

Thomas Paine 1739-1809

Bertrand Russell

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Russell's essay on Tom Paine was first published in 1934.

Thomas Paine, though prominent in two Revolutions and almost hanged for attempting to raise a third, is grown, in our day, somewhat dim. To our great-grandfathers, he seemed a kind of earthly Satan, a subversive infidel rebellious alike against his God and his King. He incurred the bitter hostility of three men not generally united: Pitt, Robespierre, and Washington. Of these the first two sought his death, while the third carefully abstained from measures designed to save his life. Pitt and Washington hated him because he was a democrat; Robespierre, because he opposed the execution of the King and the Reign of Terror. It was his fate to be always honoured by Oppositions and hated by Governments: Washington, while he was still fighting the English, spoke of Paine in terms of the highest praise; the French nation heaped honours upon him until the Jacobins rose to power; even in England, the most prominent Whig statesmen befriended him and employed him in drawing up manifestos. He had faults, like other men; but it was for his virtues that he was hated and successfully calumniated.

Paine's importance in history consists in the fact that he made the preaching of democracy democratic. There were, in the eighteenth century, democrats among French and English aristocrats, among *philosophes* and Nonconformist ministers. But all of them presented their political speculations in a form designed to appeal only to the educated. Paine, while his doctrine contained nothing novel, was an innovator in the manner of his writing, which was simple, direct, unlearned, and such as every intelligent working man could appreciate. This made him dangerous; and when he added religious unorthodoxy to his other crimes, the defenders of privilege seized the opportunity to load him with obloquy.

The first thirty-six years of his life gave no evidence of the talents which appeared in his later activities. He was born at Thetford, in

1739, of poor Quaker parents, and was educated at the local grammar school up to the age of thirteen, when he became a stay-maker. A quiet life, however, was not his taste, and at the age of seventeen he tried to enlist on a privateer called *The Terrible*, whose Captain's name was Death. His parents fetched him back, and so probably saved his life, as 175 out of the crew of 200 were shortly afterwards killed in action. A little later, however, on the outbreak of the Seven Years' War, he succeeded in sailing on another privateer, but nothing is known of his brief adventures at sea. In 1758, he was employed as a stay-maker in London, and in the following year he married, but his wife died after a few months. In 1763 he became an exciseman, but was dismissed two years later for professing to have made inspections while he was in fact studying at home. In great poverty, he became a schoolmaster at ten shillings a week, and tried to take Anglican orders. From such desperate expedients he was saved by being reinstated as an exciseman at Lewes, where he married a Quakeress from whom, for reasons unknown, he formally separated in 1774. In this year he again lost his employment, apparently because he organised a petition of the excisemen for higher pay. By selling all that he had, he was just able to pay his debts and leave some provision for his wife, but he himself was again reduced to destitution.

In London, where he was trying to present the excisemen's petition to Parliament, he made the acquaintance of Benjamin Franklin, who thought well of him. The result was that, in October 1774, he sailed for America, armed with a letter of recommendation from Franklin describing him as an 'ingenious, worthy young man.' As soon as he arrived in Philadelphia, he began to show skill as a writer, and almost immediately became editor of a journal.

His first publication, in March 1775, was a forcible article against slavery and the slave trade, to which, whatever some of his American friends might say, he remained always an uncompromising enemy. It seems to have been largely owing to his influence that Jefferson inserted in the draft of the Declaration of Independence the passage on this subject which was afterwards cut out. In 1775, slavery still existed in Pennsylvania; it was abolished in that State by an Act of 1780, of which, it was generally believed, Paine wrote the preamble.

Paine was one of the first, if not the very first, to advocate complete freedom for the United States. In October, 1775, when even those who subsequently signed the Declaration of Independence were still hoping for some accommodation with the British Government, he wrote:

'I hesitate not for a moment to believe that the Almighty will finally separate America from Britain. Call it Independency or what you will, if it is the cause of God and humanity it will go on. And when the Almighty shall have blest us, and made us a people *dependent only upon him*, then may our first gratitude be shown by an act of continental legislation, which shall put a stop to the importation of Negroes for sale, soften the hard fate of those already here, and in time procure their freedom.'

