

The European Diaries of Richard Cobden 1846–1849

Edited by Miles Taylor



THE EUROPEAN DIARIES OF
RICHARD COBDEN

1846–1849



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Miles Taylor

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‘Under the influence of . . . speedy means of intercommunication, nations are in a certain sense reduced to provinces, and an entire continent is contracted into one nation. Under such circumstances, nothing can impede the circulation of wholesome ideas, and no barrier is high enough to obstruct the progress of good example.’

Richard Cobden, speech in Berlin, 31 July 1847



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Preface

At a time when Britain's political and commercial relations with the rest of Europe are the subject of so much interest and controversy it is appropriate to look back at the European vision of one of the most eminent Victorians. This edition of the hitherto unpublished European diaries of the English MP and economic writer, Richard Cobden, demonstrates the interdependence of British and European politics in the middle of the nineteenth century, both in terms of ideas and personal contacts. The diaries also constitute a fascinating travel guide to Europe in the pre-railway age, with commentary and detailed descriptions of social life and customs covering a large part of the Continent – from France in the west, to Moscow in the east, from the Baltic sea in the north to the Mediterranean and Adriatic in the south.

Richard Cobden (1804–1865) was one of the most influential politicians of his day. As a leader of the Anti-Corn Law League in the 1840s he earned the praise and support of a cross-section of party leaders. In the two decades which followed the repeal of the corn laws Cobden became the figurehead of popular campaigns for tax reform, disarmament and retrenchment. Although politically isolated during the 1850s, his subsequent impact was immense. His writings were, in the words of John Vincent, 'the *Das Kapital*' of the British Liberal party, and the long association of the Liberals with free trade and non-intervention in foreign policy, under William Gladstone and successive leaders down to the first world war, has been invariably linked with Cobden's influence. In Europe and in America he was lionized for his free-trade advocacy both in his own lifetime and posthumously until the close of the nineteenth century.

In August 1846, Cobden commenced what was to become a 14-month

Continental tour, taking him through France, Spain, the Italian states, Austria, Saxony, Prussia, Russia and the Hanse ports. As he travelled he kept a detailed diary, making entries on a daily basis. He met with the monarchs of France, Spain, Sardinia, the two Sicilies and Prussia. He dined and conversed with the Continent's leading statesmen, including Thiers, Narváez, Cavour, Metternich, Canitz and Nesselrode. In virtually every place he visited he was fêted by liberal and progressive politicians. He was made a freeman by the cities of Barcelona, Madrid, Seville, Naples, Perugia and Hamburg. Streets were named after him in France, ships named after him in the Hanse towns, and handkerchiefs bearing his portrait were sold in Saxony. In the late summer of 1849 Cobden returned to Paris to attend the international Peace Congress, and again kept a diary recording his movements and impressions. Known mainly to posterity as a little Englander, concerned to keep Britain aloof from Continental politics, Cobden was in fact a major European celebrity, one of the most well-travelled and cosmopolitan politicians of his generation.

What these diaries reveal is that European ideas and influences played a major part in the evolution of Cobden's liberal thinking. Moreover, the diaries indicate that Cobden's reputation throughout Europe was not based on his name alone, but grew out of the network of contacts and friendships which he made during this tour. Cobden contributed an important element of internationalism to subsequent generations of British liberalism. He was almost unique among his contemporaries in being so well travelled. He visited the United States twice (in 1835 and 1859), the Mediterranean, Egypt, Turkey and Greece in 1836–7, and Europe on several occasions, including the long tour of 1846–7. From his European tour and from later visits to France in the 1850s and 1860s, Cobden developed the view that although there were important racial and national differences between the various European states and empires, what European society had in common – commerce and fertile land – was the key to peace and social stability on the Continent. These ideas permeated the mid-Victorian Liberal party, enabling many politicians to move away from the chauvinistic view of Europe which had dominated English attitudes since the Napoleonic wars. If we in the late twentieth century want to appreciate the ideological roots of the positive case for greater European integration, there is no better place to start than with the thoughts and activities of Richard Cobden.

