

**THE TRADE UNIONS: AN  
APPEAL TO THE  
WORKING CLASSES  
AND THEIR FRIENDS**

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The Trade Unions: An Appeal to the Working Classes and Their Friends by Robert Somers

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**ROBERT SOMERS**

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# THE TRADE UNIONS.

*AN APPEAL TO THE WORKING CLASSES  
AND THEIR FRIENDS.*

BY ROBERT SOMERS.

"A book, not a small one, might be made up of the strange doings of Trade Unions. Monopoly is hard to teach, and I fear the working men will only learn through suffering, and may do mischief which cannot be afterwards repaired."—RIGHT HON. JOHN BRIGHT, *June 3, 1875.*"

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## P R E F A C E.

THE Author has taken the liberty to place on the Title-Page a sentence or two from a published letter of Mr. Bright, expressing with eminent authority much the same idea and aim as had suggested the composition of this Book; and he may here add a few words from the speech of Lord Derby, on receiving the freedom of the city of Edinburgh in December last, pointing as directly to the main sources from which he deemed that the materials of such a work, if the discussion was to be preserved within recognised bounds, should be derived. Lord Derby, without reference to this subject in particular, said :—

“Look at the number of Royal Commissions that have been appointed, and of Committees in Parliament that have sat in the last twenty years to report upon various administrative matters. How many of these Reports have been acted upon?”

Trade-Unionism has had seven or more years of most eventful history—of history on the largest public scale of affairs. This history is printed in volumes of Hansard, in scores of Blue-Books, in millions of newspapers, in innumerable decisions of Civil and Criminal Courts, and, it must be feared, in many details of private woe and desolation of which there has been no recorder. But even of what has been printed on this subject under the authority of Parliament itself, how much may not be as completely buried for all practical purposes as the Reports of Royal Commissions and Select Committees to which Lord Derby has referred in general, and which he almost despairs, not without reason, of Parliament being able to overtake?

To endeavour to analyse the abundant materials, and to present, within brief compass, the subject of Trade-Unionism as a whole, and in the connexion of its various parts, would thus appear to be a desirable undertaking.

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# THE TRADE UNIONS.

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## I.

### INTRODUCTION.

THE subject of this book may be best introduced by a few interrogatories not difficult to answer.

Have any societies, companies, or organised bodies of whatever kind, acted so conspicuous a part on the public field of affairs in this country as the Trade Unions during the last ten years?

Is any one conscious of a day during the last ten years on which the proceedings of the Trade Unions, often the most unpleasant to themselves and to others, have not been recorded in the newspapers, and attracted the attention of the kingdom?

Has any disturbing action in industrial affairs been more constantly felt those ten years than the action of the Trade Unions?

Have any sectional parties in the State, during that period, been so active politically, or been found so frequently in the lobbies of the House of Commons, interviewing members, and demanding changes of the laws as the Trade Unions?

These questions can only be answered in one way, and the questions themselves have only to be stated in order to prove the great importance of the subject to which they refer. They show that the Trade Unionism of present times

is a novelty in this country, and like all novelties of such magnitude, it is more or less portentous, requiring much examination in the interest both of the Unionists themselves and of the public.

The history of Trade Unions in this country may be said briefly to have passed through three well-marked stages.

If we go back a century, we find a state of common law adapted to the social and commercial circumstances, and to the ideas of public policy, and of right and wrong at the period, under which the systematic action of many of our Trade Unions would have been impermissible, were it even possible to conceive that such action could have occurred to any of the working men of that time. But this state of the law did not prevent the formation of Trade Unions to support each other in brotherly membership of the same trade, to require full apprenticeship, to promote the utmost skill in the trade, and to urge, in harmony with employers, every means by which the interests of the workmen could be advanced, short of violence, or of any acts that could render the procedure of the Unions a political or legal question. Many of the Unions of that ancient standing remain in full vigour to the present day. They are seldom heard of in the noisy movements of recent times; but, adhering to their traditions, they have never lost their integrity, and have never fallen below other bodies of skilled workmen in rates of wages, in full demand for their labour, or in any advantage which a skilled workman most prizes. It is to these older Unions we owe the doctrine, long familiar, but now more than half exploded, that a Trade Union is a non-political body, and that as an association it has nothing to do on the high but perilous stage of politics or revolution.

Advancing along the course of history, we come to the second stage of Trade Unions, or, rather of the manifestation of a new form of Unionism, which may be called Tumultuous Unionism, when erratic leagues of working people broke out, no doubt under desperate motive, but under equally desperate ignorance, in the destruction of machines, incendiarism, and other fell outrages. This was as unlike