

# Agitators for Reform

Richard Cobden 1804-1865  
James Edwin Thorold Rogers  
1823-1890

The Rogers and Cobden families met when the Cobdens became tenants of the Rogers at West Meon in 1814. Thorald Rogers and Richard Cobden became brothers-in-law when Thorald's brother, **John Blyth Rogers**, married Richard Cobden's sister, **Emma** in 1827. Later they became close friends and Thorald was very influenced by Richard's views on economics.

## Classics and politics

Thorald Rogers, the 14<sup>th</sup> child of **George Vining Rogers** and **Mary Ann Blyth**, was educated at King's College in London and Magdalen Hall at Oxford, completing his studies at Oxford with a Master of Arts in 1849. He was initially known for his expertise on the classics and philosophy, publishing work on Aristotle and translating many works of the classical poets into English. Following his studies he was ordained in the Church of England and became curate at St. Paul's, Oxford. However, Thorald was becoming more interested in politics, perhaps due to his association with Richard, and so decided to leave the clergy. To be able to do this, he became a prominent proponent of the Clerical Disabilities Relief Act that would allow clerics to resign their holy orders. In 1870, he was the first churchman to resign under this Act.



Thorald Rogers 1862 in Oxford. Photo: T & C Shrimpton Oxford. Source: *The Family Papers of J.E.T. Rogers*

## Hard times

Richard Cobden, the 4th child of **William Cobden** and **Millicent Amber**, also made his mark on the laws of England. However, his start in life was different to Thorald's. Due to a combination of an economic downturn, and poor management at home, as a child he experienced much poverty in rural Sussex, and only was able to receive an education due to an uncle who paid his school fees. He was sent to a school in Yorkshire that had a harsh reputation for its treatment of the boys, and it was here he suffered severe frostbite that caused him permanent injury. He finished school at age 15 and went to work in his uncle's textile factory, eventually becoming a commercial traveller and consequently learning much about the cotton and textile industries. Richard then moved to Manchester and went into a partnership in a calico printing works.

Through being part of Manchester's manufacturing sector, Richard could see how the high English import duties on corn and wheat (the Corn Laws designed to protect English landowners), were restricting the manufacturing industry's exporting ability. With economists such as the Quaker, John Bright and others, Richard set up the Anti-Corn Law League and began agitation through public speaking and pamphlets, to repeal the Corn Laws. Certainly, as manufacturers, self-interest was a major factor in this free-trade movement, but they could also see how when the local corn and wheat crops failed, imported crops caused inflated bread prices that led to near starvation in the poorer classes. Richard had seen this first hand in his native Sussex. The League was eventually successful in 1846 when the Corn Laws were finally repealed.



Richard Cobden as a young orator.  
Source: rvisiondaydreamlabs.com

### Crowd funding friends



Richard Cobden albumen  
carte-de-visite c1860 by  
Maujean. Source: National  
Portrait Gallery, London

During Richard's campaigning for the Anti-Corn Law League, he became bankrupt, but a public subscription raising £80,000 enabled him to buy back *Dunford House*, his ancestral home near Midhurst in West Sussex, that his father had to forfeit in 1809. Today it is a conference centre<sup>1</sup>. Richard was much celebrated at home and internationally. In Australia, the Victorian towns of Cobden and Bright were named after Richard and his colleague. He travelled widely and met with many statesmen including Emperor Louis Napoleon (with whom he negotiated a free trade agreement with France on behalf of the British government), the Austro-Hungarian Emperor, and even the Pope. In Paris he met with Victor Hugo and chose him to be chairman for a Peace Committee he set up there. With all this recognition, Richard remained unaffected in himself. His first biographer John Morley wrote:

With his long hair and unfashionable hat, his rustic clothes and homely umbrella, he had the air of an honest countryman come to see the marvels of the town.<sup>2</sup>

### Meticulous researcher

Agrarian prices were of a particular interest to Thorold Rogers too, as well as the social condition throughout history of the lower classes particularly the rural poor. He was recognized for his meticulous research on the inter-relationship between politics and prices (political economy) publishing in 1866, his most important and extensive

study *History of Agriculture and Prices*. His expertise in the classics, philosophy and economics also led him to hold important professorial positions at Oxford University and King's College in London.

### **Progressive views**

Although there was a large difference in age, the two men became close friends sharing many similar social and political ideas. Both had what was considered to be progressive views in their day. Richard believed free trade not only would remove protection for the privileged landowning classes, but that it would promote international peace and an inter-dependence among nations. In 1860 the British government sent him to France where he negotiated an important trade treaty (he had also taught himself French). He also attended several peace conferences and believed governments should not waste money on expensive military campaigns.

Thorald had been an outspoken opponent of the actions of Governor Eyre in Jamaica, where that governor directed the killing and flogging of thousands of black peasants in order to put down a rebellion. Both men supported the cause of the northern states in the American Civil War. Although a devout Anglican, Thorald was a strong supporter of the National Education League that advocated making secular education available for all children.