This edition of Cobden's diaries is in two main sections. The introduction discusses the background to Cobden's tour, looking at the negative view of Europe which Cobden held in the 1830s, the main features of the tour itself, and the impact of the tour on Cobden's ideas during the remainder of his life. An abridged and annotated version of the diaries then follows.

I have incurred many small debts and several large ones in the course of

preparing this book. For permission to use the manuscript notebooks containing the Cobden diaries I am grateful to the Department of Manuscripts in the British Library. I am particularly grateful to the archives staff in the West Sussex Record Office in Chichester for all their help, and I would also like to thank staff in the archives and local studies sections of the Manchester Central Library, and the Special Collections Department of the Library of the University of California at Los Angeles for dealing with my requests. Thanks also to the following for dealing with photographic requests, and for granting permission to reproduce illustrations and portraits: Manchester Public Libraries (Plates 1, 4–5); the Trustees of Dunford House, Sussex (Plates 2, 3 and 13); Miss Jean Scott Rogers and Mr John Richardson of Historical Publications Ltd (Plate 2); West Sussex County Council and Beaver Photography of Chichester (Plates 3 and 13); the British Library (Plate 6); the Museo de Bellas Artes, Seville, the Museo Pio Clementino in the Vatican, the Slide Department of the Faculty of Art and Architecture, University of Cambridge and the Audio-Visual Aids Unit in the University of Cambridge (Plates 7–8); the Mary Evans Picture Library (Plate 9); the Civiche Raccolte Storiche Milano (Plate 11); and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library (Plates 10, 12 and 14). For cartography I am particularly grateful to Ian Agnew in the Faculty of Geography, University of Cambridge.

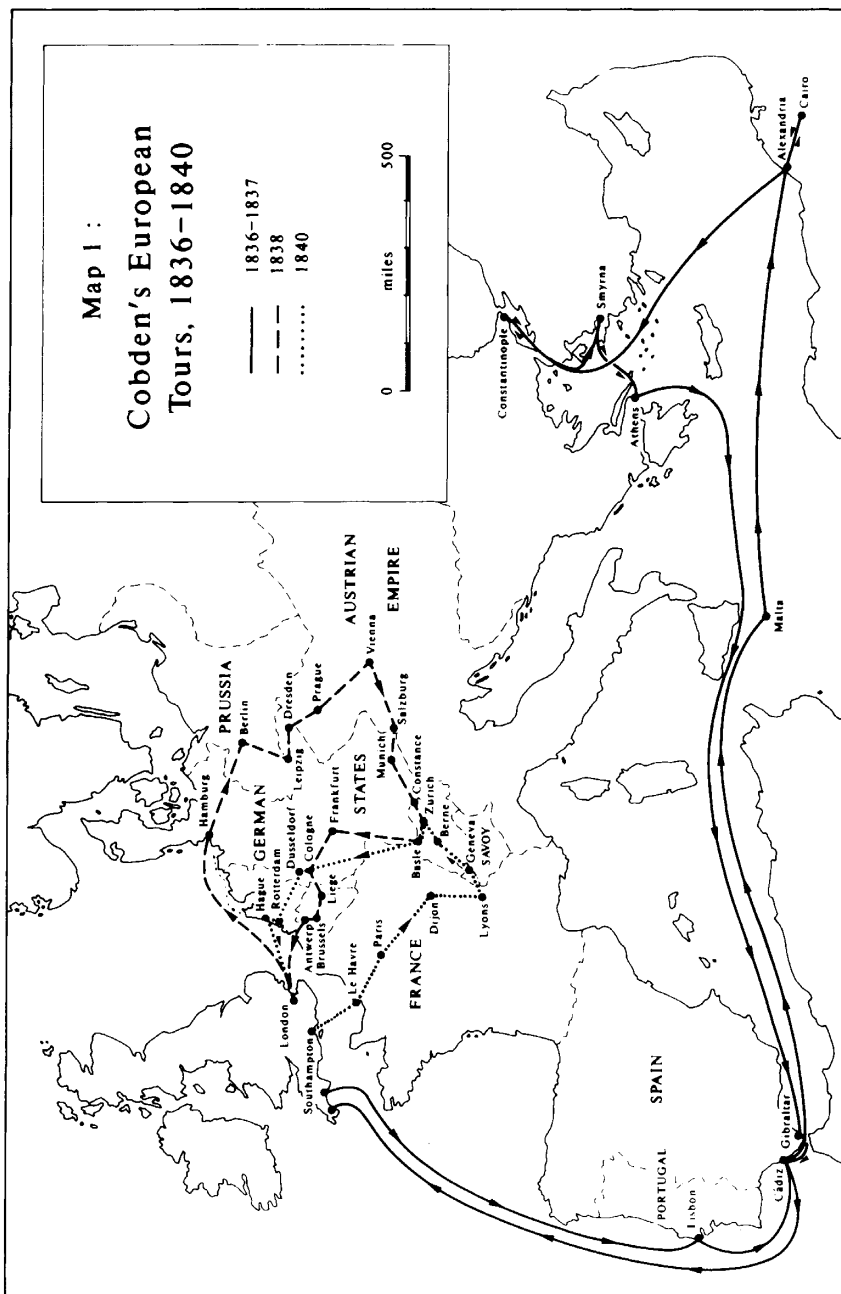
To the Master and Fellows of Christ's College I am grateful for encouragement and support. In particular I would like to thank the college's Research Fund Managers for awarding me a grant to help out with preparing this edition for publication. Lastly I am indebted to the many friends and colleagues who have eased my passage across Cobden's Europe. Lucjan Lewitter and Cecil Courtney were kind enough to point me in the right direction in the Baltic and in the Bible. As so often in the past, Mike Sonenscher provided all sorts of useful signposts for my background research. Orlando Figes, Hazel Mills and Nick Stargardt have scrutinized, respectively, the Russian, French and German portions of the text and helped me make more sense of Cobden's movements and contacts. Derek Beales has been an indispensable guide on Italian affairs, and given me some very helpful general advice as well. I am similarly grateful to Susan Bayly, Peter Clarke, Ewen Green and David Reynolds for breaking off from their own travels to comment so constructively upon somebody else's. Finally, I am indebted to Ann, the most important European in my life, for her inspiration and encouragement, and, above all, for making my world a little less provincial with each passing year.

