

Richard Cobden's Liberal Mission and the Quest for Universal Peace

Rosario López
University of Málaga
rosariols@uma.es

Richard Cobden (1804-1865) is probably best known nowadays as the political agitator behind the introduction of free trade in England. Together with John Bright, he led the anti-Corn Law League, a mass political movement that resulted in the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. He was an uncommon type among the British politicians of the time: a merchant and experienced traveller who fostered his career in politics thanks to his remarkable popularity among middle and lower classes.

While the literature has mostly examined his ideas on free trade as developed in public and parliamentary speeches, and to a lesser extent in a number of political pamphlets, in this paper I adopt a different stance by focusing on his travel diaries. One of my aims is to assess the relevance of some of his unpublished manuscripts, namely the travel notes he took during his so-called Eastern Tour. Between October 1836 and April 1837 Cobden visited places like Lisbon, Gibraltar, Malta, Constantinople, and Alexandria, before returning home via Greece, and met politicians and intellectuals, collected information on trade and politics, and generally reflected on the state of the countries he visited.

More particularly, my aim is to study how the ideas of trade, peace, and civilisation are waved together. Whether he argued a link between the capacity for the development of wealth and commerce in society, a tendency towards a peaceful resolution of conflicts, and the general state of foreign societies as compared to England. This way I hope to examine how Cobden's entanglements with other cultural and intellectual traditions abroad shaped his economic and political liberal ideas. Although Cobden's tours have attracted attention in terms of their impact on the development of free-trade policies in the countries he visited, I focus instead on how Cobden's cosmopolitan experiences led him to elaborate on wider issues on social and economic development and political liberalism.