Soon after the collected edition of *Rural Rides* appeared, a widespread campaign of machine-breaking, arson and threatening letters took place across southern England. Historians have described these events as the Captain Swing riots, after the mythical leader of the uprising, but at the time Cobbett described it as a ‘Rural War’. This phrase suggests a broad continuity between his *Rural Rides* and the events that were now taking place, and Cobbett emphasized that he had predicted unrest in warnings to farmers and landlords throughout the 1820s. He also interpreted this rural uprising in terms of contemporary events in France, viewing the Swing riots and the July Revolution as part of a long revolutionary era. In 1831, Cobbett was charged with seditious libel for his ‘Rural War’ articles, and subpoenaed the entire Cabinet as witnesses in his defence. His writings on the July Revolution, Captain Swing and the Reform crisis represent a late, neglected chapter of his career, and one that challenges any nostalgic reading of his legacy.

Cobbett received news of the July Revolution in time to add a paragraph to the *Political Register* of 31 July 1830 as it was going to press, headlined ‘French Revolution, No. II’. A week later, he published an open letter to the new king William IV, arguing that *les trois glorieuses* made ‘reform in England ... inevitable’. He continued this theme in the next edition, with an address to his readers:

*Kensington, 10th August, 1830. My Friends ... the Tri-coloured Flag again salutes the air; that symbol of the “Rights of Man” ... The subject has in it so many points of great and deep interest; it comes home to us directly in so many different ways, that I hardly know at what point to begin ... how will this affair affect us? No tongue, no pen, can describe how it will affect us. Our feelings are our instructors*
here. Does not every man of you feel differently from what you did twenty days back? Do you not all feel that this event changes the whole face of things? ... You, without any reasoning, feel ... that there must be, and will be, a total change in the system.3

Cobbett’s excitement derives from a confidence that the July Revolution is an event that, in a spontaneous rush of feelings, ‘comes home to us’ to guarantee political change. He established a subscription for the wounded of Paris, chaired a dinner on the anniversary of Peterloo and sent his Norfolk friend Sir Thomas Beevor – ‘who left at home a harvest spread over a thousand acres of land’ – to Paris as the ‘Ambassador of the Reformers of England’.4 Beevor carried an ‘Address from the Radical Reformers of England to the Brave People of France’ and was accompanied by Cobbett’s son James.

Cobbett soon, however, became disappointed with the direction of the July Revolution, which represented the beginning of a French experiment in constitutional monarchy, led by a strongly Anglophile king who wanted Britain to be France’s closest ally. Between 1830 and 1848, ‘France’s political system drew closer to that of Britain than at any moment before or since.’5 Queen Victoria’s visit to Normandy in 1843 made her the first English monarch to visit France since Henry VIII, and Louis-Philippe came to Windsor the following year: the first, and last, French king to step foot in England since 1356. The Orléans family tried to cement the July monarchy through a narrative that mirrored the Whig history of Britain, casting Louis XVI as Charles I, the Revolution as the Civil War, Napoleon as Cromwell, Charles X as James II, 1830 as 1688 and Louis-Philippe as William III. Cobbett contested the Whig version of British history and was vehemently opposed to the idea that France had arrived at anything resembling the 1688 settlement. Instead, he believed that the July Revolution represented the triumph of the rights of man in France and would provide the final push towards radical reform in Britain.

Letters from Paris

Cobbett did not have to rely on other newspapers but sent his sons James (27 years old) and then William (32) to Paris as correspondents for the *Political Register*. Their letters from Paris differ in form: James’s letters were never published but survive in manuscript, while William’s letters were published in the *Register* and the originals lost or destroyed. The two sequences of letters show a striking continuity in their style