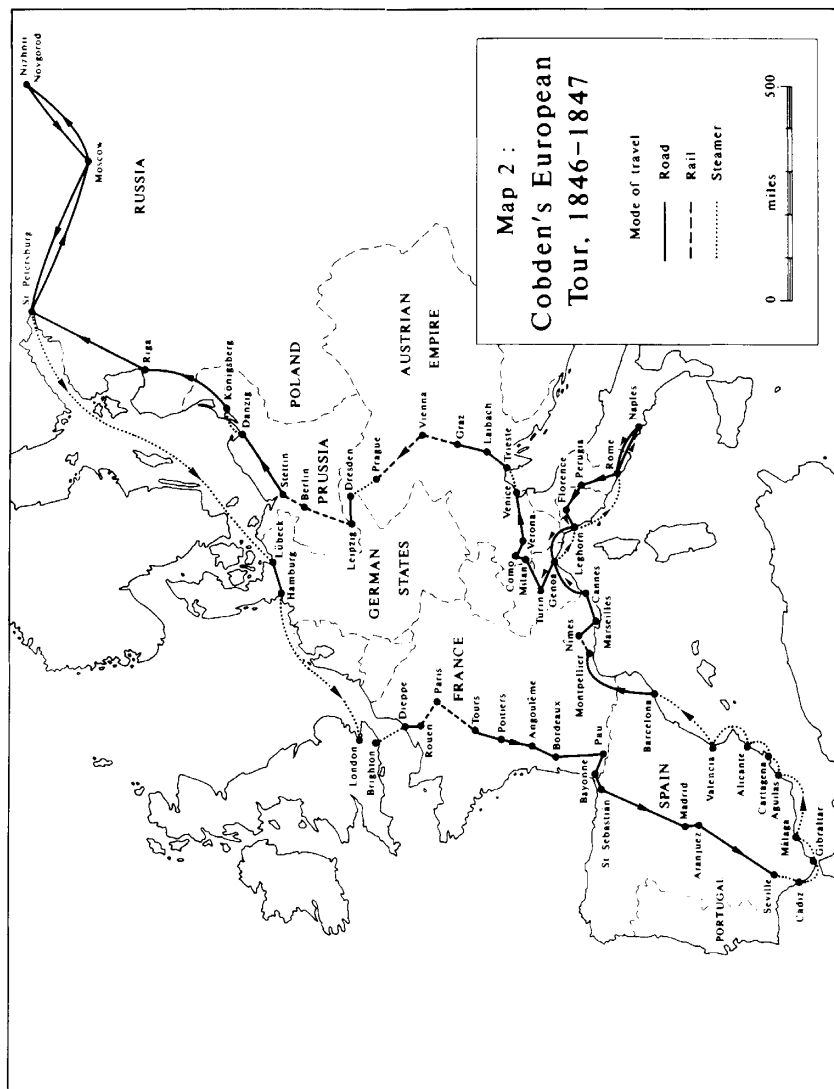


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Introduction

Richard Cobden has been the subject of new interest and fresh interpretation on many occasions during the last hundred years or so. Ever since John Morley's biography, published in 1881, Cobden has been revisited and his ideas refashioned to suit the needs of successive generations of liberal and radical politicians. Morley's own work, and the activities and publications of the Cobden Club, were part of the late nineteenth-century attempt to return the Liberal party to the principles of anti-imperialism and free trade at a time of Conservative ascendancy and growing calls for greater state intervention.¹ In the aftermath of the first world war, the radical economist J. A. Hobson turned to Cobden to find a coherent vision of international peace and order.² During the 1950s, A. J. P. Taylor found in Cobden a timely indictment of the British tendency to become involved in other countries' problems to the detriment of progress at home and national independence abroad.³ In more recent years Cobden has been the subject of less partisan interest, and the focus has switched away from his attitude towards foreign policy. A steady stream of biographies and historical studies have thrown more light on his interaction with mid nineteenth-century middle-class culture.⁴

With each new look at Cobden, something is gained and something is lost. Owing to the work of Morley and more recent biographers, Cobden's pivotal role in the early Victorian battles over free trade is now understood more properly. However, against this must be set the rather lopsided picture of Cobden which has been left in place by the many attempts to identify him as the quintessential 'little Englander', firmly rooted in the manufacturing culture of the north-west, and inextricably wedded to the doctrine of non-involvement in foreign politics.⁵ One of the aims of this

edition of his European diaries is to show that this ‘little Englander’ interpretation, so predominant in much of the historiography, is a misleading one. It is a view which overlooks the great interest shown by Cobden in social and economic conditions on the Continent, and it is a view which fails to understand the extent to which Cobden thought that progressive reforms in Britain needed to go hand in hand with similar reforms in Europe.

