

JOHN BRIGHT

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John Bright by C. A. Vince

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C. A. VINCE

JOHN BRIGHT

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By

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Preface

LIBRARY SETS

A history of John Bright's career must needs be largely a record of opinions. In constructing this record I have tried, as far as possible, to use his own words, although the limits of this book do not permit extended quotations from his speeches. Such a method is facilitated by the terseness of his style; and inasmuch as his opinions were always clearly defined, and, being notably independent of circumstances and conditions, were subject to very little change, I may reasonably hope to have escaped the error of misrepresenting occasional utterances as definite judgments.

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I have not, however, been content merely to summarize Bright's acts and views, but have throughout tried to form and to suggest a critical estimate of his work and its results. With one exception the controversies in which he was engaged are now sufficiently remote, and their issues sufficiently developed, to bear historical treatment. The exception is the controversy raised in 1886; upon this subject, therefore, I have added no comment to the account given of Bright's opinions. The space allotted to the different subjects treated is proportional, not to their importance, but to the importance of Bright's dealings with them.

HARDING

For some details of Bright's parentage and early life I rely on the authority of the biography written by Mr. W. Robertson of Rochdale. In studying his parliamentary career I have resorted throughout to *Hansard* and the newspaper files. The books of which I have made most use are Mr. Morley's *Life of Cobden*, Prentice's *History of the League*, the *Historics* of Mr. J. F.

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Bright and Mr. W. N. Molesworth, Mr. Kinglake's *Invasion of the Crimea*, Charles Greville's *Journal*, Earl Russell's *Recollections*, Sir G. O. Trevelyan's *Life of Macaulay*, and the collection of Bright's *Public Letters* edited by Mr. H. J. Leech. Wherever I have derived hints from other books I have indicated the source.

I may be permitted to add that I have been from boyhood a close observer of the political life of Birmingham, and for some years actively engaged in it. This work has made me conscious of the still lasting influence of Bright's doctrine and example on the minds of persons interested in politics in this city. That influence has often been neglected or under-estimated by journalists and speakers who have treated the present state of Liberal opinion in Birmingham as a phenomenon calling for explanation. It has been a task of curious interest to me to amplify and correct, by a complete study of Bright's career, my conception of the character, the methods, the failures and successes, the greatness and the limitations, of a man who did so much to form the political mind with which I am in daily contact.

I have had the advantage of consulting on some points politicians whose knowledge of Bright was intimate and of long duration. In particular, I have to thank Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. J. Thackray Bunce, who most kindly communicated to me some of their personal recollections of Bright. Mr. William Wright of Birmingham has allowed me the use of his large collection of newspaper cuttings, and has given me other assistance, which I here gratefully acknowledge.

C. A. VINCE.

BIRMINGHAM, Dec., 1897.

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John Bright.

Chapter I.

The Anti-Corn-Law League.

John Bright was born at Green Bank, Rochdale, on November 16, 1811. He was the second son of Jacob Bright, a prosperous manufacturer. He came of a thrifty and pious stock. At the time of the Revolution his paternal ancestors were farmers at Lyneham in Wiltshire, where there is a field that still bears the name of Bright's Orchard. Abraham Bright, the great-grandfather of the statesman, migrated from Wiltshire to Coventry, and there his grandson, Jacob Bright, was born. Jacob Bright was apprenticed to William Holme, a Derbyshire manufacturer; and early in this century accompanied the two sons of Holme to Rochdale, where he was employed by them in a cotton mill. Two years before the birth of his famous son he started a mill on his own account. He borrowed the capital for this enterprise, but soon became independent, and in time wealthy. He was shrewd in business and rigid in principle, but of a just and compassionate disposition, a generous giver, and, by comparison with other cotton-spinners of those cruel days, notable for the kindness of his dealings with his work-people. He distinguished himself by the obstinacy of his resistance to church-rates, consistently refusing to pay until his goods were dis-

trained. He appears to have been worthy of the veneration with which his son cherished his memory; and all that is recorded of him is consistent with the belief that it was from him that John Bright received, whether by training or by inheritance, his piety of spirit, his unbending opinion, and his strong faith in individual liberty. Those who attach importance to the remoter influences of heredity may think it noteworthy that Bright had a small infusion of Hebrew blood, for his great-grandmother, the wife of Abraham Bright of Coventry, was a Jewess.

John Bright received such education as the better sort of private Nonconformist schools were able to offer at a time when Dissenters were still excluded from the universities. "My limited school-time", he wrote in 1886, "scarcely allowed me to think of Greek; and I should now make but slow steps in Latin, even with the help of a dictionary." He brought from his school in Ribblesdale a love of angling which furnished him with a wholesome recreation throughout life, and sufficient skill at cricket to make him a useful member of the Rochdale eleven. He had also acquired a genuine love of reading, but not any aptitude for systematic study, and was sufficiently interested in intellectual matters to join the local Literary and Philosophical Society. It is, however, the common experience of provincial societies bearing this honourable name that they discuss contemporary events and problems with more zest than either philosophy or literature. Whatever were the defects of Bright's education he never affected to deplore them. His devotion to politics was so complete that he applied the political standard to everything; and the connection he discovered between culture and Conservatism led him rather to respect culture less than Conservatism more. The observation, which he found frequent occasion to mention, that the ancient universities returned to Par-

liament the most unreasonable of Tories, made him suspect that the literature studied in those seats of learning was superficial and unsound.

His father, and his ancestors for many generations, were Nonconformists, and members of the Society of Friends. He himself remained faithful to the religious and political ideas and traditions in which he was brought up. A great part of his public conduct cannot be understood by anyone who either forgets that he was a Nonconformist, or is ignorant of the political history of nonconformity. He was proud of his descent from John Gratton of Derbyshire, who was a leader of the Quakers during the life of George Fox, and suffered imprisonment in the persecution of Charles and James.

During his boyhood Rochdale was the scene of violent conflicts on the question of church-rates. To this recollection he often recurred; and the sense of injuries to be resented, which Nonconformists of his age had so many reasons to feel, remained in his mind to the last. A certain asperity of temper is commonly imputed by unfriendly critics to political Nonconformists. It is to be explained, if it can no longer be excused, by the bitterness of the prolonged struggle by which they painfully won the elementary rights of citizenship.

Throughout his life Bright never spoke with so much vehemence of indignation, and never, it must be added, with so little concern for the susceptibility of his opponents, as when he was pleading for religious equality, and giving voice to his resentment at the privileges of the Established Church.

It is still more important that the student of his career should not for a moment forget that he was a member of the Society of Friends. The discipline of that society has been eminently successful in promoting both private virtue and a generous sense of public duty. Bright's religion was the very foundation of his public as well as