**The Association for Promoting the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge (*act*. 1851-1868)** was established at a meeting at Fendall’s Hotel in London, on 13th February 1851, with a view to the repeal of a number of financial burdens falling particularly but not exclusively on newspapers, collectively known by their opponents as the ‘taxes on knowledge’: the advertising duty, the newspaper stamp, and the excise on paper. In 1851 the advertising duty on each separate advertisement per edition was 1s 6d. Any publication appearing more frequently than 26 days and containing news had to be printed on ‘stamped’ paper at a charge of 1d per sheet. In addition manufactured paper was liable to a further duty of between 20% and 40%. And to make matters worse, these taxes were underpinned by system of registration and sureties which obliged newspaper printers and proprietors to provide recognizances against publication of sedition or blasphemy.

The taxes on knowledge had their roots in the crisis of the late eighteenth century, and were designed to raise revenue, but also to control political expression. Augmented in 1819 in the aftermath of Peterloo, they had been significantly reduced during the 1830s as a response to what became known as the ‘war of the unstamped’, the publication of a wave of illegal unstamped newspapers and periodicals, most notably Henry Hetherington (1792-1849)’s *Poor Man’s Guardian* (1831-35), and John Cleave (1794/5-1850)’s *Weekly Police Gazette* (1834-36). Despite this lessening of the financial burdens, the more systematic implementation of the tax regime after 1836 had far-reaching consequences for the British press, discouraging new titles, severely limiting the number of daily papers, and facilitating the national dominance of *The Times*. Prices were high, circulation restricted, and profits uncertain.

Working class newspapers in particular were inhibited, which made renewal of the campaign for their repeal a natural focus for the cross-class reform movements which emerged after 1848 in the aftermath of the success of the Anti-Corn Law League and the collapse of Chartism. One of these new groupings was the People’s Charter Union, whose membership included Hetherington, James Watson (1799-1874), Richard Moore (1810-78), the secularist George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), and J. Dobson Collet (1812-98), or Collet Dobson Collet as he began to call himself sometime in 1849/50. In March 1849 the People’s Charter Union re-formed as the Newspaper Stamp Abolition Committee (NSAC) with a broad radical agenda of exemption of the press from all tax burdens and its emancipation from all particular regulatory control.

The NSAC was supported by the leading London radical paper, the *Daily News*, prominent metropolitan radicals, including Francis Place (1771-1854), who served as treasurer, Thomas Cooper (1805-1892), and G.J. Harney (1817-1897), who pressed the cause in articles in the *Northern Star* and *Democratic Review,* and in Parliament by the loose parliamentary radical grouping which included Joseph Hume (1775-1855), Herbert Ingram (1811-60), and A.S. Ayrton (1816-1886). However, initially the ‘Manchester School’ radicals of the Anti-Corn Law League, figures like Thomas Milner Gibson (1806-84), John Bright (1811-1889), and Richard Cobden (1804-65), largely remained aloof, despite sharing almost all the NSAC’s aspirations, a sign of their unease with social and political background of the NSAC’s leadership.

Ultimately the solution was the further transmutation of the NSAC into APRTOK, in which although the appearance of continuity was carefully maintained, the influence of the Manchester radicals predominated. So, while Place was retained as treasurer, real responsibility passed to the music publisher J.A. Novello (1810-96), who was appointed sub-Treasurer, becoming a crucial link between activists like Collet who continued as Secretary, and the Association’s middle class backers, whose credit frequently kept the Association financially afloat.

Institutionally, APRTOK remained a loose and frequently tense coalition of interests. Cobden was especially invested, seeing the taxes on knowledge as propping up the reactionary *Times*, and preventing the flourishing of a progressive press. While he pressed and prodded in the background, parliamentary leadership passed to Milner Gibson. Overshadowed in histories of mid-Victorian radicalism, not least because of his unorthodox translation from Conservative MP to free trade radical, it was Milner Gibson whose skilful tactics and astute draughtsmanship contributed significantly to the Association’s ultimate successes.

Meanwhile, considerable day to day autonomy was left to Collet, an interesting and sometimes enigmatic figure with broad contacts across mid-Victorian radicalism, including the *Leader* circle around Thornton Leigh Hunt (1810-1873), continental radicals exiled in Europe after the revolutions of 1848, and the maverick Russophobe, David Urquhart (1805-1877), Collet’s support of whom was a particular source of friction with Cobden. Collet’s local secretaries were often working-class radicals like Dr John Watts (1818-1887) in Manchester, or Thomas Edward Bowkett (1805-74), apothecary and surgeon, and ex-Chartist and freehold land society advocate, who organised for the Association in east London. These activists, all apparently men – although women supporters do appear occasionally as petitioners for repeal of the taxes, as Ann Jane Morgan, from Harting, Sussex, editor of *The Mother’s Friend*, did in 1855 – serviced local radical-Liberal constituencies which spanned the League and Chartism. Supporters including figures like George Henry Lewes (1817-78) andJohn Passmore Edwards (1823-1911) in London, William Benjamin Smith (1821-95), Freehold Land Society supporter and proprietor of the *Birmingham Mercury* (one of the first papers to appear daily at one penny once the stamp was repealed), Isaac Ironside (1808-70) at Sheffield, George Wilson (1808-70) in Manchester, and later (Sir) Joseph Cowen (1829-1900) in Newcastle.