Although one aim of this edition is to cast Cobden’s ideas in a very different light to that suggested by most previous accounts, its principal purpose is to recover and reproduce what amounts to a lost text of mid-Victorian liberal cosmopolitanism. Cobden’s published writings, which were collected together in two volumes in 1867, have often been seen as a key statement of mid-Victorian liberalism, with their confident faith in free trade, *laissez-faire* and the rationality of human nature.⁶ However, examined more closely, Cobden’s pamphlets do not provide an easily accessible guide to either his own liberalism, or mid-Victorian liberalism in general. Many of them were composed quickly in the heat of the moment, and virtually all of those written during the 1850s and early 1860s register the opprobrium to which Cobden had been subjected during the Crimean war and its aftermath. Not only did his polemic sometimes get the better of him – particularly in *1793 and 1853* (1853) – but he was often driven to include lengthy extracts and statistical information, as in *What next and next?* (1856), in order to substantiate what was an isolated point of view. The rhetorical conventions adopted by Cobden in his pamphlets do tend to weaken their canonical status. They are of historical interest as political ephemera, but they do not really serve as lasting statements of an ideological creed.

In contrast to the pamphlets, and in spite of the journal format, Cobden’s European diaries do furnish us with a much more coherent and reflective guide to his social and economic thought. Contained within them is a perceptive, well-informed and, for the most part, unprejudiced vision of European society and culture on the eve of the 1848 revolutions. The diaries reveal what Cobden thought Europe might learn from the British example, and conversely what Britain might learn from Europe. The diaries add to the large volume of travel literature available from the Victorian period, but above all else they provide in an applied form the main elements of Cobden’s thinking – on religion, civil society, land ownership, economic growth and stability, and, of course, free trade.

