

# These Are the Times

*Trevor Griffiths*

*This short excerpt from Trevor Griffiths' screenplay These Are The Times: A Life of Thomas Paine (Spokesman Books £15) takes place in 1775 in the Philadelphia State House Yard, where a Town Meeting is called to receive the news of the Lexington Massacre from Paul Revere.*

*Later this year, Spokesman will publish a two-volume collection of all Trevor Griffiths' Theatre Plays.*

PAINÉ: What is it?

MARTHE: They call the people. I think there must be a danger.

*Folk call to each other in the streets. Paine looks out. When he looks back, she's gone. He scans the street for her. Thunder again. The bells dole out their sombre meanings. He grabs his coat from the office.*

*Dusk. Images of the moment around the city:*

***On the Common**, Spring Fair slowly gives way to listening silence, a maypole swings slowly to a stop. Men and women stare down on the summons, faces made grave by fear. A large man wrestling a pig kneels up to listen; the pig's teeth slice up at him, blood gouts from his ear.*

***At Dock Creek**, young swimmers, lads and lasses, stand in the settling water, arrested in play. On the bush-lined banks, lovers and drunks lie in their separate oblivions.*

***In a Recruiting Tent**, a huge militia captain, Timothy Matlack, in the makeshift uniform of the Philadelphia Associators, the semi-legal self-defence force paid for by the City, stops to listen with the rest. A stocky Scots recruiter, James Cannon, appears at the flap. The captain nods, moves out onto the Common.*

***The State House Yard**. Paine hurries through the crowd converging on the State House. People walk fast, purposeful, concerned, without panic. Kids and dogs run on, smelling excitement. Fine carriages arrive from the outskirts, clogging the streets. Some way ahead, the State Yard's already jammed; walls, trees, roofs are being climbed for vantage. The bells begin to peal down to the one high above in the State House. On its wide balcony, Pennsylvania Assembly leaders and civic dignitaries are all but mustered.*

*Paine heads for the Yard wall; gets a helping*

*mitt from Matlack, the bear-like militia captain, already up there. The streets behind them are choked with people, standing, watching.*

*The bell stops. Voices die. Paine checks the balcony figures. Robert Morris arrives, brilliant in beaver coat, huddles to confer with others already out. A gaunt ancient carrying the HouseSpeaker's ceremonial staff appears, a second man in travel-stained dress in tow. More huddling. Unease begins to seep through the waiting crowd. Voices lift here and there for news.*

PAINE: *(To Matlack)* What news, do you know?

*The militia captain doesn't answer at once, busy contacting groups of men in the Yard below, little nods, finger signals, waves of a grubby kerchief. We recognise one of them: Cannon, the Scots recruiter.*

MATLACK: *(Eventually; not looking; hoarse)* Uhunh. But those buggers're so scared up there, they're bumpin' into each other, so it ain't gonna be good. *(Fast; huge-voiced)* FOR GOD'S SAKE, **LET'S HEAR IT** . WE ARE GATHERED!

*His contacts in the Yard take up the call, spread it beyond. The balcony people still appear unready to start, perhaps waiting for someone. Pressure grows from below.*

*The gaunt ancient HouseSpeaker steps forward abruptly, raises an arm for silence, bangs his staff twice on the floor.*

HOUSESPEAKER: The Speaker of this House calls this meeting to order. May the good Lord guide us. *(Amens stutter across the great crowd, as translations below trail the balcony English.)* People of Pennsylvania, ye're summoned to hear a new-fetched letter from the Congress of Massachusetts on recent happenings in that beleaguered and most misfortunate colony. Our friend here have rode four days and nights fetching it. I ask you to listen with your customary calm and fortitude, secure in the knowledge that we ourselves face no present danger nor threat of one by these events ... *(Checks a slip of paper)* Mister ... *(Relieved to spot a tall, distinguished man hurrying out onto the balcony)* Ah, State President Dickenson.

