

Book of the Month - 'Thomas Paine: In Search of the Common Good'

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The American Revolution was, perhaps, the single most influential event in modern political history. Spawning the democracies which have since spread around the globe, the revolution gave renewed impetus, credence and theoretical argument to the concepts of representative government, the separation of political powers, liberty, freedom and natural rights. Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and James Madison, have all

been immortalised by their deeds and words in that period. Yet one man, argued those who met at a United Nations colloquium in 1987, is unjustly absent from those so fondly and admirably remembered. Indeed, he was the first to call the United States of America by its now familiar name.

Thomas Paine, writes Leo Zonneveld, in the introduction to a new book bringing together the reflections of those at the colloquium, was a 'brilliant activator and humble participant in the process of pointing out the reality of human brotherhood and true democracy.' In the ensuing twelve short chapters, a diverse group of Paine enthusiasts, including former Labour Party leader Michael Foot, UN assistant secretary-general Robert Muller and professor of American history Eric Foner, debate Paine's legacy, put forward their interpretations of Paine's work and talk about how he has influenced their lives. For Foot it is Paine's unshakeable belief in the power of freedom which is most admirable; Foner offers Paine's detest for hereditary privilege as one of his great characteristics; while Muller asks what would Paine of said about today's world.

The direct references to Paine's writing coupled with the biographical information present in many of the chapters, means that those who are not familiar with his life can easily follow what is being said and, indeed, may find this book an excellent introduction. For those well versed in the punchy, evocative prose of 'Common Sense' and 'The Rights of Man' some of this may be going over old ground. With the personal slant on Paine's work given by many of the speakers, however, there are still plenty of new interpretations and insightful analysis to keep you interested.

In stark contrast to today's mediated, spin driven politics a quote from a letter Paine sent to the Providence Gazette begins one chapter: 'I have never yet made it the least point of consideration whether a thing is popular or unpopular, but whether it is right or wrong'. It is this uncompromising stance - one which on several occasions nearly cost Paine his life - which sets him apart from many others and provides the undercurrent for his admirers here. Unfortunately, this leads to the one problem with this book. At several points it becomes clear that there was no prior planning concerning who would say what, and this leads to several cases of repetition. Despite this and with June 8, 2009 marking the 200th anniversary of Paine's death, this book succeeds in being a timely reminder of the work and influence of one of the leading political thinkers and activists of his or any generation.

Thomas Paine: In Search of the Common Good (Edited by Joyce Chumbley and Leo Zonneveld) is published by [Spokesman Books](#) and is out now.