

Thomas Paine – the Forgotten Radical

Barbara Burfoot tells the story of Paine's involvement in the American and French Revolutions, which were the context of his three great works: *Common Sense*, *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*.

Thomas Paine was born in Thetford in Norfolk on 29th January 1737, the only child of Frances and Joseph Paine. Frances was the Anglican daughter of a respected local lawyer who became Thetford's Town Clerk and Joseph was a Quaker stay (or corset) maker. (Stays were the essential item in every woman's wardrobe in the 18th century.) Frances was twelve years older than Joseph. Thomas had great love and respect for his father. He found his mother rather cold and distant but he provided for her in her old age when, remarkably, she outlived his father.

Thomas attended Thetford Grammar School from the age of 6 until he was 12, when he went to work with his father as an apprentice. In 1756 he left home, 'raw and adventurous, and heated by the false heroism of a master (his grammar school teacher) who had served on a man o' war I began the carver of my own fortune'. In 1757 he signed on as crew aboard a privateer 'cruising against the French'. He left the ship after six months with a handsome commission of £30, which he used to finance a kind of 18th century 'gap year' in London.

By his own account, 'as soon as I was able I purchased a pair of globes and attended the philosophical lectures of Martin and Ferguson, and afterwards became acquainted with Dr Bevis of the so-called Royal Society, then living in the Temple and an excellent astronomer'.

Paine was joining other master craftsmen pursuing their studies in what they called natural philosophy and we would call science – part of the explosion of knowledge and experiment which we call the Enlightenment. Paine, by then a master craftsman himself, joined the discussions in London's coffee houses, read the newest scientific publications and went to evening lectures often in the same coffee houses.

By 1758 Paine's privateer earnings were exhausted, his 'gap year' was over and he had to leave London to work as a journeyman stay-maker in Dover. In 1758, with a £10 loan from his employer, Paine started his own stay-making business nearby in Sandwich. In 1759 he married

Mary Lambert, the orphaned daughter of an Excise man. His business collapsed almost immediately after his marriage and the couple moved to Margate, where Mary died giving birth to a dead child. Paine wrote 'there is neither manhood nor policy in grief'. The 23-year-old widower moved back to Thetford to live with his parents.

In December 1762 Paine passed the Board of Excise examination and obtained a position in Lincolnshire, probably helped by the influence of his maternal grandfather Thomas Cocke, sometime Thetford Town Clerk. He would also have had to prove that he was a baptised and confirmed member of the Church of England. While he was influenced by his Quaker father it seems that, at least to some extent, he practised his mother's faith. Corruption was endemic in the Excise service and when his superior, William Swallow, was caught in 1765 Paine lost his job as well. In early 1768 he petitioned the Excise for reinstatement, which was granted and he was posted to Lewes in Sussex.

Lewes had been a centre of political and religious dissent since the 13th century and Paine soon joined the Headstrong Club, which met regularly for supper and debate in the White Hart Inn. The Headstrong Club is still going strong and still meets in the White Hart Inn. A present day member of the Club attended SOF Network's 2014 Conference. Paine frequently won the Club's informal prize 'General of the Headstrong Army' for his oratory.

Paine lodged in Lewes with Samuel and Esther Ollive over their shop. Paine became so close to Samuel that after his death in 1769 he tried to help Ollive's widow in the business. In 1771 Paine married Samuel's only daughter, Elizabeth, but the marriage was never consummated. Paine told a friend, 'It is nobody's business but my own. I had cause for it but I will name it to no one'.

In 1772 Excise men throughout Great Britain decided to apply to parliament for some addition to their salaries. Paine was chosen to put their case and he drafted *The Case of the Officers of Excise* in the plain language favoured by the Royal Society. He

instances their poverty as the source of the widespread corruption in the service. Excise men were held in general contempt at the time but Paine's clear explanation of their crucial importance to the financing of British government gave them a reason to be proud of what they did. His colleagues contributed three shillings each to print four thousand copies of *The Case*, with the rest of the funds used to support Paine in travelling to London to present it to Parliament.

His greatest supporter in London was George Lewis Scott, a Commissioner on the Board of Excise who had met Paine during his 'gap year'. Scott introduced him to Edward Gibbon, Samuel Johnson and, crucially for Paine's future, to Benjamin Franklin, then the United Colonies' premier colonial agent.

Paine spent more than two years in London pressing the Excise men's case. When his stipend from his colleagues ran out he worked as a private tutor. Meanwhile the business in Lewes, managed by his wife and mother-in-law, was slowly going bankrupt.