*The crowd tenses as the grandees go into more huddles. House servants carry lamps out, to light the crowded balcony. Paine scans the sombre Yard: spots his print workers; the Baches; Mrs Downey; Aitken; Rittenhouse, his wife and two young daughters; Will on a window ledge; and back to the captain.*

PAINE: What now?

MATLACK: *(Harsh)* ... That's our State President, Half-Way Dickenson, he's worried this ain't bein' managed proper, he don't want them rebel Massachusetts people talking straight out to Pennsylvania folk, we might just get the Big Idea ... *(Paine frowns a question. The Captain grins, drops his*

voice to a hoarse whisper) Independence! S’ a word ye gotta whisper just now, ’less ye want yer neck stretchin’, but it’s comin’, friend, it’s comin’ ...

HOUSESPEAKER: (*Backtracking*) ... Friends, let us first welcome President John Dickenson, who has an opinion to set before you on behalf of Council ... (*Boos, cries of ‘No, we will hear the news’ stop him in his tracks. Another brief flustered consultation. Robert Morris steps forward, lays a decisive word in Dickenson’s ear. The balcony accepts its defeat*) Very well ... (*The swarthy Massachusetts man steps forward again, letter in hand. Thunder, a touch more distant. The deep, straining silence resumes.*) Mr Revere ...

REVERE: (*Reading; French Huguenot origins in the tough craftsman’s voice*) From the Council, Congress and People of the colony of Massachusetts, to all Americans: We send hard news. Last Monday, April nineteenth, in the forenoon, at the town of Lexington, a body of some six hundred British Regulars, sent out under orders to disarm the people, being met on the common by a small band of townfolk determined to defend their honour and their liberty, did, upon the command of their officers, deliberately take aim and fire upon that defenceless muster, leaving eight dead and many more wounded.

*He looks up from the page. He’s weeping. In the Yard below, people have begun to pray, others hug their dear ones closer. Faces register the new gravity of things. Paine’s is stunned, uncomprehending.*

REVERE: ... What happened next, how townships were pillaged, old men, women, children dragged onto the streets and publicly violated, houses burned and several hundred Americans attacked and mutilated, we must needs leave for a later occasion, in the hope that a few grains of truth may fill a whole barn with justice ...

*He pauses again, to wipe his glasses and shield the paper from the sifting rain just begun. In close up, Paine burns with the news, eyes chilled with the dawning horror. Matlack chews on, impassive. Most folk stand whitely in the rain, aghast, borne down. A blind old man, heavy Swedish accent, calls **Is he done?** Someone quietens him. Town lamplighters move around the edges of the vast throng, lighting up. Torches flare here and there inside the crowd.*

REVERE: (*Reading on*) ... Fellow Americans, we ask these questions: If this be not Tyranny, how shall we name it? And if this be not War, how shall it be called? Fellow Americans, the crisis is come, the time to rise is upon us, and the fate not of a colony but of a **continent** hangs on your answer. Signed, John Hancock, President, Sam Adams, John Adams, Executive Members.

*Revere sniffs, blows his nose. Translation tails away. The balcony stands mute, frozen in indecision, aware of the power of feeling below. Fragments of prayer lift, fall: fear, grief, foreboding rise like steam from the silence. A contact hands a flaming torch to Matlack, still by Paine on the wall.*

REVERE: ... Made up a rough list o' dead 'n' wounded ...

VOICE: ... I got a boy there, town o' Quincy. William Malley ...

*Other names are called; more. Revere turns to the balcony grandees for guidance.*

REVERE: Simpler if I just read them out ...

*The HouseSpeaker stands forward, bangs his stick. The names die away.*

HOUSESPEAKER: Calm yourselves, fellow citizens. I call now President ...

MATLACK: (*Big*) Let their names be heard ...

HOUSESPEAKER: ... John Dickenson to the floor.

MATLACK: (*Full fury*) Shame on your head. We are **all** family here, not a man murdered but we lose a brother.

*The HouseSpeaker clouts the balcony repeatedly with his stick. Dickenson waits with demonstrated patience.*

MATLACK: What are ye up there? Americans? Or sacks of British snot dumped on us while we sleep to keep us in our place?

