own Country without promoting the interests of mankind at large ... To hasten the advent of that era when international prejudices shall disappear before the universal conviction that the interests of each nation are bound up in the prosperity of all other nations, shall be one of the great objects of my public life.<sup>22</sup>

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1 The major biographies of Cobden are: John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1881); Nicholas Edsall, *Richard Cobden: Independent Radical* (Harvard University Press, 1986); and Wendy Hinde, *Richard Cobden: A Victorian Outsider* (Yale University

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- Press, 1986).
- 2 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy 1792–1939* (London: Hamilton, 1957), chap. 2. The major works on the League are Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838–46* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958); and Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (New York: Leicester University Press, 2000).
  - 3 J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London, 1902). See Peter Cain, 'J. A. Hobson, Cobdenism, and the Radical Theory of Economic Imperialism, 1898–1914', *Economic History Review* 31 (1978), pp. 565–84 and the subsequent debate with P. F. Clarke, *Economic History Review* 34 (1981), pp. 308–16 – all reprinted in John C. Wood and Robert D. Wood (eds.), *John A. Hobson: Critical Assessments of Leading Economists*, 3 vols. (London: Routledge, 2003), ii, pp. 184–219; See also Cain, *Hobson and Imperialism: Radicalism, New Liberalism and Finance 1887–1938* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
  - 4 For a critical assessment of Cobden's internationalism, see Peter Cain, 'Capitalism, Imperialism and Internationalism in the Thought of Richard Cobden', *British Journal of International Studies*, 5, 3 (1979), pp. 229–47.
  - 5 Cobden's journals from this trip are in the *Cobden Papers*, British Library (hereafter *Cobden Papers*): Add. MS 43672 A and B.
  - 6 Cobden to Tait, 15 August 1837. *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 43665, ff. 387–8.
  - 7 For example, Cobden to John Bright, 29 Oct. 1855, *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 43650 ff. 142–3; Cobden to George Wilson, 2 Nov. 1855, *Wilson Papers*, Manchester Central Library: M20 vol. 23.
  - 8 These ideas are encapsulated in Cobden's 'Letter to Henry Ashworth', reprinted in *The Political Writings of Richard Cobden*, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1868), ii, pp. 5–22.
  - 9 Edsall, *Richard Cobden*, pp. 238–9; Graham Irwin, *Nineteenth Century Borneo: A Study in Diplomatic Rivalry* (The Hague, 1955), chap. 7, especially p. 144; L. R. Wright, *The Origins of British Borneo* (Hong Kong University Press, 1970), pp. 25–26.
  - 10 *Political Writings*, ii, pp. 27–106.
  - 11 *Ibid.* pp. 102–03.
  - 12 Cobden to Henry Richard, 10 Aug. 1852. *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 43657 ff. 140–1; partially printed in J. A. Hobson, *Richard Cobden: The International Man* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1918), pp. 86–87.
  - 13 *Political Writings* ii, p. 105 n. Cobden's emphasis.
  - 14 Cobden to Henry Richard, 6 Dec. 1849. *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 53657; reprinted in Hobson, *Richard Cobden: The International Man*, pp. 60–62.

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- 16 Cobden to Henry Richard, 10 Aug. 1852. *Cobden Papers*, BL Add. MS 43657 ff. 140–1; partially printed in Hobson, *Richard Cobden*, pp. 86–87.
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- 20 Cobden to Henry Richard, 2 Nov. 1863. *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 43659 ff. 237–40; printed in Hobson, *Richard Cobden*, pp. 313–15.
- 21 Particularly W. H. Dawson, *Richard Cobden and Foreign Policy: A Critical Exposition, with Special Reference to Our Day and its Problems* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926), chap. 9.
- 22 Cobden to G. & C. Merriam, 10 August 1850. G. & C. Merriam Company Archive, Beinecke Rare Books and Music Library, Yale University: GEN MSS 370.

# THE BRITISH LIBERAL POLITICAL STUDIES GROUP

Over the past few decades the Liberal Democrats have expanded greatly as a political party across Great Britain. In Scotland and Wales they have formed part of the government, and at Westminster, in local government and in the European Parliament they have become a serious political force.

As the Liberal Democrats have developed, so academic interest in both the contemporary party and its Liberal and SDP predecessors has increased. The British Liberal Political Studies Group has therefore been set up, as a sub-group of the Political Studies Association (PSA), to coordinate and encourage the academic study of British Liberal politics, both contemporary and historical.

## Purpose of group

The British Liberal Political Studies Group aims to cover the following areas:

1. Political campaigning in both historical and contemporary contexts

connected with the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP.

2. Policy development and creation within the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP.
3. The history of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP.
4. The history of Liberal political groups associated with British Liberal politics.
5. Important historical events.
6. Analysis of leadership within the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP.
7. The study of Liberal and Liberal Democrat state and regional parties in both historical and contemporary contexts.
8. The study of the Liberal Party both in opposition and in government.
9. The study of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP's past and predicted election results, opinion polling and party development at local, regional,

national and European levels.

10. An examination of the interrelationship between British Liberal politics and related political parties outside the United Kingdom.

## Proposed activities

1. Panels – to organise one or two panels on the topic of British Liberal Political Studies at the annual PSA conference, and other occasional day conferences at various venues.
2. To hold an annual conference.
3. To organise meetings at appropriate Liberal Democrat state and federal conferences.
4. Communications. The circulation among members of a Directory with names and email addresses.
5. To contribute towards the *Journal of Liberal History*.
6. Annual Report – preparation of the annual

report of the specialist group submitted to the PSA.

## Newsletter

A twice-yearly newsletter will be established within the group.

## Membership

Initially free for 2004–05; rising to £20 per annum, including a yearly subscription to the *Journal of Liberal History*.

## Convenor and membership registration:

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