

These are the times

Episodes from a Life of Thomas Paine

An Original Screenplay

By Trevor Griffiths

In the 200th year since his death, the astonishingly influential radical thinker and writer Thomas Paine is incarnated afresh in the work of one of the most important and politically committed British dramatists and screenwriters of the last fifty years.

Trevor Griffiths was born and educated in Manchester, and has been writing for theatre, television and cinema since the late 1960s. His extensive work for the screen includes three major television series – *Bill Brand*, *Sons and Lovers* and *The Last Place on Earth*; numerous single plays including *All Good Men* and *Through the Night*, and the television films *Country* and *Food for Ravens*. Many of his stage plays have also been produced on television.

His hugely acclaimed stage plays include *Occupation*, *The Party*, *Comedians*, *Piano*, *The Gulf Between Us* and *Who Shall Be Happy ...?* For his film *Reds*, written with Warren Beatty, he received the Writers Guild of America Best Screenplay award and an Oscar nomination. Other films have included *Country*, directed by Richard Eyre, and *Fatherland*, directed by Ken Loach. In 1982 Griffiths was given the BAFTA Writers Award.

From the 1980s onwards he has also directed his own work both in theatre and on film. *Food for Ravens* (1997), which he wrote and directed for BBC Wales, won both a Royal Television Society award and a Welsh BAFTA.

These Are the Times, a screen biography of Thomas Paine, was originally commissioned in 1987 by Richard Attenborough. It currently awaits feature production but has been adapted for BBC Radio 3 (broadcast in 2008) and will be seen as a stage play at London's Globe Theatre in August 2009 (29th August – 9th October), under the title *A New World*.

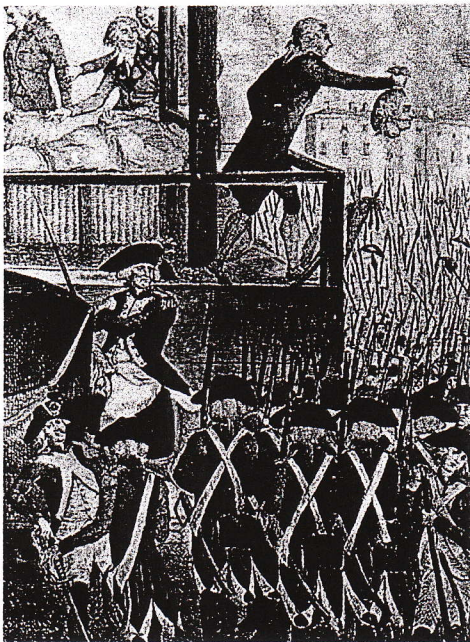


Thomas Paine (January 29, 1737 – June 8, 1809) was a British pamphleteer, revolutionary, radical, inventor and intellectual. He lived and worked in Britain until age 37, when he emigrated to the British American colonies, in time to participate in the American Revolution. His principal contribution was the powerful, widely-read pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), advocating colonial America's independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain, and *The American Crisis* (1776–1783), a pro-revolutionary pamphlet series.

Later, he greatly influenced the French Revolution. He wrote the *Rights of Man* (1791), a guide to Enlightenment ideas. Despite not speaking French, he was elected to the French National Convention in 1792. The Girondists regarded him as an ally, so, the Montagnards, especially Robespierre, regarded him as an enemy. In December of 1793, he was arrested and imprisoned in Paris, then released in 1794. He became notorious because of *The Age of Reason* (1793–94), the book advocating deism and arguing against Christian doctrines. In France, he also wrote the pamphlet *Agrarian Justice* (1795), discussing the origins of property, and introduced the concept of a guaranteed minimum income.

He remained in France during the early Napoleonic era, but condemned Napoleon's dictatorship, calling him "the completest charlatan that ever existed". In 1802, at President Thomas Jefferson's invitation, he returned to America.

Thomas Paine died, at the age of 72, at 59 Grove Street, Greenwich Village, New York City, on June 8, 1809. He was buried at what is now called the Thomas Paine Cottage in New Rochelle, New York, where he had lived after returning to America in 1802. His remains were later disinterred by an admirer, William Cobbett, who sought to return them to England. The bones were, however, later lost and his final resting place today is unknown. (from *Wikipedia*).



