

Two, Three, Many Revolutions ... On Tom Paine

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A New World, Trevor Griffiths' new play about the life of Thomas Paine, has its world première at Shakespeare's Globe in London on 29 August, and runs till 9 October.

President Obama quoted Tom Paine in the conclusion to his inaugural address in January, but did not name him.

After Obama named the values (honesty, hard work, courage, fair play, tolerance, loyalty, and patriotism), after he urged us to our duties and responsibilities, and to be ready to pay the price of citizenship, after invoking God, and stating that these values comprised our liberty and creed, he asked us to remember America's birth (an odd name for independence or revolution when you think about it).

Obama set the scene on Christmas Day, for believers a birthday of a saviour. But let us set aside these undertones, and get to the main story: Xmas, 1776, and George Washington's storied crossing of the Delaware river. It is the subject of the 1850 painting by Emmanuel Leutze, a German '48er, who made sure to include an African American and a woman in the crew of the boat named *Revolution*. The Delaware separates New Jersey from Pennsylvania. In New Jersey British troops of George III, King of England, were marching swiftly after the multiple defeats, a rout really, in New York. In Pennsylvania the American troops were encamped - cold, sick, hungry, their enlistment tours almost up, demoralized, defeated, and wanting to go home. These were the original 'winter soldiers' after whom were named the brave Viet vets who denounced US war crimes in 1971 Detroit.

Washington planned to surprise the mercenary troops at Trenton on the day after Christmas. It would require a crossing during a windy night through the ice floes of the river. A bold, and risky

decision. President Obama says, ‘At the moment when the outcome of our revolution was most in doubt, the father of our nation ordered these words be read to the people ...’ And he quotes Tom Paine. George Washington was the commander of the army, and later he would become president. I don’t think that he was called ‘father of the nation’ at the time. When did this title come to be applied? What is the significance of this figure of speech and how does it relate to ‘birth’ in this rhetoric? I’m not sure.

Anyway, Washington did not rally the troops himself but urged his officers to read what Tom Paine had written on a drumhead, by the light of campfires, published as *The Crisis in Philadelphia* ten days earlier and available in a pamphlet the day before Christmas Eve. Obama quotes –

‘Let it be told to the future world that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet it.’

Obama then winds up his address, paraphrasing Paine – the winter, the timeless words, the icy currents, the hope and virtue, then God’s grace and God’s blessing, pretty much ending up monotheistically in the same way that Paine concluded the *Crisis* paper, beginning his last paragraph with thanks to God.

This *Crisis* paper is brief. We read it aloud in class in under forty-five minutes. Most everyone already knows the beginning, ‘These are the times that try men’s souls’. Paine is serious about the soul. He will invoke God Almighty several times, and here in the beginning he explains heaven and hell. ‘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.’ Woman. It’s just a hint, but on the day after Christmas it gets the attention of these militia men.

‘Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem to lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated.’

Here the figure of speech is commerce, cheapness and dearness, or as we would say deflation and inflation. But it’s not true – dearness does not give value, not according to the labour theory of value anyway.

The body of the essay describes the retreat in flattering terms, it makes the rout sound like the soul of orderliness. He frankly admits to the panic

of the soldiers, and explains that panic is useful not only because it toughens those who survive it but it also exposes the hypocrites, the waverers, the reconcilers, the secret Tories. Then Paine – and this is his brilliance – instead of denouncing Tories as traitors addresses them directly, and meets each of their arguments. ‘Let us reason the matter together,’ he says, quoting Isaiah, like Lyndon B Johnson used to do with Martin Luther King or anyone else who rocked the boat.

Another important undertone ripples through *The Crisis* and comes to the surface at the end – the ravishment of women: General Howe, commander of the British forces, was ‘ravaging’ New Jersey. If further defeat befalls the Americans – and this is the concluding thought — our homes will become bawdy-houses for the Hessians and ‘a future race to provide for, whose fathers were shall doubt of’. This opens the mind to another meaning of legitimacy.

Nevertheless, this is an essay in a people’s war; they are words of revolution advocating the forcible overthrow of the government. This is partly why, even in 2009, two-hundred-and-twenty-three years later, President Obama will not name the man with whose words he closes his address. Some Presidents name him, Franklin Roosevelt for example, but Teddy Roosevelt called him a ‘filthy little atheist’.

