



European Leaders (Illustrated)

John Lord

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Beacon Lights of History, Volume X, by John Lord

EXCERPT:

On the death of George IV. in 1830, a new political era dawned on England. His brother, William IV., who succeeded him, was not his equal in natural ability, but was more respectable in his character and more liberal in his views. With William IV. began the undisputed ascendancy of the House of Commons in national affairs. Before his day, no prime minister could govern against the will of the sovereign. After George IV., as in France under Louis Philippe, “the king reigned, but did not govern.” The chief of the ascendent political party was the real ruler.

When William IV. ascended the throne the Tories were still in power, and were hostile to reform. But the agitations and discontents of the latter days of George IV. had made the ministry unpopular. Great political reformers had arisen, like Lords Grey, Althorp, and Russell, and great orators like Henry Brougham and Macaulay, who demanded a change in the national policy. The social evils which stared everybody in the face were a national disgrace; they made the boasted liberty of the English a mockery. There was an unparalleled distress among the laboring classes, especially in the mining and manufacturing districts. The price of labor had diminished, while the price of bread had increased. So wretched was the condition of the poor that there were constant riots and insurrections, especially in large towns. In war times unskilled laborers earned from twelve to fifteen shillings a week, and mechanics twenty-five shillings; but in the stagnation of business which followed peace, wages suffered a great reduction, and thousands could find no work at all. The disbanding of the immense armies that had been necessary to combat Napoleon threw out of employ perhaps half a million of men, who became vagabonds, beggars, and paupers. The agricultural classes did not suffer as much as operatives in mills, since they got a high price for their grain; but the more remunerative agriculture became to landlords, the more miserable were those laborers who paid all they could earn to save themselves from absolute starvation. No foreign grain could be imported until wheat had arisen to eighty shillings a “quarter,” [1]—which unjust law tended to the enrichment of land-owners, and to a corresponding poverty among the laboring classes. In addition to the high price which the people paid for bread, they were taxed heavily upon everything imported, upon everything consumed, upon the necessities and conveniences of life as well as its luxuries,—on tea, on coffee, on sugar, on paper, on glass, on horses, on carriages, on medicines,—since money had to be raised to pay the interest on the national debt and to provide for the support of the government, including pensions, sinecures, and general extravagance.

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