AMERICA, VALLEY FORGE, FEBRUARY 1778

Night. Paine and Washington sit by the fire; an orderly refills their brandy glasses, recedes. Silence. Washington hums snatches of a doleful tune, intuned, a cold anger working on something. Paine watches him over his glass; begins to take out notebook and Deane Report from satchel. Mrs Washington stops in, kisses the General on his hair, motherly; he pats her hand, fond, remote. She leaves for bed. WASHINGTON: Do ye have a wife, Mr Paine? (Paine frowns; shakes his head) Mm. Man needs a wife. (Paine lights his pipe. Washington hums again; gulps his brandy.) Those documents on yer knee there, are they the corruption affair ye're come for my thoughts on..? (Paine begins to open the file) No no, keep it shut, I got enemies enough in Congress without stickin' my nose in their private chamber pots, as we speak there are elements in that esteemed body plotting with my fellow generals to have me removed, oh yes, keep it shut, sir, I may not be drawn on this matter.. (Paine closes the file. Sniffs.) My advice to you would be much the same. Speculation, peculation and an insatiable thirst for self-enrichment may well have got the better of every other consideration in many of our countrymen, but you lift yer head up to speak it, Mr Paine, ye'll catch a ball. In the meanwhile, you 'n' me's got a war to win. That's the crisis.

He drains his glass, lays his head back, eyes closed. Paine looks at him; pushes notes and file back into his satchel; lays down his glass, moves to the window, stares out at the high ridge in hard moonlight. Snow has fallen, shimmering the earth. Sentries call, answer, on the hill.

PAINE: With respect, General, the crisis ain't only the War or the Army any more. The crisis is everywhere and everyone. Why we fight. What world we would put up in place o' the one we bury. A nation born in greed and graft and corruption will surely drown in them. Same

as a Congress allowing these lawbreakers to prosper will lead us into private anarchy and public squalor. Which is to say, just another form of tyranny...

A log falls, sputters, on the hearth. Paine turns his eyes back into the room. Washington dozes, his mouth open, wooden teeth bared, brandy glass precariously still to hand. Paine watches a moment, eyes sombre; crosses to finger the glass from his hand; pads carefully from the room. Washington snores softly on.

Morning. Snow on the ground. Tents still in use, but the shapes of cabins have begun to spring up, men swarming about them, sweating in the cold sun. Two wagon-loads of young volunteers from France, just arrived, draw cheers from watching Americans.

Paine riding through at the walk, on his way, Washington's greatcoat tail draping his horse's rump. Lafayette struggles up level with him, hurrying to welcome the French.

LAFAYETTE: Frenchmen, Mr Paine. Answering the call. And there'll be more.. even our King supports ye, as I hear it..

PAINE: Good to know it, sir..(Looks down at his sweating face) And what'll ye do when it's over, all this..?

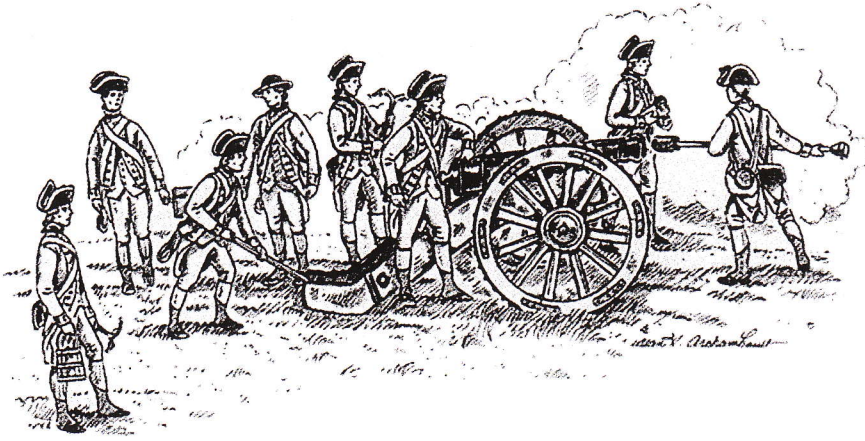
LAFAYETTE: I'll take the good news back home, sir, and see it's put to use..

ENGLAND, 1791

Summer. Large country house at Beaconsfield, snug in its six hundred acres. Paine's carriage clops up the long treelined avenue to the house.

Wentworth House. Drawing Room, ill-kempt, sunk beneath the ages, dark and chill. Paine stands by a window, reading the dank space amid the click of many clocks and the alphabetic mutterings of a Caribbean parrot with a Dublin brogue.