It was for the sake of freedom – freedom from monarchy, aristocracy, slavery, and every species of tyranny – that Paine took up the cause of America.

During the most difficult years of the War of Independence he spent his days campaigning and his evenings composing rousing manifestos published under the signature 'Common Sense.' These had enormous success, and helped materially in winning the war. After the British had burnt the towns of Falmouth in Maine and Norfolk in Virginia, Washington wrote to a friend (January 31st, 1776):

'A few more of such flaming arguments as were exhibited at Falmouth and Norfolk, added to the sound doctrine and unanswerable reasoning contained in the pamphlet *Common Sense*, will not leave numbers at a loss to decide upon the propriety of separation.'

The work was topical, and has now only a historical interest, but there are phrases in it that are still telling. After pointing out that the quarrel is not only with the King, but also with Parliament, he says: 'There is no body of men more jealous of their privileges than the Commons: Because they sell them.' At that date it was impossible to deny the justice of this taunt.

There is vigorous argument in favour of a Republic, and a triumphant refutation of the theory that monarchy prevents civil war. 'Monarchy and succession,' he says, after a summary of English history, 'have laid... the world in blood and ashes. 'Tis a form of government which the word of God bears testimony against, and blood will attend it.' In December, 1776, at a moment when the fortunes of war were adverse, Paine published a pamphlet called *The Crisis*, beginning:

'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.'

This essay was read to the troops, and Washington expressed to Paine a 'living sense of the importance of your works'. No other writer was so widely read in America, and he could have made large sums by his pen, but he always refused to accept any money at all for what he wrote. At the end of the War of Independence, he was universally respected in the United States, but still poor; however, one State legislature voted him a sum of money and another gave him an estate, so that he had every prospect of comfort for the rest of his life. He might have been expected to settle down into the respectability characteristic of revolutionaries who have succeeded. He turned his attention from politics to engineering, and demonstrated the possibility of iron bridges with longer spans than had previously been thought feasible. Iron bridges led him to England, where he was received in a friendly manner by Burke, the Duke of Portland, and other Whig notables. He had a large model of his iron bridge set up at Paddington; he was praised by eminent engineers, and seemed likely to spend his remaining years as an inventor.

However, France as well as England was interested in iron bridges. In 1788 he paid a visit to Paris to discuss them with Lafayette, and to submit his plans to the

Académie des Sciences, which, after due delay, reported favourably. When the Bastille fell, Lafayette decided to present the key of the prison to Washington, and entrusted to Paine the task of conveying it across the Atlantic. Paine, however, was kept in Europe by the affairs of his bridge. He wrote a long letter to Washington informing him that he would find some one to take his place in transporting ‘this early trophy of the spoils of despotism, and the first ripe fruits of American principles transplanted into Europe.’ He goes on to say that ‘I have not the least doubt of the final and compleat success of the French Revolution,’ and that ‘I have manufactured a Bridge (a single arch) of one hundred and ten feet span, and five feet high from the cord of the arch.’

For a time, the bridge and the Revolution remained thus evenly balanced in his interests, but gradually the Revolution conquered. In the hope of rousing a responsive movement in England, he wrote his *Rights of Man*, on which his fame as a democrat chiefly rests.

This work, which was considered madly subversive during the anti-Jacobin reaction, will astonish a modern reader by its mildness and common sense. It is, primarily, an answer to Burke, and deals at considerable length with contemporary events in France. The first part was published in 1791, the second in 1792; there was, therefore, as yet no need to apologise for the Revolution. There is very little declamation about Natural Rights, but a great deal of sound sense about the British Government. Burke had contended that the Revolution in 1688 bound the British forever to submit to the sovereigns appointed by the Act of Settlement. Paine contends that it is impossible to bind posterity, and that constitutions must be capable of revision from time to time.