HOUSESPEAKER: (*Over the din*) President John Dickenson has the floor.

DICKENSON: (*As things subside*) Friends, the agitator there who seeks to disturb our solemn meeting ... is, of course, Mr Hothead Matlack. (*Gentry in the Yard fill the space he leaves them with hissing and calls of derision*) The name speaks for itself ...

MATLACK: All ends against the middle, is it, Mr Half-Way bloody Dickenson? The game's up, man. Ye'll see soon enough.

*He gives a shrill whistle, lips on teeth, drops down into the street, torch in hand, headed off. Groups of working men begin to push out from the Yard to follow, some of Paine's printworkers among them. Paine watches, tense, unsure: sees Rittenhouse leave his family abruptly, push after them.*

DICKENSON: (*Soothing tones*) My friends, as ye know, we seek peace and justice through negotiated settlement with our British cousins ... And no bully may deflect us from our chosen path ...

*Paine's eyes follow the exodus of Matlack's people to a corner warehouse, where they angrily regroup. Rittenhouse reaches them; begins to argue with Matlack, restrain him. The Scots recruiter arrives, tries to mediate.*

*Paine scans the warehouse block. Sees Marthe Daley, on a tea chest, face greasy with tears, watching the balcony. He watches her until she sees him. A moment between them, a graveness shared. She gets down, disappears into the crowd. Paine looks back at the corner warehouse: the radicals are gone. Dickenson soothes on. Paine turns back to him.*

DICKENSON: ... Fellow Pennsylvanians, like many here I'm but a simple farmer, but I do know that He who made us will always heed the call of a troubled soul. *(Pause)* I ask the Reverend William Smith, Provost of our great college here, to lead us in a final prayer.

*Silence, as translations tail away; the fat, creamy cleric waddles forward, bible in hand, under a parasol borne by a black liveried slave. Approving nods from other grandees, on the brink of another Balcony victory.*

SMITH: Let us pray. O Lord ...

*The old man's voice sets up in Swedish from below, addressing the balcony. The Speaker stands forward, bangs his staff, Dickenson restrains him: no danger there. The old man talks stolidly on.*

DICKENSON: In English, if you please, sir.

YOUNG WOMAN: *(Swedish in her English)* My papa say he came in from Lancaster for Spring Fair, he wanna know why we not hear more 'bout these murderings ...

DICKENSON: Well, I do believe we have dealt with them, tell him ...

*The old Swede speaks on.*

YOUNG WOMAN: ... He's saying did our people give back fire or just stood for shooting ...?

*The crowd lifts a little, behind the question. Revere stands forward again.*

REVERE: Yeah, we returned fire all right ...

*He's checking his notebook.*

YOUNG WOMAN: My father's asking how many we get?

REVERE: Well, er, we think 'bout two hundred and seventy Redcoats killed 'n' a lot more hit.

*Silence. The crowd stirs, half lifted further, half more depressed. The old guy rattles on.*

YOUNG WOMAN: My father thanks you, mister. Says he don't like no-one shot an' he aint no scholar ... but he reckon if the British have a couple more victories like this one, we'll have them on their knees beggin' for peace ...

*Silence for a while, as folk do their sums. Then a slow swell of chuckling laughter sets up; applause. Faces gleam from the bright dark; grow slowly grave again.*

*Paine's face, watching, listening, finding himself at last at one with these people and their purpose. Smith resumes the prayer. Paine again, his hand straying unbidden to the wooden pen he carries as craft-sign on his lapel. He looks down at the hand, the pen. Climbs from the wall. The prayer lards on. He leaves.*

Fade sound. Bring up the sound of a side-drum, a slow solemn roll; over it, Paine's writing voice:

PAINÉ'S VOICE: ... Whoever considers the unprincipled enemy we have to cope with will not hesitate to declare that nothing but arms or miracles can reduce them to reason or moderation, for they have lost sight of the limits of humanity ...

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