

Farewell Michael Foot

Michael Foot has died, well into his nineties. Some years ago, in 1998, he introduced a new edition of Bertrand Russell's Autobiography with these words:

'A particular, persistent reason why Bertrand Russell had such appeal throughout his ninety odd years, especially to the young, was the trouble he took to write plain English.'

Foot went on to praise what he regarded as 'one of the truly great autobiographies in our language'. Another of Foot's favourite writers of plain and potent English was Thomas Paine, who was his 'number one revolutionary hero'. By way of tribute to Michael Foot, we reprint a review he wrote of three works concerning Paine, which was probably Foot's last published work.

Just about 20 years ago, with Jill Craigie at the top of her intellectual form, when she thought the cinema could raise all the arts to a higher degree of excellence, we got the news from a good source that at last a proper film was to be made on a subject which cried out for it: Thomas Paine.

He had been my number one revolutionary hero and, instructed perhaps by her love of revolutions, Rebecca West, he was high up on Jill's list too. It so happens that we had been together with several Indian friends who knew that what we were seeing at the first-night showing of Richard Attenborough's *Ghandi* was the truly epic subject properly displayed.

The actors contributed to the film's success but it was the vision of the great director testing his new instruments to the limit which would achieve the great results. Not so long after that night of triumph we were told that Attenborough was turning his imaginative mind to Thomas Paine as his next great subject.

It could still happen, but meantime I must give readers an update on Thomas Paine matters. Some may recall that I have, on occasion, such is his important role in history, suggested changing the name of Trafalgar Square to Thomas Paine Square. It would be a nice compliment to the Americans and the French, since he played such an important part in achieving their freedom as well as ours.

However, I now report not the great film but three new books, which should remind us afresh how essential were the causes we honour today.

The first and the most significant is *These Are The Times: A Life of Thomas Paine* by Trevor Griffiths, who makes his dedication:

‘For Richard Attenborough, comrade and conductor on this long march’. Such words might suggest that the march is ended, but not necessarily so. Here is the brilliant and truly original screenplay written by Griffiths for the film, and I hope that its publication may revive the idea of making it. Most of the scenes take place in America, but they speak again to the whole world.

Griffiths is a true Painite, and I was sent this copy by an old friend who also qualifies for that title, Ken Coates, of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in Nottingham.

The second book, Bernard Vincent’s *The Transatlantic Republican: Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions*, offers a series of fresh lectures and reviews. Vincent has already played a leading role in restoring Paine’s proper reputation in France.

Paine himself never forgot his debt to the people of France and Paris in particular. But only with Vincent’s scholarship and political insight has that association been properly restored. The other truly great contribution to this period was John Keane’s book, *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, published by Bloomsbury on May 1, 1995. Never was there a better date to remind us of the even greater glory of July 14th which all those truly entitled to call themselves revolutionaries, the women even more than the men, must still celebrate. Keane then told the story better than ever before, and he would have been happy to acclaim those who are just catching up.

Third, Penguin has just published in its Great Ideas series, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, which first made him infamous. On December 3rd, the Thomas Paine Society held its annual meeting in London’s Conway Hall, which is our regular meeting place. Without Conway Hall, without Moncure Conway, true revolutionaries of the modern age would have no such appropriate place to meet. Without his truly liberal ideas, embracing women as well as men, which he brought from America, we would still be living in the intellectual dark ages.

The more we look today on the persistent topicality of Paine’s political ideas, the more we see for ourselves that it is the potency of his writing which prevails, and we may be all the more amazed to recall that Richard Carlile was imprisoned in 1823 for selling Paine’s *Rights of Man*. Carlile concluded that matter thus: ‘His pen continued an overmatch for the whole brood.’

Trevor Griffiths, These Are The Times – A Life of Thomas Paine, Spokesman Books, Bernard Vincent, The Transatlantic Republican – Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions, Amsterdam Monographs in American Studies, Editions Rodopi B.V. Thomas Paine, Common Sense, Penguin Books Great Ideas Series.