Governments, he says, ‘may all be comprehended under three heads. First, Superstition. Secondly, Power. Thirdly, The common interest of society and the common rights of man. The first was a government of priestcraft, the second of conquerors, the third of reason.’ The two former amalgamated: ‘the key of St. Peter and the key of the Treasury became quartered on one another, and the wondering, cheated multitude worshipped the invention.’ Such general observations, however, are rare. The bulk of the work consists, first, of French history from 1789 to the end of 1791, and secondly, of a comparison of the British Constitution with that decreed in France in 1791, of course to the advantage of the latter. It must be remembered that in 1791 France was still a monarchy. Paine was a republican and did not conceal the fact, but did not much emphasise it in *Rights of Man*.

Paine’s appeal, except in a few short passages, was to common sense. He argued against Pitt’s finance, as Cobbett did later, on grounds which ought to have appealed to any Chancellor of the Exchequer; he described the combination of a small sinking fund with vast borrowings as setting a man with a wooden leg to catch a hare – the longer they run, the further apart they are. He speaks of the ‘Potter’s field of paper money’ – a phrase quite in Cobbett’s style. It was, in fact, his writings on finance that turned Cobbett’s former enmity into admiration. His objection to the hereditary principle, which horrified Burke and Pitt, is now

common ground among all politicians, including even Mussolini and Hitler. Nor is his style in any way outrageous: it is clear, vigorous, and downright, but not nearly as abusive as that of his opponents.

Nevertheless, Pitt decided to inaugurate his reign of terror by prosecuting Paine and suppressing *Rights of Man*. According to his niece, Lady Hester Stanhope, he 'used to say that Tom Paine was quite in the right, but then, he would add, what am I to do? As things are, if I were to encourage Tom Paine's opinions we should have a bloody revolution.' Paine replied to the prosecution by defiance and inflammatory speeches. But the September massacres were occurring, and English Tories were reacting by increased fierceness. The poet Blake – who had more worldly wisdom than Paine – persuaded him that if he stayed in England he would be hanged. He fled to France, missing the officers, who had come to arrest him, by a few hours in London and by twenty minutes in Dover, where he was allowed by the authorities to pass because he happened to have with him a recent friendly letter from Washington.

Although England and France were not yet at war, Dover and Calais belonged to different worlds. Paine, who had been elected an honorary French citizen, had been returned to the Convention by three different constituencies, of which Calais, which now welcomed him, was one. 'As the packet sails in a salute is fired from the battery; cheers sound along the shore. As the representative for Calais steps on French soil soldiers make his avenue, the officers embrace him, the national cockade is presented' – and so on, through the usual French series of beautiful ladies, mayors, etc.

Arrived in Paris, he behaved with more public spirit than prudence. He hoped – in spite of the massacres – for an orderly and moderate Revolution such as he had helped to make in America. He made friends with the Girondins, refused to think ill of Lafayette (now in disgrace), and continued, as an American, to express gratitude to Louis XVI for his share in liberating the United States. By opposing the King's execution down to the last moment, he incurred the hostility of the Jacobins. He was first expelled from the Convention, and then imprisoned as a foreigner; he remained in prison throughout Robespierre's period of power and for some months longer. The responsibility rested only partly with the French; the American Minister, Gouverneur Morris, was equally to blame. He was a Federalist, and sided with England against France; he had, moreover, an ancient personal grudge against Paine for exposing a friend's corrupt deal during the War of Independence. He took the line that Paine was not an American, and that he could therefore do nothing for him. Washington, who was secretly negotiating Jay's treaty with England, was not sorry to have Paine in a situation in which he could not enlighten the French Government as to reactionary opinion in America. Paine escaped the guillotine by accident, but nearly died of illness. At last Morris was replaced by Monroe (of the 'Doctrine'), who immediately procured his release, took him into his own house, and restored him to health by eighteen months' care and kindness.

Paine did not know how great a part Morris had played in his misfortunes, but

he never forgave Washington, after whose death, hearing that a statue was to be made of the great man, he addressed the following lines to the sculptor:

Take from the mine the coldest, hardest stone,
It needs no fashion: it is Washington.
But if you chisel, let the stroke be rude,
And on his heart engrave—Ingratitude.