What was particularly significant about the Association was its strategy: not the conventional pressure from without tactic of threatening popular alienation, but a deliberate attempt to wear down the will of officials and politicians by taking advantage of the complications and inconsistencies of the statutory regime to bring the law and the institutions that implemented it – particularly the Inland Revenue – into disrepute. Holyoake, in his direct harrying of the Inland Revenue with requests for clarification and challenges to procedures, and Milner Gibson in his parliamentary interventions, both proved masters of this approach, combining constructive appeals for repeal with vilification of the arbitrariness, chaos and compromises of the system. At the same time, with increasing confidence, Collet engineered a number of calculatedly illegal publishing ventures designed to encourage prosecution and provide further opportunities to hold up the law to ridicule. Over time, the resulting attrition simply sapped the will of politicians and civil servants to resist.

Successive Chancellors of the Exchequer conceded the theoretical force of the APRTOK case but argued that the exigencies of the public finances restricted their discretion. Sir Charles Wood (1800-1885) was particularly unsympathetic, but repeal was much more congruent with the long-term reconstruction of public finances implemented by W.E. Gladstone (1809-98) between 1853 and 1861. Although his initial intention had been merely to reduce the duty, as a result of some skilful parliamentary manoeuvring by Milner Gibson, Gladstone’s path-breaking 1853 budget enacted the entire abolition of the advertising duty. Optimism that the newspaper stamp would soon follow was destroyed by the outbreak of the Crimean War, although the *Times’* assaults on the coalition government of Lord Aberdeen (1784-1860) drove even cautious Whigs towards support for repeal, while the insatiable demand for war news encouraged a new wave of unstamped papers, much to the outrage of the proprietors of stamped titles. Although Gladstone lost his position as Chancellor in the fall of the Aberdeen administration in 1855, the stamp duties were repealed by Sir George Cornewall Lewis (1806-1863)’s budget of May 1855.

Although the paper duties remained, after this success APRTOK slipped into abeyance. Cobden and Bright concentrated their energies into the launch of their own paper, the *Morning Star*. Collet threw himself into the Urqhuartite movement. The rout of the middle-class radicals at the general election of 1857, when Bright and Milner Gibson were both defeated at Manchester, and several other prominent parliamentary supporters of the campaign, including W.J. Fox (1786-1864), A.H. Layard (1817-1894), and Sir Joshua Walmsley (1794-1871) failed to be elected, was a further setback.

Momentum gradually returned after the 1859 general election when Milner Gibson entered the government, and his place as parliamentary leader for APRTOK was assumed by Ayrton. In the face of determined resistance to Gladstone’s proposed repeal of the paper duties in the budget of 1860 APRTOK was resuscitated, largely on the initiative of Collet, Holyoake and Moore. It co-ordinated propaganda controverting the claims of the paper industry, and then co-operated with the newly-formed London Constitutional Defence Committee (which mobilised many ARPTOK supporters and sympathisers, including the ex-Chartist Henry Vincent (1813-78), Robert Wilson Smiles (1816-90), brother of Samuel Smiles, organising secretary of the National Public Schools Association, and later chief librarian of the Manchester Public Libraries, and the anti-slavery activist F.W. Chesson (1833-1888)) in organising opposition to the attempts of the Conservative majority in the House of Lords to block repeal. Initially unsuccessful, the Association had the satisfaction of seeing the 1861 budget repeal the paper duties without undue alarm.

Thereafter the APRTOK effectively ceased to operate as a formal institution; somewhat belatedly the accounts of the Association were reconciled and at the end of 1864 a subscription was handed without fanfare to Collet. However, although the Manchester School leaders moved on to other issues, Collet and a number of the other metropolitan radicals maintained their interest, and they sprang periodically to life under the Association’s banner to resist the Revenue’s intermittent efforts to enforce its residual responsibilities, and ultimately in 1868 to successfully assist Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891), who was prosecuted for publishing the *National Reformer*. This case embarrassed Gladstone’s new Liberal government sufficiently for it to speedily repeal the remaining registration and sureties requirements. Thereafter the Association quietly faded, its energies channelled elsewhere, not least into the Travelling Tax Abolition Committee, which reunited Collet, Holyoake and Watts. Meanwhile, scores of new daily newspapers and hundreds of new provincial weeklies transformed the British press, while the campaigns against the knowledge taxes passed into the lore of the Liberal party and of the making of Gladstone as ‘the People’s William’.

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