Thorald Rogers caricature by Leslie Ward from *Vanity Fair* 1884. Source: Wikimedia Commons

### **Members of Parliament**

Richard was offered some important government positions, and mostly declined them. But in 1841 he entered the House of Commons as the member for Stockport, and later the West Riding of Yorkshire, and also Rochdale in 1859. At one time he lost his seat due to his opposition to the Crimean war.

Thorald also became a member of parliament. From 1880-1885 he was a member for Southwark and later Bermondsey, and in 1886 supported Prime Minister Gladstone in enabling the first Home Rule Act (allowing Irish limited self-determination), although this caused him to lose his seat in 1887.

### **Family parallels - achievements and tragedies**

There were also some parallels in the two men's personal lives. Both lost a son in tragic circumstances, and both had daughters who were promoters of women's rights.



## Talented and progressive daughters

Richard married a Welsh woman, Catherine Anne Williams in 1840 and they had five daughters and one son who survived infancy. When the children were young the family lived in Manchester, then London, and later, Midhurst in West Sussex. Of his daughters, Kate married a lawyer Richard Chester Fisher who was useful in the Cobden Club, formed after her father's death, Ellen Melicent Ashburner Cobden was a novelist and first of the three wives of artist William Sickert, Emma Jane Catherine Cobden-Unwin was a suffragist and radical, Julia Sarah Anne Cobden-Sanderson was a suffragette and a socialist. The youngest, Lucy Elizabeth Margaret Cobden only lived to 29 years of age.

## Cobden's dreadful journey

In 1856, the Cobden's son Richard, when away at school in Germany, died from scarlet fever. He was 15 years old and the Cobdens never got over this terrible loss. In a letter to a friend, Richard wrote of the ordeal of having to inform his wife of their son's death:

'..... the third letter I opened informed me that my dear boy, who by the latest accounts was described as the healthiest and strongest in the school, was dead and in his grave. No one not placed in the same situation can form the faintest conception of my task in making the journey to this place [his home Dunford], which took me five hours, bearing a secret which I knew was worse than a sentence of death on my poor wife..... I tried to manage my communication, but the dreadful journey had been too much for me, and I broke down instantly, and was obliged to confess all. She did not comprehend the loss, but was only stunned; and for twenty-four hours was actually lavishing attentions on me, and superintending her household as before. ....'<sup>13</sup>



Richard (Dick) Cobden who died in Germany age 15. Source: West Sussex Record Office



## Inconsolable grief

In a letter some months later, he wrote of his wife's grieving:

'My poor wife, makes but slow progress in the recovery of her health. She is on the lawn or in the field all day with a little spade in hand, digging up the weeds. .... The open air must give her strength, but as yet she has not been able to pass a night without aid of opiates.'<sup>14</sup>

Richard's wife Catherine Anne Cobden 1877 Engraving, artist unknown. Source: *Illustrated London News Ltd*/Mary Evans

And in another letter:

'She is as helpless as one of her young children, and requires as much forbearance and kindness. God, knows how much the comfort and regularity of her domestic life have always been made subservient, willingly and meekly so, to my political engagements, without one atom of ambition to profit by the privileges which to some natures offer a kind of compensation for family discomfort. And, bearing this in view, I have from the moment that this terrible blow fell on us, determined to make every other claim on my time and attention subordinate (even to the giving up of my seat) to the task of mitigating her sufferings.'<sup>15</sup>

### **Thorald's high achieving family**



Descendants of Thorold Rogers. At back: sons Bertram and Arthur. Seated: Agnes (Bertram's wife), daughter Annie, son Clement. At front: granddaughters Mary and Constance, and son Leonard. Photo at *The Cedars* 1901. Source: *The Family Papers of J.E.T.Rogers*

In 1850, Thorald Rogers married his first wife, Anna Peskett, but she died two years later. He married again in 1854 to Ann Susannah Charlotte Reynolds, and they had one daughter and five sons. They lived all of their married life in Oxford where all their children were born and baptized. Their eldest child, Annie Mary Anne Henley Rogers became an Oxford tutor and promoter of women's rights at the university, Bertram Mitford Heron Rogers became a medical doctor and lived in Bristol, Leonard James Rogers was a mathematics professor at Leeds University, a musician and a linguist, Arthur George Liddon Rogers worked for the Board of Agriculture and Clement Francis Rogers became the Professor of Pastoral Theology at King's College, London.

### **Teenage suicide**

Like Richard Cobden's family, they also suffered a terrible loss when the eldest son, Henry Reynolds Knatchbull Rogers, committed suicide in 1876. He was 18 years old, Captain of the Westminster School and had been in apparent good health and happiness. His death occurred one evening after he had spent the day at home playing cricket and cards with his younger brother Bertram. Thorald was away in

Germany and Ann was unwell and in bed, so the next morning when Henry didn't appear for breakfast, Bertram went to his room to find him 'suspended by a strap from the hook on the door, quite dead.'<sup>6</sup> Bertram had to cut the strap and lay his brother's body down on the floor and then ran to inform his mother.