The soldiers crossed the river, and before marching to Trenton to surprise the Hessian mercenaries (who surrendered with scarcely a fight), they were issued fresh gunpowder and new flints for their muskets. Paine wasn’t just a wordsmith; he was handy, a tinkerer, a mechanic. He experimented in gunpowder manufacturing and recommended popular mobilization of Pennsylvania kitchens for the production of saltpeter. Moreover, I think he knew something about flints.

He was born in Thetford, East Anglia, England. I visited there a while ago with a friend, a geographer, who explained the peculiarities of the ecology of the region known as Breckland, as the Brecks. The region is desolate and thinly inhabited, historically because the soil is sandy, and actually because it’s militarized – firing ranges for the soldiers, and an American airbase nearby. My friend explained that tools of war had been manufactured in the Brecks for centuries, nay, for millennia. Grime’s Graves is the name of the Neolithic flint mining pits and galleries located not a long walk from Thomas Paine’s birthplace. The spear points, hatchets, and knives made from the flint turn up as arrow-heads do among American farmers.

The production of gunflints reached the stage of industrial take-off only during the wars against the French Revolution when more than a million a

month were produced at Brandon, just up the river from Thetford along the Little Ouse. A good Brandon flint knapper could hammer out eight gunflints a minute, according to the observations of Sydney B.J. Skertchly, reporting in an 1879 volume of the *Memoirs of the Geological Survey*. In a later volume of the Survey (1891), W. Whitaker notes that the cylindrical flint forms found about Thetford produced a distinctly sonorous clinking when struck against one another. He notes in the same volume that the hand-fashioned implements found in the gravel pits of Thetford ‘give us our earliest evidence of the existence of our species in England’, (and, as we might add, concerning the same species, the termination of its existence, for the Anglo-American have specialized their relationship there with missiles bearing nuclear warheads.)

I thought it might provide a neat fact to say that the flints issued to the army on the eve of its victory came from that part of England where the author of the fighting words came from, both igniting revolution, but I’m afraid that the provenance of the flints in question is the source of scholarly controversy. They may have actually been the preferred French flints, honey-yellow in colour, and knapped as flakes, in contrast to the black flints of Brandon which were knapped as spalls. However, the soundings by Seymour de Lotbiniere of Brandon Hall into the three hundred volumes of the 18th century Board of Ordnance records produced a few findings which were published in the *Minnesota Archaeologist*. These make it clear that it is certainly possible that the flints came from the Brecks. In 1775, the Ordnance Board puts in its first order for flake gunflints, or ‘flints of a New Construction’, which possessed the design advantages of those of French manufacture. Or, the flints may have been part of the *câche* of 30,000 black flints seized with the fall of Fort Ticonderoga in May 1775 which, according to G.M. Trevelyan, were immediately sent to Washington.

The arcana of scholarly specialists can tease the imagination. While the evidence of lithologists, petrographers, and archaeologists has produced a wealth of evidence over the Victorian pedestrian geologists, such as Skertchly or Whitaker, it does not yet tell us, conclusively, where Washington’s gunflints came from. But scholarship advances! By strict reasoning and patient investigation, including fascinating new techniques such as photographic spark array analysis, we cannot exclude the possibility that the flint deposits of the region of Thetford are evidence of a) the first existence of homo sapiens in England, or b) the permanence of the propensity in that species to military hardware. Furthermore, the evidence does not permit us to say that the flints of Paine’s Brecklands were c) an essential precondition to the independence of America, or, and

finally, d) necessary to the victory of the rights of man! Yet I think sparking provides us with a better analogy than parturition when it comes to the revolutionary war.

Henry Knox was there, going across the river, avoiding the floating ice, marching the nine miles to Trenton in a hailstorm, marching ‘with the most profound silence’. He wrote to his wife, ‘It must give sensible pleasure to every friend of the rights of man to think with how much intrepidity our people pushed the enemy and prevented their forming in the town’. Thomas Paine went on to write further papers of *The Crisis*, the last and 13th called ‘Thoughts on the Peace and the Probable Advantages Thereof’. It was full of grandiose hyperbole, yet Rome was on his mind, ‘Rome, once the proud mistress of the universe, was originally a band of ruffians. Plunder and rapine made her rich, and her oppression of millions made her great’. And there was Obama talking about ‘greatness’ again! And not a word about the rights of man. Instead it has become commonplace in 2009 to talk about the US empire. We now see the American Revolution in three: the war of independence from England, the slave revolt from the plantations, and the war of conquest against the native Americans.

