

**HISTORY OF THE TAXES
ON KNOWLEDGE: THEIR
ORIGIN AND REPEAL.
VOL. I**

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History of the Taxes on Knowledge: Their Origin and Repeal. Vol. I by Collet Dobson Collet

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HISTORY
OF THE
TAXES ON KNOWLEDGE
THEIR ORIGIN AND REPEAL

BY
COLLET DOBSON COLLET

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE

VOL. I

Library of
George Peckham
London

T. FISHER UNWIN
PATERNOSTER SQUARE
MDCCCXCIX

INTRODUCTION.

It is an inadequate thing to say that the author of this book was a remarkable man. Remarkable men are common. But unusual men are not common, and Collet was an unusual man. For more than fifty years I was associated with him in public affairs, and I never knew any one so discerning as he in choosing a public cause, so incessant in promoting it, with such plenitude of resource for attaining it. He had absolute disinterestedness—never having concern for himself, and never seeking any remuneration for public work he did ; though sometimes—not often—something came to him from the consideration of others, but never on his solicitation and never adequate to his ceaseless services. Many a time he has come to my house at midnight to discuss some new point he thought of importance. He had all the qualities of a great secretary, as the narrative of this book shows. He habitually sought

the opinion of the Committee before acting in its name. He read every letter to them and every document proposed to be issued. When they differed on points of policy, or terms of expression, he deferred to the views of others, not only with acquiescence, but willingness. During the more than twenty years in which I have been chairman of the Travelling Tax Abolition Committee (which succeeded the agitation for untaxed knowledge) I remember no instance to the contrary of his ready deference. In the Twelve Years' Contest of which these pages are the History, his fertility in suggestion was of great advantage to the Committee. From among them Mr. Bright, Mr. Gibson, or Mr. Cobden (who had an instinct of fitness) would select the most suited to the purpose in hand. Early in life Mr. Collet studied for the law, and retained a passion for it, which was a constant advantage in dealing with Acts which during a hundred and forty-three years had enchained the Press. No one now remains who could tell, or so fully interpret what took place in those now distant days, since his were the only hands through which all the documents passed—and who was present at consultations unknown to the public.

What will strike every reader of this book is its conspicuous dispassionateness. It is free from all injustice of imputation. Its abiding charm is its

scrupulous fairness to every Government with which we came in contact, and to heads of departments with whom unceasing war was waged. Their personal honour was never confused with the mischievous Acts they were compelled to enforce. The History is that of a model agitation in its thoroughness and steadfastness, in fairness and courtesy.

The reader will meet with several passages referring to the important services of Mr. John Francis, publisher of the *Athenæum*. As early as 1830 he was struck by the inscription on the *Examiner* newspaper of these words: "Paper and print 3½d., Taxes on Knowledge 3½d., price 7d." This inspired Mr. Francis with the determination to accelerate the extinction of the malevolent imposts upon Intelligence—a determination which never ceased to animate him. Nineteen years later, in January, 1849, he took an office in Salisbury Street, and on the 5th of May, the London Association, founded by him for the Repeal of the Advertisement Duty, issued its first circular (two months after the formation of the Taxes on Knowledge Abolition Committee, whose proceedings are the main subject of this History). William Ewart, the member for Dumfries, was the president of the new Association, John Francis its treasurer, John McEnteer its

secretary. Among the most earnest of its supporters was Knight Hunt, the Editor of the *Daily News*, who succeeded Charles Dickens. James Grant of the *Morning Advertiser*, Herbert Ingram of the *Illustrated London News*, and Murdo Young of the *Sun* were others. At that time the tax was 1s. 6d. upon each advertisement. The servant girl in want of a situation paid the same sum as the rich man who advertised his estate for sale. When Mr. Gladstone was willing to reduce the tax to 6d. Mr. Francis firmly rejected the idea, as the mitigation would but prove the indefinite continuation of the tax. When the repeal of the Paper Duty was proposed by Mr. Milner-Gibson in 1858, Mr. Francis founded The Newspaper and Periodical Association for the Repeal of the Paper Duty. Milner-Gibson was its president, John Cassell chairman, John Francis treasurer, and Henry Vizetelly secretary. The chairman, treasurer, and secretary went to Scotland and Ireland, forming branch associations. The reader will see elsewhere in these pages record and recognition of the influence of the *Athenæum* and the zeal of Mr. Francis in this cause, by which so many have benefited and for which few had discernment enough to care. Mr. Francis had repeated interviews, on deputation and otherwise, with Mr. Gladstone, Sir George Cornwall Lewis,

and others, and it was largely owing to Mr. Francis that the important concession was made of four ounces of printed matter going through the post for one penny, which enabled many propagandist journals, which could not command a circulation by newsagents, to exist by a circulation through the post.

Mr. Collet wrote much in his long and busy life, but no work so compact and historic as this. The narrative never lingers, and is illumined by pertinences of thought and expression belonging only to competence and experience. Friends of the author thought such a work ought to be printed as a personal memorial, as well as from its intrinsic importance to every journalist, to every librarian, to every lover and reader of books or newspapers. Yet publishers thought that, like a law book, it would sell only to the profession. But the profession in this case is that of literature and newspapers, the largest profession in the world, increasing by millions of members every year, who will all have curiosity—most of them sense and many gratitude. They will ask how they came by the priceless facilities of knowledge denied to their forefathers. Learning that the State was for a hundred and forty-three years the active and determined frustrator of public information, they will ask, Who gave this

licensed foe battle? What were the vicissitudes and duration of the contest? By what arts of stratagem and valour was the victory finally won? It was not meet that he who could best answer these questions should die, and all the generous incidents of enthusiasm and resource be buried with him. The Editor of the *Weekly Times and Echo* was of this opinion, who published the first volume of the History in his columns. This book was written by Mr. Collet between the age of 81 and 85. It was Mr. John Morris (whose name occurs as one of the legal advisers of the combatants), Sir Edward Watkin, and Mr. T. D. Galpin who induced him to write it. Since his death help became needful to print and publish it. For this purpose Mr. John Morris contributed, others being Mr. Collet's daughters: *The Daily Telegraph*: *Harmsworth's Magazine*: Mr. Allsop: *The Daily News*: *The Illustrated London News*: *The Manchester Guardian*: *The Star*: and Spicer Brothers, paper-makers. The contributions are intended to be repaid from the sales.

It would be as curious a page as any in this book, if the adventures of this collection were told. Institutions, libraries, great newspapers, great publishing houses have arisen, which would not exist had the repealed Acts which clogged knowledge