This remained unpublished, but a long, bitter letter to Washington was published in 1796, ending:

‘And as to you, Sir, treacherous in private friendship (for so you have been to me, and that in the day of danger) and a hypocrite in public life, the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an impostor; whether you have abandoned good principles, or whether you ever had any.’

To those who know only the statuesque Washington of the legend, these may seem wild words. But 1796 was the year of the first contest for the Presidency, between Jefferson and Adams, in which Washington’s whole weight was thrown into support of the latter, in spite of his belief in monarchy and aristocracy; moreover Washington was taking sides with England against France, and doing all in his power to prevent the spread of those republican and democratic principles to which he owed his own elevation. These public grounds, combined with a very grave personal grievance, show that Paine’s words were not without justification.

It might have been more difficult for Washington to leave Paine languishing in prison if that rash man had not spent his last days of liberty in giving literary expression to the theological opinions which he and Jefferson shared with Washington and Adams, who, however, were careful to avoid all public avowals of unorthodoxy. Foreseeing his imprisonment, Paine set to work to write *The Age of Reason*, of which he finished Part I six hours before his arrest. This book shocked his contemporaries, even many of those who agreed with his politics. Nowadays, apart from a few passages in bad taste, there is very little that most clergymen would disagree with. In the first chapter he says:

‘I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for 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.’

These were not empty words. From the moment of his first participation in public affairs – his protest against slavery in 1775 – down to the day of his death, he was consistently opposed to every form of cruelty, whether practised by his own party or by his opponents. The Government of England at that time was a ruthless oligarchy, using Parliament as a means of lowering the standard of life in the poorest classes; Paine advocated political reform as the only cure for this abomination, and had to fly for his life. In France, for opposing unnecessary

bloodshed, he was thrown into prison and narrowly escaped death. In America, for opposing slavery and upholding the principles of the Declaration of Independence, he was abandoned by the Government at the moment when he most needed its support. If, as he maintained and as many now believe, true religion consists in ‘doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy,’ there was not one among his opponents who had as good a claim to be considered a religious man.

The greater part of *The Age of Reason* consists of criticism of the Old Testament from a moral point of view. Very few nowadays would regard the massacres of men, women, and children recorded in the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua as models of righteousness, but in Paine’s day it was considered impious to criticise the Israelites when the Old Testament approved of them. Many pious divines wrote answers to him. The most liberal of those was the Bishop of Llandaff, who went so far as to admit that parts of the Pentateuch were not written by Moses, and some of the Psalms were not composed by David. For such concessions he incurred the hostility of George III and lost all chance of translation to a richer see. Some of the Bishop’s replies to Paine are curious. For example, *The Age of Reason* ventured to doubt whether God really commanded that all males and married women among the Midianites should be slaughtered, while the maidens should be preserved. The Bishop indignantly retorted that the maidens were not preserved for immoral purposes, as Paine had wickedly suggested, but as slaves, to which there could be no ethical objection. The orthodox of our day have forgotten what orthodoxy was like a hundred and forty years ago. They have forgotten still more completely that it was men like Paine who, in face of persecution, caused the softening of dogma by which our age profits. Even the Quakers refused Paine’s request for burial in their cemetery, although a Quaker farmer was one of the very few who followed his body to the grave.

After *The Age of Reason* Paine’s work ceased to be important. For a long time he was very ill; when he recovered, he found no scope in the France of the Directoire and the First Consul. Napoleon did not ill-treat him, but naturally had no use for him, except as a possible agent of democratic rebellion in England. He became home-sick for America, remembering his former success and popularity in that country, and wishing to help the Jeffersonians against the Federalists. But the fear of capture by the English, who would have certainly hanged him, kept him in France until the Treaty of Amiens. At length, in October 1802, he landed at Baltimore, and at once wrote to Jefferson (now President):

‘I arrived here on Saturday from Havre, after a passage of sixty days. I have several cases of models, wheels, etc., and as soon as I can get them from the vessel and put them on board the packet for Georgetown I shall set off to pay my respects to you. Your much obliged fellow-citizen,

Thomas Paine.’