A man enters abruptly, stands for a moment as



if lost; he's midsixties, oddeyed, a shambles.
 MAN: *(The parrot's Dublin voice)* Mr Paine, sir.
 PAINE: Mr Burke.
 BURKE: I cannot see ye, sir. I'm at my desk.
 PAINE: Be happy to wait. But my business is urgent.
Silence. Burke loses track for a moment, begins to mumble a line he's been struggling with.
 BURKE: Sit.
Paine takes the proffered chair, Burke slumps into his, face cowed in gloom.
 PAINE: I'm conscious of intrusion, Mr Burke, and will be brief..
 BURKE: ..If it is France ye would discuss, I have told ye all I wish to upon the subject..
 PAINE: Ye've told me nothing, sir. My letters lie unanswered.
 BURKE: Precisely, sir. On events in that miserable place, I am not persuadable.
 PAINE: Not even by the truth..?
 BURKE: I believe I know the truth, Mr Paine. At the moment I am busy wrestling it down onto paper.
A clock strikes the quarter; another follows; another. Burke takes out a pocket watch; stares at the silver face-cover for some moments, puts it away. Paine watches.
 PAINE: Mr Burke, ye did much for the rights of colonial Americans, ye've spent a lifetime championing the cause of slaves and homosexuals and religious dissenters. Men and women have read your works and learnt the future need not be, must not be, as appalling and oppressive as the past. Yet now, when millions pay you heed by tearing up the fraudulent contract with history that holds them down and demanding their natural human rights, ye turn on 'em like any mad monarch and vilify them. Why? In reason's name, sir, why?
 BURKE: *(standing abruptly)* Mr Paine, ye may find your answer on the shelves at seven shillings and sixpence when my book is published. I have nothing more to say to you.

Paine rises slowly. Frowns a little.
 PAINE: Ye'll not come to France with me and see for yerself?
 BURKE: I will not, sir.
 PAINE: Then I'll be plain. Publish your book and I will answer it.
Silence. Horses neigh nearby; Paine checks a window: a bulldog stands on hindlegs at the pane, staring jowllily in.
 BURKE: Ye're a living danger to all that's sacred in human affairs, Mister Paine. "The French Revolution is but the forerunner to others across Europe ...", one of your letters said. You agitate your way across the world, sowing dissension, breeding conflict, gnawing away at the settled natural order of things. And here you are back in your own land and about to put it to the torch. *(Paine watches him in rapt fascination, the man's madness suddenly vivid before his eyes)* But ye will not succeed, sir. Thanks to our sullen resistance to innovation, thanks to the cold sluggishness of our national character, we British still bear the stamp of our forefathers. Use what art ye may, ye'll not root out of this people's mind the principles of natural subordination. They will continue to respect that property of which they cannot partake, they will continue to labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportionate to the endeavour, they will continue to be taught to seek their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice ...
 PAINE: *(Eventually; deadly quiet)* While you, sir, the Champion of Liberty, will continue to call yourself a Whig and receive a secret pension of ten thousand a year from the Tories to trash the future.
 BURKE: Leave my house, sir. I had imagined you a gentleman.
 PAINE: No, sir. I'm an American. Proud of it. *He heads for the door; the parrot scolds the dank air: "A, B, C ..."*

FRANCE, 1792

Calais Harbour. September evening. A large excited crowd waits for the boat to dock and Paine to show. A band plays revolutionary tunes with some vigour. Officers of the Calais Assembly and other luminaries form an official welcoming party. Banners proclaim their meanings: Pas de Calais welcomes Thomas Paine; a new Deputy for a new Convention; Long live the Rights of Man. Over this,
 PAINE'S VOICE: ..Reports from France leave my reserves of hope somewhat depleted. Sacking the King was absolutely right, but should have happened a year back, before he had chance to embroil ye in this pointless war with Austria and Prussia, which clearly threatens all ye seek to create..
Paine arrives on the gangway: music, cheering, vast applause. He smiles; waves.
 PAINE'S VOICE: ..The good folk of Calais seek to make amends by electing me in absentia Deputy to the new Convention and Honorary Frenchman. English, American, now French, is this a step in the right direction, for one who would be a Citizen of the World..?
He reaches quayside kisses, hugs, speeches. Smiles on everything.
Slow fade to black.
 PAINE'S VOICE: ..At least no-one here would have me dead.

Paris. Day. The shot slowly tracks the grounds of the Luxembourg, one-time palace, now prison. Mutilated corpses lie in rough lines across the grass and dirt, some still in their prison chains, the as yet unidentified remnant of brutal massacres. Paine arrives at the heart of the carnage, watches relatives pick their fearful way across the site, seeking their own. A weeping woman claims a husband. Two men heave his legless form into a half-loaded cart. Ox-drawn open carts trundle in and out, bearing the



claimed corpses to the burial ground. Smoke from rubbish-pyres thickens the thin autumn haze.

A Ministry of Justice coach draws up nearby, Danton leaps out to speak with a group of Deputies. Paine turns to leave, face stony, sickened. Hears his name called. Sees Danton leaving the group he's with to come to meet him.

DANTON: Welcome back, Paine. As ye see, sir, the Revolution has not been idle in your absence. PAINE: Why? (A sweep of the hand across the killing field) What does it mean?

