

**GODWIN'S "POLITICAL
JUSTICE." A REPRINT OF THE
ESSAY ON "PROPERTY,"
FROM THE ORIGINAL EDITION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649480067

Godwin's "Political Justice." A Reprint of the Essay on "Property," from the Original Edition by H. S. Salt

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H. S. SALT

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o Social science series.

o *William*
GODWIN'S

“POLITICAL JUSTICE.”

A REPRINT OF
THE ESSAY ON “PROPERTY,”

FROM THE ORIGINAL EDITION.

EDITED BY

H. S. SALT.



LONDON:
SWAN SONNENSCHNEIN & CO.,
PATERNOSTER SQUARE.

1890.

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GODWIN'S "POLITICAL JUSTICE."

A Reprint of the Essay on Property.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

It is now close on a hundred years since the world was startled by the appearance of a book which, both by the significance of its title and the strangeness of its conclusions, was well calculated to arrest the attention—friendly or hostile, as the case might be—of every reader into whose hands it might fall. It is difficult for us, who live in a less speculative and sanguine age, to realize the keen interest which attached to the publication, in 1793, of William Godwin's *Political Justice*, at a crisis when men's minds were strung to a high pitch of expectant enthusiasm by the thrill of excitement of which the French Revolution was the cause; but the testimony of contemporary authors, whatever their personal sympathies might be, is explicit on this point. "No work in our time," says Hazlitt, "gave such a blow to

the philosophical mind of the country as Godwin's celebrated *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*. Tom Paine was considered for the time as a Tom Fool to him; Paley an old woman; Edmund Burke a flashy sophist. Truth, moral truth, it was supposed, had here taken up its abode, and these were the oracles of thought." "Burn your books of chemistry," was Wordsworth's advice to a student, "and read Godwin on Necessity." "Faulty as it is in many parts," wrote Southey, "there is a mass of truth in it that must make every man think." We are told by De Quincey that Godwin's book "carried one single shock into the bosom of English society, fearful but momentary." "In the quarto," he adds,—“that is, the original edition of his *Political Justice*,—Mr. Godwin advanced against thrones and dominations, powers and principalities, with the air of some Titan slinger or monomachist from Thebes and Troy, saying, ‘Come hither, ye wretches, that I may give your flesh to the fowls of the air.’”

It might well have been expected, in an age when government prosecutions were so rife, that the powers thus challenged would have retaliated with full severity on their venturesome opponent. It is said that *Political Justice* owed its immunity from prosecution solely to the fact that it appeared in an expensive form; for when the question was discussed in the Privy Council, it was remarked by Pitt that “a three-

guinea book could never do much harm among those who had not three shillings to spare." In this respect Pitt's judgment seems to have been less shrewd than might be supposed, for it is recorded that *Political Justice* "became so popular that the poorest mechanics were known to club subscriptions for its purchase, and thus it was directed to mine and eat away contentment from a nation's roots."¹ Godwin himself indirectly corroborates this statement. "I had a numerous audience," he says, "of all classes, of every age, and of every sex. The young and the fair did not feel deterred from consulting my pages."

The author who rose into this sudden notoriety as the advocate of the most revolutionary views was the descendant on both sides of respectable middle-class families, his father being a Dissenting minister at Wisbeach, in Cambridgeshire, in which place William Godwin was born, March 3rd, 1756. He was brought up in an atmosphere of ultra-Calvinistic doctrines as a follower of Sandeman, "a celebrated north country apostle," as Godwin expresses it, "who, after Calvin had damned ninety-nine in a hundred of mankind, contrived a scheme for damning ninety-nine in a hundred of the followers of Calvin." Among the boy's earliest books were the *Pilgrim's Progress* and the *Pious Deaths of many Godly Children*; and so serious was his tem-

¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, June, 1836.

perament, that it was his practice, when occasion permitted, to discourse to his school-fellows on the congenial subject of sin and damnation. From the first, the leading traits of his character were an indefatigable zeal in the search for truth, and a calm, intellectual gravity, underlaid, and at times dominated, by an insatiable self-esteem. After receiving his education at Norwich and Hoxton College, he undertook and discharged the duties of a Nonconformist minister at Stowmarket, and other places, for a period of about eight years, publishing, in 1784, a volume of six sermons, under the title of *Sketches of History*, in which, while in the main writing as an orthodox Calvinist, he advanced the significant and characteristic proposition that "God himself has no right to be a tyrant."

In a few years from this time his religious faith, which had already been shaken by a study of the French philosophers, underwent a complete change, and from 1787 onward he gave up the ministry, to become an avowed and uncompromising advocate of the principles of free thought. Urged partly by the need of finding a livelihood,—for his means were very limited,—partly by a natural inclination to a literary profession, he settled in London, where he became acquainted with Sheridan, Canning, Holcroft, and other men of note, and won some distinction as a vigorous exponent of advanced political opinion. He wrote articles for the *Political Herald*, contributed a