### Hard to accept

As to why this tragedy should have occurred was unclear at first. Thorald and Ann had great difficulty accepting it was a deliberate act of suicide, but at the time there seemed to be a lack of evidence that it was a prank gone wrong (as Thorald preferred to think) or an act of temporary insanity. However, a letter from a schoolmaster to Ann, uncovered later, showed there was concern that Henry was slipping in his school work and seemed to be unwell and lacking in energy. Thorald had written a letter replying to all his friends' messages of condolence, refuting the verdict of suicide stating: (that accepting suicide in his son's case) '...would be to insult humanity, to outrage reason, to dishonour the providence of God, to reduce human life to chaos or chance'.<sup>7</sup> Henry was buried in St. Sepulchre's Cemetery, Oxford, and his mother attended his grave every week until she died and was buried with him 13 years later in 1899.



Henry Reynolds Knatchbull Rogers  
1871. Henry killed himself in 1876.  
Photo: Wheeler & Day Oxford. Source:  
*The Family Papers of J.E.T. Rogers*

### Lives celebrated

#### A life of perseverance

Richard had always suffered from a bronchial weakness, and his busy schedule of public speaking took its toll. One day when traveling to London from Midhurst to give a speech to parliament, he caught a cold which developed into acute bronchitis. He died in London on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1865 and was buried in his son's grave at West Lavington churchyard, near *Dunford House*. This was preceded by an extensive funeral procession led by future Prime Minister William Gladstone. At West Lavington Church, Thorald Rogers, still a clergyman at this time, read a memorial sermon. Here is a brief extract:

'...The advantage of his life, and his public teaching, allowed and admitted to the full even by those who once resisted him and his purposes, has become in the best sense the property of the whole human race, is acknowledged more and more widely among mankind, has called forth "the respect and assent of all nations to whom the news of his death has come; but is consecrated by the unswerving integrity of his whole career, by the unfailing purity of his purposes, and by the heroic self-devotion of the last acts of his life. Henceforth he is a true pattern to all who give themselves up to public affairs and the administration of the state.....To love truth for truth's sake, to resist what conviction suggests is false or wrong, to persevere in a righteous cause, even when it is in the highest degree unpopular or unacceptable,



and to be willing to serve men, even when the willingness is slighted or thwarted, are the highest acts of the best life, and fulfil most nearly the spirit of God's commands.'<sup>8</sup>



The funeral and burial of Richard Cobden at West Lavington churchyard 1865. Engraving by unknown artist. Source: Art.com

Richard Cobden's family grave at West Lavington churchyard, West Sussex.  
Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014



### **Hundreds of mourners**

Thorald Rogers died in October 1890 following several months of suffering ill health. He was buried with his son at St. Sepulchre's Cemetery. His funeral was a grand affair, testimony to his reputation at Oxford. *Jackson's Oxford Journal* on October 18<sup>th</sup> reported:

'A very large gathering of senior members of the University assembled on Thursday afternoon at the funeral in St. Sepulchre's Cemetery, Walton-street. At half-past three the body was conveyed to Worcester College from the deceased's residence in Beaumont-street, in an open hearse, the funeral cortège consisting of three carriages, kindly lent for the occasion..... the coffin, which was profusely covered with beautiful wreaths, was borne from the College gates to the Chapel they formed in procession after the mourners.'

The journal lists hundreds of mourners and notes the procession was led by the Vice-Chancellor and the Mayor of Oxford.



Grave of Thorold, his wife Ann and their son Henry R K Rogers at St. Sepulchres Cemetery, Oxford. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014

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2020

See my stories **First Oxford Female Don, Socialist and Suffragette, Suffragist and Tireless Campaigner** and **Socialist and Suffragette** for more about their daughters.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> In 1951, it was decided to transfer Dunford House and property to the National Council of the YMCA, for its continued use as an educational venue. As of 2019/20 the YMCA have put Dunford House up for sale and potential buyers may look at turning the property into a wedding venue, hotel, apartments or private dwelling. This is contrary to the wishes and terms of the endowment from the Cobden family. See the Cobden Foundation Appeal: <https://www.cobdenfoundation.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Morley, John - *The Life of Richard Cobden* (1881) p308

<sup>3</sup> Rogers, Jean Scott - *Cobden and his Kate, The Story of a Marriage* (1990) p115

<sup>4</sup> Morley, John - *The Life of Richard Cobden* (1903) Letter from Cobden to Joseph Parkes May 23rd 1856 p646

<sup>5</sup> Rogers, Jean Scott - *Cobden and his Kate, The Story of a Marriage* (1990) p121 Letter from Cobden to Joseph Parkes June 4th 1856

<sup>6</sup> Jalland, Patricia - *Death in the Victorian Family* (1996) p72

<sup>7</sup> Jalland, Patricia - *Death in the Victorian Family* (1996) p73



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<sup>8</sup> *Cobden: An Appreciation* - The Online Library of Liberty <https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/cobden-an-appreciation-ii>

Other resources:

*British Newspaper Archive* (British Library)

*Cobden: An Appreciation* - The Online Library of Liberty <https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/cobden-an-appreciation-ii>

Howe, Anthony and Bannerman, Gordon - *The Letters of Richard Cobden* (2007)

*The Family Papers of J. E. T. Rogers* - The Bodleian Library, Oxford

West Sussex Record Office, Chichester UK - Cobden family letters