So, let’s get back to Tom Paine’s birthday. It was on January 29, 1737. This was a significant date and a significant year and for the same reason, namely both are associated with regicide. The 30th January is the anniversary of the beheading of Charles I in 1649. In England the republicans of every stripe remembered the day, as did monarchists who called Charles a martyr. That’s the day. Now this for the year. 1736 was the last time that the Calve’s Head Club met. This was gathering for drinks and a feast to secretly commemorate the death of monarchy and all that it stood for.

Regicide then was never far from Paine’s mind, especially around his birthday. I think that he planned for it because all his major writings were generally published at this time of year. *Common Sense* in January 1776, *The Crisis* in December as we’ve seen, *Rights of Man* part one in February 1791, and *Rights of Man* part two exactly a year later, *The Age of Reason* which John Brown and Mother Jones alike admired, was published in January 1794, and *Agrarian Justice*, in which he distinguished between natural and acquired property, arguing that earth, air, and water belonged to all as a commons, was published in the winter of 1795.

Though a revolutionary opposing kingship, one-man rule, the puppet-show of sovereignty, the war-making essential to monarchy, he was also opposed to capital punishment, refusing in France to vote for the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. He was cast into prison and escaped

the guillotine himself only by an amazing accident – the doors of those to be guillotined were chalked the night before, but Paine’s cell door was not yet closed but swung open against the wall and in the dim light it was chalked on the wrong side, so that when closed at last it displayed the unchalked side when the executioners came in the morning.

In the nineteenth century the anniversary of the regicide, the 30th January, was no longer much observed. On the other hand, the birthday of Tom Paine, the 29th January, was the occasion for banquets, drinks, and celebrations by reformers and revolutionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Parsons, Mark Twain, Emma Goldman, Eugene Debs, A.J. Muste, Saul Alinsky, C. Wright Mills. The list is American because I have relied on Harvey Kaye’s reliable but Americentric study when America could claim to be the exceptional revolutionary beacon. About a decade later it was joined by Haiti, Ireland, France, and the hopes of many others.

‘Counter-revolution’, like the ‘United States of America’, were phrases or neologisms invented by Paine. He did not find a place for himself in post-revolutionary America, or during its counter-revolution, so he returned to England. ‘From what we now see, nothing of reform on the political world ought to be held improbable. It is an age of revolutions, in which everything may be looked for.’ In Ireland the United Irish were inspired by Paine’s American and French experiences, which they combined in a toast of Belfast, ‘May common sense establish the rights of man’. In India the Bengal renaissance of the 1840s owes much to the work of the Derozians, followers of Vivian Derozio, who taught his students at Calcutta’s Hindu College both *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*. K’tut Tantri, who fought with the guerrillas and wrote speeches for Sukarno against Dutch imperialism in Indonesia, was known to her comrades as the Mrs. Tom Paine! When Paine raised his glass, in 1792, just before going over to France he toasted ‘To World Revolution’.

George Lippard, co-operator, unionist, enemy of capitalists, honoured the 115th birthday of Paine: ‘that unfailing quill in his hand that shall burn into the brains of kings like arrows winged with fire and pointed with vitriol’.

Ernestine Rose, a New York feminist, organized Tom Paine festivals, a birthday in 1852: ‘There is no need to eulogize Thomas Paine. His life-long devotion to the cause of freedom; his undaunted, unshrinking advocacy of truth; his deep seated hatred to kingly and priestly despotism, are his best eulogies’.

Robert Ingersoll, the freethinker of Illinois, gave the Tom Paine birthday address in 1871: ‘He had more brains than books; more sense than education; more courage than politeness; more strength than polish ... He saw oppression on every hand; injustice everywhere; hypocrisy at the altar; venality on the bench; tyranny on the throne; and with a splendid courage he espoused the causes of the weak against the strong – of the enslaved many against the titled few.’

Lester Ward, the Iowa reformer, in a 1912 Tom Paine birthday dinner, noted that the political struggle was not enough: ‘There was another great struggle to be gone through ... a contest for the attainment of social and economic equality. It is the effort of the fourth estate which used to be called the proletariat, the working classes, the mass of mankind, to secure social emancipation.’