In April 1774 the Board of Excise relieved him of his duties because of his long unauthorised absence and he was immediately arrested for debt. The house and business in Lewes were sold at auction and Paine separated from his wife, accepting £35 in exchange for signing over all their other joint property to Elizabeth at a time when as her husband he had an absolute right in law to all of it. They never met again. From time to time Paine sent Elizabeth money anonymously and when she was offered a substantial sum of money to join the Government's campaign of vilification against her husband she steadfastly refused.

The Excise men's petition to Parliament was lost, probably because the petition was seen as an act of insurrection to be crushed before an unfortunate precedent was set.

With £35 and letters of introduction from Benjamin Franklin, Paine set sail for America. When he arrived there in December 1774, he was carried off the ship in Philadelphia so weakened by typhus that he was unable to walk. It was six weeks before Paine was well enough to present any of his letters of intro-

duction to Franklin's relatives and friends. It was a print shop and bookstore proprietor called Robert Aitken, an immigrant from Scotland, who offered Paine his first job in America as executive editor of his new magazine, *Pennsylvania Magazine* or *American Monthly Museum*. Paine's writings were an instant success; though Aitken later suggested their production was assisted by liberal amounts of brandy, even so they were 'perfectly fit for the press without alteration or correction'. For the new magazine Paine wrote attacks on cruelty to animals and the practice of duelling and he published 'An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex', one of the first arguments for women's rights to appear in America.



Thomas Paine

Slave auctions were held in rooms opposite Paine's lodgings in Philadelphia and in 1775 he co-wrote with Thomas Prynor a passionate essay against slavery, *African Slavery in America*, demanding the immediate emancipation of every African slave in every colony. Such was its impact that five weeks after its publication the Pennsylvania Society for the Relief of Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage was formed, the first abolitionist organisation in the Western Hemisphere.

In 1775 the smouldering resentment of the American colonists against the taxes levied by the British Government was coming to a head and the first shots in the War of Independence had already been fired.

Paine had parted from Robert Aitken and had embarked on a major essay on the history of the Colonies and their position in the British Empire; an essay which became *Common Sense*. Paine had some difficulty finding a printer brave enough to publish it. *Common Sense* was eventually published as a pamphlet costing two shillings, an outrageous price that reflected the risk the printer felt he was taking.

A thousand copies were printed on 10th January 1776 as 'by an Englishman' and sold out within days. By the end of 1776 between 150,000 and 250,000 copies had been sold to an American population of about three million. A Bostonian commented: 'Independence a year ago could not have been publicly mentioned with impunity ... Nothing else is now talked of, and I know not what can be done by

Great Britain to prevent it'.

The first year of the War was disastrous for the colonists, an uninterrupted series of defeats. Paine served briefly in the Continental Army but was then persuaded that he could better serve the cause with his pen. In December 1776 the *Pennsylvania Journal* published the first of Paine's fourteen papers on *The American Crisis*, written between 1776 and 1783.

At dusk on 27th December 1776 Washington ordered his officers to gather their men into squads and read the paper aloud to them. It began: 'These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.' Two days later the Continental Army took the town of Trenton.

After the War, the New York State Assembly awarded Paine a farm at New Rochelle as recompense for his services to the new Republic and Paine turned his attention from journalism and politics to engineering and the design of a single-span iron bridge. Finding the no one in America prepared to construct the bridge, Paine returned to England in 1787 in the hope of being reunited with his parents. His father died before he arrived in England but his mother was still alive. He was granted an English patent for the bridge and an experimental version was constructed over the Don at Rotherham in Yorkshire. Paine met Edmund Burke when he visited the bridge and they became friends immediately. Paine made many visits to Burke's home in Buckingham. Burke is seen today as the patriarch of conservatism but in his own day he was a liberal Whig and a strong supporter of the American colonists.

Paine was shocked when in 1790 Burke published an attack on the French Revolution, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Paine's *Rights of Man* was written as an answer to Burke's attack. Part 1, published in 1791, was dedicated to George Washington and Part 2, published a year later, to the Marquis de Lafayette, who had fought for the colonists in the American War of Independence and played a major part in the first stages of the French Revolution. Burke's *Reflections* sold 20,000 copies, but the *Rights of Man* sold at least five times as many. More than 100,000 copies were sold in North America alone. Part 1 is an argument for representative government but Part 2 is far more incendiary and includes strong attacks on the Hanoverian monarchy. It also contains a plan for a welfare state recognising the community's responsibility to educate the young and support the sick and the old. It was Part 2 that led the British Government to ban the book and to charge Paine with

seditious libel, which could carry a death sentence. Paine was warned by William Blake to leave England and in September 1792 he left from Dover on the ferry to France.