He had no doubt that all his old friends, except such as were Federalists, would welcome him. But there was a difficulty: Jefferson had had a hard fight for the

Presidency, and in the campaign the most effective weapon against him – unscrupulously used by ministers of all denominations – had been the accusation of infidelity. His opponents magnified his intimacy with Paine, and spoke of the pair as ‘the two Toms.’ Twenty years later, Jefferson was still so much impressed by the bigotry of his compatriots that he replied to a Unitarian minister who wished to publish a letter of his: ‘No, my dear Sir, not for the world! . . . I should as soon undertake to bring the crazy skulls of Bedlam to sound understanding as to inculcate reason into that of an Athanasian . . . keep me therefore from the fire and faggot of Calvin and his victim Servetus.’ It was not surprising that, when the fate of Servetus threatened them, Jefferson and his political followers should have fought shy of too close an association with Paine. He was treated politely, and had no cause to complain, but the old easy friendships were dead.

In other circles he fared worse. Dr. Rush of Philadelphia, one of his first American friends, would have nothing to do with him: ‘his principles’ he wrote, ‘avowed in his *Age of Reason*, were so offensive to me that I did not wish to renew my intercourse with him.’ In his own neighbourhood he was mobbed, and refused a seat in the stage coach; in the last year of his life he was not allowed to vote, on the alleged ground of his being a foreigner. He was falsely accused of immorality and intemperance, and his last years were spent in solitude and poverty. He died in 1809. As he was dying, two clergymen invaded his room and tried to convert him, but he merely said ‘Let me alone; good morning!’ Nevertheless, the orthodox invented a myth of deathbed recantation which was widely believed.

His posthumous fame was greater in England than in America. To publish his works was, of course, illegal, but it was done repeatedly, although many men went to prison for this offence. The last prosecution on this charge was that of Richard Carlile and his wife in 1819: he was sentenced to prison for three years and a fine of £1,500, she to one year and £500. It was in this year that Cobbett brought Paine’s bones to England, and established his fame as one of the heroes in the fight for democracy in England. Cobbett did not, however, give his bones a permanent resting place. ‘The monument contemplated by Cobbett,’ says Moncure Conway,* ‘was never raised. There was much parliamentary and municipal excitement. A Bolton town-crier was imprisoned nine weeks for proclaiming the arrival. In 1836 the bones passed with Cobbett’s effects into the hands of a receiver (West). The Lord Chancellor refusing to regard them as an asset, they were kept by an old day-labourer until 1844, when they passed to B. Tilley, 13 Bedford Square, London, a furniture dealer . . . In 1854, Rev. R. Ainslie (Unitarian) told E. Truelove that he owned “the skull and the right hand of Thomas Paine,” but evaded subsequent inquiries.’ No trace now remains, even of the skull and right hand.

Paine’s influence in the world was twofold. During the American Revolution he inspired enthusiasm and confidence, and thereby did much to facilitate victory.

In France his popularity was transient and superficial, but in England he

inaugurated the stubborn resistance of plebeian Radicals to the long tyranny of Pitt and Liverpool. His opinions on the Bible, though they shocked his contemporaries more than his unitarianism, were such as might now be held by an Archbishop, but his true followers were the men who worked in the movement that sprang from him – those whom Pitt imprisoned, those who suffered under the Six Acts, the Owenites, Chartists, Trade Unionists, and Socialists. To all these champions of the oppressed he set an example of courage, humanity, and single-mindedness. When public issues were involved he forgot personal prudence. The world decided, as it usually does in such cases, to punish him for his lack of self-seeking; to this day his fame is less than it would have been if his character had been less generous. Some worldly wisdom is required even to secure praise for the lack of it.

*Whose biography of Paine and edition of his works are a monument of patient devotion and careful research.



Tom Paine's bones brought home by Cobbett, and soon lost. His ideas were less easy to mislay.