Mumia Abu Jamal remembers that George Washington would not lift a finger to help Paine from the guillotine, and Mumia, himself from death row, quotes Paine’s bitter letter, ‘And as to you, Sir, treacherous in private friendship (for so you have been to me, and that in the day of danger) and hypocrite in public life, the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an imposter, whether you have abandoned your principles, or whether you ever had any.’ The sunshine patriot refused to aid the winter soldier, or ‘the father of his country’ refused to stand by ... what? the mother? the Lamaze midwife? instead leaving Thomas Paine to the dungeon and the guillotine.

Mumia sums up, ‘Thoroughly radical, a believer in international revolution, an opponent of slavery, anti-death penalty, and advocate for the poor, Thomas Paine embodied some of the most humanistic movements of his time.’

Thomas Paine was fond of a certain time of year. He concludes part two of *Rights of Man* by referring to it. ‘It is now towards the middle of February,’ he says. ‘Were I to take a turn into the country, the trees would present a leafless winterly appearance.’ It is not as easy now in 2009 to take such a turn in the country because leisurely strolls have all but vanished given overall social speed-up, and the country is not what it used to be either, but is asphalted in strip malls and subdivisions. Still, perhaps we remember people taking such walks. ‘As people are apt to pluck twigs as they walk along, I perhaps might do the same, and by chance might observe, that a single bud on that twig had begun to swell.’ This gentle sentence is the key to Paine: notice how in the logic and the grammar of it the author follows the reader.

Furthermore, the sentence expresses the first step in reaching an

accurate conclusion about the real world, the scientific method begins with the making of an observation. Then comes the second step, reasoning. ‘I should reason very unnaturally, or rather not reason at all, to suppose this was the only bud in England which had this appearance. Instead of deciding thus, I should instantly conclude, that the same appearance was beginning, or about to begin, everywhere; and though the vegetable sleep will continue longer on some trees and plants than on others, and though some of them may not blossom for two or three years, all will be in leaf in the summer, except those which are rotten.’ Nations and individuals are his matter. Some people can flower, i.e. learn, flourish, speak and act, some quicker than others, some not at all. Likewise, some nations can throw off despotism. ‘What pace the political summer may keep with the natural, no human foresight can determine. It is, however, not difficult to perceive that the spring is begun.’

The essential point, popular sovereignty, is introduced at last as an adjective and the seasons or the summer, the turning of the earth on its axis towards the sun, is the real world of us all – ‘the political summer’. And the paragraph ends with the powerful word ‘spring’, here as one of the seasons, and as we now think about it as one of the stages in revolutionary transformation. But spring is also a verb, a very active one, sudden, a leap. And this is what revolutionaries do – they jump and they surprise, here, there, all over. They do it together, and nowadays we must do it by commoning.

Paine’s prose reflects his deep beliefs – a) the passage begins and ends not with abstract theories, or imagined romances, but with a real objective world common to us all – earth, air, water, b) the common person may understand that world by observation and reasoning, c) the change is accomplished by action. I should not say the prose reflects these beliefs, because the prose does not say these things directly. Instead, we think them as a result of the prose. Paine guides us; he helps us think. But we do the thinking. The only thing in the passage which might give us pause– it is two centuries old – is that we live in post-enclosure time, our country, our world, is enclosed, shut up. His had not yet been, or not completely. In England, 1804 was the Thetford Enclosure Act privatizing 5,616 acres and denying public access to 80 per cent of the borough.

This year is the bicentennial of the death of Thomas Paine. He died in what is now Greenwich Village and was buried in New Rochelle attended by a French woman, some Irish men, and two Afro-Americans.

Let us lift our bumpers high for Citizen Tom Paine, for spark array analysis, and world revolution.

● Note: I thank the geographer Iain Boal, I thank Gillian Boal for provision of my notebooks, I thank Alan Haber for provision of Howard Fast's edition of *Selected Writings of Thomas Paine* (1945), a book which J. Edgar Hoover ordered taken from the shelves of American public libraries, and I thank the generosity of Oliver Bone, curator at the Ancient House, Thetford, for photocopying some pages from Alan Crosby, *A History of Thetford* (1986).

SOME FURTHER READING

Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (2005)

John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (1995)

Henry Steel Commager and Richard B. Morris, *The Spirit of 'Seventy-Six:*

The Story of the American Revolution as Told by Participants (1958)

Craig Nelson, *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations* (2006)

Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (1976)

David Hackett Fisher, *Washington's Crossing* (2004)

Trevor Griffiths, *These are the Times: A Life of Thomas Paine* (2005)

Joyce Chumbley and Leo Zonneveld (editors), *Thomas Paine: In Search of the Common Good* (2009)



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