Cobden, Britain and Europe, 1835–1846

Cobden was not an instinctive European. Although he travelled fairly

extensively in Europe during the 1830s – on commercial business, and later as a tourist – visiting France in 1833, Switzerland in 1834, and Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands in 1838, until his tour of 1846–7 he held a decidedly negative view of Continental politics. In Cobden's view, most of the European states were unstable, and he felt that England's real destiny lay with the rising commercial power of the new world in North and South America. During the 1840s, Cobden began to take more of an interest in European politics, partly because the forces of political progressivism were becoming stronger in France and Spain in particular, and partly because the anti-corn law agitation forced him to be more aware of the state of agriculture on the Continent. But it was only with his tour of 1846–7 that he became aware of the potential for peaceful social and economic progress in Europe.

Cobden's first entry into national political life was inspired by the state of European politics. In 1835, he became involved in a polemical exchange with David Urquhart, the secretary to the British embassy in Constantinople, who, along with some sections of radical opinion in the House of Commons, was calling for English intervention to prevent Russian encroachment on Turkey at the western end of the Black Sea.⁷ Writing under the pseudonym of 'A Manchester Manufacturer', Cobden produced a pamphlet entitled *England, Ireland and America*, which was published by the London publisher Ridgway in the spring of 1835. Cobden's main argument was that too great an involvement in European politics was detrimental to English interests. It increased the national debt, earned England few friends overseas, and at home gave the aristocracy, feeding off increased taxation, further licence to practice debauchery and extravagance in private and public life. Moreover, the problems which beset the various European states were too intractable for easy solution. As Cobden wrote,

With France, still in the throes of her last revolution, containing a generation of young and ardent spirits, without the resources of commerce, and therefore burning for the excitement and employment of war; with Germany, Prussia, Hungary, Austria, and Italy, all dependent for tranquillity upon the fragile bond of attachment of their subjects to a couple of aged monarchs; with Holland and Belgium, each sword in hand; and with Turkey, not so much yielding to the pressure of Russia, as sinking beneath an inevitable religious and political destiny. . . with such elements of discord as these fermenting all over Europe, it becomes more than ever our duty to take natural shelter from a storm.⁸

In *England, Ireland and America* Cobden also rejected the idea that English intervention – whether in the form of military or naval action – might encourage or promote commerce. War could never be the handmaiden of commerce. European trade had suffered enormously as a result of the Napoleonic wars, and English merchants had been forced to look beyond the Continent for export markets. The corn laws which had been

introduced at the end of the Napoleonic wars had served only to encourage the growth of industry in America and in some of the European states. Their agricultural exports excluded from English markets by high tariffs, foreigners had turned to manufacturing instead. Rather than attempting to secure commerce through armed intervention overseas, Cobden argued, England should put her own house in order – by making the reformed House of Commons the means of exerting a tighter control over government spending, and by turning attention to the problems of Ireland. Cobden also argued that the Anglo-American trade and the Atlantic economy in general should be developed, both as a means of encouraging the Irish economy, and in order to release England from its European obligations. Impressed by accounts of the abundance of natural resources in the United States – particularly land – Cobden saw England's future as lying in a westward direction.

In characteristic manner, Cobden let his convictions determine his actions, and spent the summer of 1835 in America, touring the eastern seaboard, and travelling through Pennsylvania, upstate New York and Massachusetts.⁹ The visit confirmed his earlier impressions of America's infinite capacity for the development of wealth and commerce. Cobden saw American progress as a challenge, insofar as unless England took steps to change her own commercial policy, America would soon outstrip all the economies of the older countries, and directly challenge English supremacy. But he also saw American growth as an opportunity for England to develop new markets and fields of investment.