DANTON: Waste not good tears, Mr Paine, most of 'em were enemies, when you know the circumstance..

PAINE: Circumstance? What circumstance on earth can justify the brutal slaughter of thousands of chained prisoners by crazed citizens' death squads, mister, while the Revolution stands by and does **nothing**..? Where was the Minister of Justice..?

DANTON: (Eyeing him; cool) ..The Prussian Army stood seventy miles from Paris, the Minister of Justice was busy raising a People's Militia to up and throw 'em out. Ten thousand patriots answered the call, eager to go, yes, but not while the prisons of Paris sat swelled to bursting with the enemies of their revolution, who might break out in their absence and take revenge on the undefended families our patriot volunteers would leave behind. (Sweeps a hand at the killing field) They did what they did. I turned my back. I was busy saving the Revolution. (They eye each other. Paine takes deep breaths; reeling) Paine, there's no maps cover the place we've got to or the land ahead. Stay close, friend. Ye could, I promise ye, do much worse... (Inclines his head towards the nearby group. Paine takes them in; spots the dwarf Marat; the others strangers, one Robespierre, dabbing a nosegay to his face; and Bancal) Be useful here. Take a hand in writing the new Constitution, lead the Committee, I'll back ye. But don't get embroiled elsewhere. Especially, should we decide to proceed with it, in the trial of the King. This fever must run its course..

PAINE: Trial, did ye...?

He's gone. Paine turns away, bearings gone, grim; takes a last look at the carnage.

AMERICA, JUNE 1809

Day. A small trail of carts and carriages heads across fields.

Big field. A coffin lowered into a simple grave; a headstone nearby:

Thomas Paine, age 73, author of Common Sense.

A handful of people gathered at graveside. Two black men, father and son, stand respectfully by, their trousers spattered from their journey. Carnet motions her sons to the grave-head, stations herself at its foot.

CARNET: (Red rose held against black dress) May the body of this man lie in peace in this good earth. And may his name be remembered wherever Liberty and Justice are cherished ... (Looks down the grave at son Thomas) Let my son there stand here for America ... I for France. BLACK FATHER: Amen.

Carnet turns, smiles at him. The man steps forward, hat in hand. Collects a hunk of dirt.

BLACK FATHER: I hope ye'll forgive th'intrusion, ma'am. My son 'n' me heered Mr Paine'd passed on, we walk' up from New York t'pay respec's ...

CARNET: You're very welcome, gentlemen. He throws the dirt on the coffin. His son joins him.

Wide, high shot of the scene. The two black men peel away, the diggers head for their tool-cart, the boys leave their mother to a private moment.

She stands some moments longer, turns away, clears frame. For a moment, there is only the open grave.

The shot closes in, begins to move, as Paine's voice sets up, over, in a final summation of belief, as if from the grave.

PAINE'S VOICE: ... The present state of civilization is as odious at it is unjust ...

The down-shot heads on past the grave, slowly covers the fields and hedges beyond.

PAINE'S VOICE: ... It is absolutely the opposite of what it should be, and it is necessary that a revolution should be made in it ...

The down-shot heads on: odd sounds

approaching traffic on a highway.

PAINE'S VOICE: ... The contrast of affluence

and wretchedness, continually meeting and offending the eye, is like dead and living bodies chained together ...

The shot tilts suddenly, reveals a modern highway, heavy with traffic, ripping past New Rochelle. Mixes, with the southbound flow, to today's New York City and its images of wretchedness and affluence ...

PAINE'S VOICE: ... The great mass of the poor are become an hereditary race, and it is next to impossible for them to get out of that state of themselves ... The condition of millions in every country ... is now far worse than if they had been born before civilisation began ...

The shot resolves slowly back to the deserted field, the open grave.

PAINE'S VOICE: ... It is a revolution in the state of civilization that is now needed. Already the conviction that representation is the true system of government is spreading itself fast in the world. But there must grow, and soon, a system of civilization out of that system of government, so organized that not a man or woman born in the Republic but shall inherit some means of beginning the world and see before them the certainty of escaping the miseries that up to now have always accompanied old age ... An army of principle will penetrate where an army of soldiers can not: it will march on the horizon of the world, and it will conquer.

A wind stirs the grass: the grave remains open. - End -

Trevor Griffiths' theatre plays (in two volumes), *These Are the Times* and the screenplay of *Sons and Lovers* are all published by Spokesman Books (www.spokesmanbooks.com).

They also publish papers from a colloquium held in New York under the auspices of the United Nations in 1987 to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Paine's birth. The volume is called *Thomas Paine: In Search of the Common Good*.

Many thanks to Gill and Trevor Griffiths, and to Tony Simpson at Spokesman Books.