In France he took up the place to which he had been elected as deputy for Calais in the French National Convention. He spoke no French but was provided with an interpreter. Paine had not been a legislator for long when the question of the fate of the French King came before the Convention. Paine argued strongly against the execution of the King and Queen, directly opposing Robespierre.

Paine was arrested in the early hours of the morning on 28th December 1793 and taken to the Luxembourg Prison but on the way his guards allowed him to take the manuscript of Part 1 of his third great work, *The Age of Reason*, to his friend, Joel Barlow for safekeeping. Joel Barlow arranged for its publication and its translation into French and it appeared in both France and England in 1794. Its sales exceeded those of Paine's previous works. In the USA alone seventeen editions would be printed and in England more than thirty replies had been published within four years.

Theodore Roosevelt once described Paine as 'a grubby little atheist' but he was wrong. Paine's personal hygiene may have left something to be desired in the latter years of his life but he certainly wasn't an atheist. He wrote *The Age of Reason* to save the French from atheism 'lest, in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government, and false theology, we lose sight of morality, humanity and of the theology that is true'.

The Age of Reason includes this declaration: 'I believe in one God and no more; and I hope for some happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy and endeavouring to make our fellow creatures happy.' Paine held that 'the Word of God is the Creation we behold'. He considered Christianity and particularly its doctrine of the atonement an insult to the Creator of the universe. Paine's views were commonplace among gentlemen and academics at the time. His religious views were those of four of the first five American presidents but these same gentlemen and academics still felt that they should not be set out in plain language to be read or read aloud to anyone with sixpence to spare. Paine was clear about his audience. At one point he refers to an astrolabe and describes it for those who may never have seen one.

Part 2 of *The Age of Reason* is sharper and more combative than Part 1, because he was replying to

some of the vicious attacks on him. *The Age of Reason* destroyed Paine's reputation and many of his friendships in religious America.

Paine was saved from the guillotine by a series of accidents and by uncertainty about his nationality. He was released from prison on 6th November 1794. He was not able to return to America until 1802 after the signing of the Treaty of Amiens between Britain and France, which meant that he was no longer at risk of capture by a British warship and being returned to Britain to face a possible death sentence.

Paine returned to America at the invitation of Thomas Jefferson. He frequently dined with Jefferson in the 'President's Palace'. Having vacated his farm for the wife and children of his French host, Nicolas de Bonneville, who had emigrated to America, Paine went to live in rooms in what is now Greenwich Village in New York. In his retirement he wrote amongst other things *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance* about Britain's rising national debt, which changed the mind of one of his bitterest opponents, William Cobbett, and made him one of Paine's most passionate champions. His last published work was *Agrarian Justice*, recognised today as the first argument for an old age pension published in America.

Most of the ideas in *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* are taken for granted today. (*The Age of Reason* might still be controversial in some religious circles). Most of the ideas were not original at the time but Paine's expression of them in vigorous, accessible language shook the contemporary establishment to its foundations. Where are Paine's counterparts today challenging the powerful and exciting us to action against injustice?

Paine died on 8th June 1809. He was refused a place in the New York Quaker burial ground and was interred on his farm at New Rochelle. A year later William Cobbett, his son and a hired man dug up Paine's bones. Cobbett brought them to England hoping to provide them with an appropriate resting place and promptly lost them!

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The French Revolution *As It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement*

Oh! pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love!
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!—Oh! times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,
When most intent on making of herself
A prime Enchantress – to assist the work
Which then was going forward in her name!
Not favoured spots alone, but the whole earth,
The beauty wore of promise, that which sets
(As at some moment might not be unfelt
Among the bowers of paradise itself)
The budding rose above the rose full blown.
What temper at the prospect did not wake
To happiness unthought of? The inert
Were roused, and lively natures rapt away!
They who had fed their childhood upon dreams,
The playfellows of fancy, who had made
All powers of swiftness, subtilty, and strength
Their ministers, – who in lordly wise had stirred
Among the grandest objects of the sense,
And dealt with whatsoever they found there
As if they had within some lurking right
To wield it; – they, too, who, of gentle mood,
Had watched all gentle motions, and to these
Had fitted their own thoughts, schemers more wild,
And in the region of their peaceful selves; –
Now was it that both found, the meek and lofty
Did both find, helpers to their heart's desire,
And stuff at hand, plastic as they could wish;
Were called upon to exercise their skill,
Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us – the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!

William Wordsworth

The poem is from William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, vol. 11 (1805).