With renewed vigour, Cobden returned to the polemic with Urquhart in 1836, writing the pamphlet *Russia* which was published in July. In *Russia*, Cobden looked at the Russo-Turkish problem in much more detail, analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the contending parties. Arguing against the grain of much of the Turcophilia rife in England during the 1830s, Cobden pointed out that Turkey, despite her physical advantages, remained commercially backward and could not be considered as a major trading partner of England. Similarly, he chipped away at the widespread fear of Russian penetration into Europe via Turkey. Russia, Cobden suggested, was too large, her population too dispersed, ignorant and 'scarcely rising above a state of nature' to be capable of subsuming the West.¹⁰ The last thing Russia required was more territory. Cobden then let his argument run away with him. Even if Russia did move into Turkey by taking Constantinople, he wrote, this would benefit Christianity and encourage commerce – a new St Petersburg would be created on the banks of the Bosphorus, in 'place of those huts which now constitute the capital of Turkey'.¹¹ Russia might Europeanize the eastern Mediterranean, imposing the habits of Christian morality and commercial enterprise upon a barbarous wilderness.

In *Russia* Cobden also played down the threat posed to Europe by Russian involvement in Poland. He pointed out that it was the Polish nobles who were the real authors of Polish troubles, through their laziness and corruption. If Russia did step out of line in Poland, England might easily stifle Russian aggression by imposing a naval blockade in the Baltic. Cobden's belief that the Russian threat was a chimera led him on to a comprehensive attack of the notion of the 'balance of power' in Europe, which English diplomacy was required to uphold. Not only did most of the leading authorities on international diplomacy such as Vattel dispute the notion, but England's own actions in taking colonies were an example of the aggrandizement which the 'balance of power' was supposed to prevent.

In the final section of *Russia* Cobden returned to one of the main themes of *England, Ireland and America* – namely, that England's destiny lay with the Atlantic economy. Gone were the days when English trade was based on foreign dependencies and required the navy and the threat of force to ensure its maintenance. The remnants of English mercantilism in the Mediterranean – for example, Gibraltar – had been unable to prevent English supremacy in manufacturing being challenged by, most notably, Saxony and Switzerland. And English concern for the 'balance of power' in Europe, and the security of trade routes, had not prevented countries like France opting for excluding English manufactures by high tariffs.¹² In contrast to this the Anglo-American trade was mutually beneficial, and required no armed protection – 'this commerce, unparalleled in magnitude, between two remote nations, demands no armament as its guide or safeguard: nature itself is both'.¹³

Cobden, then, was by no means well disposed towards Europe in the 1830s. In taking Europe to task for its propensity for warmongering, its debt and unstable paper currencies, the factional politics of its parliaments, the despotic ambitions of its monarchies and the self-interested character of its commercial policies, Cobden joined a long line of critics stretching back to Thomas Paine and William Cobbett in outright condemnation of the old world. Like them, Cobden saw in America the antidote to many of Europe's ills. Cobden's attitude towards Europe in the 1830s also reflected his own youthful radicalism. Just as he saw the English aristocracy as standing in the way of reform at home – through their adherence to the old 'boroughmongering' ways which had predominated in the years before the reform act of 1832 so too did he see them as the main architects of England's misguided commercial and foreign policy. For it was only the aristocracy who stood to benefit from a system based on plunder overseas, and high taxation at home. Cobden's confident paean to the spirit of middle-class endeavour abroad, contained in *Russia* – '[t]he tranquil and unostentatious educational reforms in Switzerland, the temperance societies of America, and the railroads of England' – matched his faith

closer to home in the ratepayer politics with which he was involved in Manchester.¹⁴ In order to root out aristocratic influence at home, England needed to be freed from the 'balance of power' in Europe.

An instinctive anti-European in the mid 1830s, Cobden's sympathies towards the Continent moved in an increasingly positive direction thereafter. This is an important point, and one which has been overlooked by most commentators who see Cobden's two pamphlets of the mid 1830s as embodying the key elements of his lifelong creed.¹⁵ What is often forgotten is that Cobden wrote both *England, Ireland and America* and *Russia* in a conjectural fashion, having never visited the places of which he wrote, and having little real practical knowledge of the internal conditions of the states he described. In the course of his travels in Europe and the near east in the second half of the 1830s – journeys he undertook having already written both pamphlets – he was able to gain first-hand evidence with which he could substantiate and amend his speculations. Furthermore, through his involvement in the Anti-Corn Law League at the end of the decade and during the 1840s, Cobden became preoccupied with land reform and agricultural improvement, a development which not only softened his view about some of the English aristocracy, but also eventually prompted him to take a greater interest in the state of agriculture on the Continent.

In October 1836 Cobden embarked on his longest tour of the decade, sailing to the eastern end of the Mediterranean. En route he visited Lisbon, Gibraltar, Malta, Egypt, Constantinople (Istanbul) and Smyrna (Izmir), returning via the Greek islands and Athens, and landing back in Cornwall in April 1837.¹⁶ Intending in part to take a rest, Cobden used the trip to expand his knowledge of social and economic conditions in the eastern Mediterranean. He travelled as a tourist, alongside many 'colonels, majors & captains', and spent a good part of the sea journey in the company of Lord Balcarras.¹⁷ Unlike in 1846–7, Cobden's reputation did not precede him. Although he met with Muhammad Ali in Cairo, this was only because the Egyptian leader had requested of the English vice-consul that some 'British travellers' be brought to meet him. In August 1838 Cobden made a less extensive tour, lasting three months, through the German states, Austria, Switzerland and Belgium. Travelling by road he met up with contacts established during his years as a calico manufacturer, and also ran into one or two Englishmen abroad who were familiar with his pamphlets. In May 1840 Cobden returned to Switzerland on his honeymoon, and took in the French Alps, Switzerland and Savoy, before returning to London by way of Cologne and Holland.¹⁸

Cobden's various tours between 1836 and 1840 served to confirm the view he had taken of the eastern question in *England, Ireland and America* and *Russia*, but they did also nudge him into a more positive frame of mind about the prospects of European trade. His visits to Egypt and to

Constantinople impressed upon him the backward condition of commercial resources in both places and, moreover, the purely mercantilist approach to commercial policy taken by statesmen in that part of the world. In a series of articles published in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, Cobden summarized his reflections. Muhammad Ali, in Cobden's opinion, was developing a domestic cotton industry only as a means of strengthening his national defences and making his country self-sufficient.¹⁹ Having visited both Constantinople and Smyrna and seen the level of activity in both ports for himself, Cobden concluded that reports of Turkey's growing trade with England were much exaggerated.²⁰ In a similar fashion Cobden poured scorn on one of Urquhart's obsessions, by arguing that the Circassian people, who inhabited the territory on the eastern side of the Black Sea, were not ready for commerce with England, despite their populous character, and therefore did not require armed intervention by England in order to be protected from Russia.²¹ Cobden drew a larger conclusion from this deeper investigation of the eastern question – that an export trade with the barbarian peripheries of Europe could never begin to rival the commercial connections which England had with civilized countries such as Holland. For the first time in his life, Cobden was beginning to talk of Anglo-European trade with a little more confidence. At the same time he remained convinced that the only reason for the growth of industry and railways on the Continent – as, for example, he witnessed in Saxony – was England's corn laws.²²

In the 1841 election Cobden was returned to the House of Commons as MP for Stockport. This, together with his involvement in the Anti-Corn Law League, marked a new phase in his political career, one characterized by a less rugged radicalism and a greater interest in land reform. Key elements of his earlier attitude towards foreign policy of course remained in place. He continued to argue that the main purpose of foreign trade was not to protect overseas conquests – a policy which could only awaken national rivalries – but to encourage peaceful co-existence between nations.²³ He remained sceptical about any attempt by English diplomats to negotiate tariff reductions with different states. Such moves, said Cobden, referring to the case of Portugal, usually only applied to luxury items such as port consumed by the wealthier members of society, whereas at one fell swoop abolition of the corn laws and the sugar duties would open up the markets of the Americas to English manufacturers.²⁴ But alongside these familiar assertions of faith in the Atlantic economy, Cobden also argued that corn-law repeal would benefit English manufacturing exports to the continent, for it would encourage European corn export to England, and keep most of the European countries as purely agricultural producers.²⁵ Fighting off the criticisms of protectionists, who painted a picture of a post-corn law English economy overrun by Continental corn, Cobden argued that European