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THOMAS PAINE AND THE UNITED IRISHMEN

*Sean Cronin

THOMAS PAINE PLANNED to visit Ireland in the summer of 1791 because it was a country ripe for revolution. Other matters intervened. Among the educated he was a household name. His Rights of Man was "the Koran" of Belfast, Theobald Wolfe Tone learned in October 1791 when he went north from Dublin to found the first Society of United Irishmen. Edmund Burke, an Irishman, lost the loyalty of his radical countrymen to Paine because of his defence of the status quo. Public opinion in Ireland, Catholic as well as Protestant, leaned to Paine. The original United Irishmen, the Presbyterian merchants and manufacturers of Belfast, saw Paine as a hero and Burke as a villain. When Tone wrote his Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland, to convince them that they had nothing to fear by supporting full rights for Catholics and allying themselves with the majority in an independent Ireland, with its own national government, he clinched his case with the remark, "for, after Paine, who will, or who need, be heard on that subject?"

Of the 40 to 50 thousand copies of Rights of Man sold in England, Scotland and Ireland, more than 20,000 were circulated in Dublin, which was one of the reasons why Paine wanted to visit Ireland. Tone claims that the Rights of Man, combined with the French Revolution which it explained, "changed in an instant the politics of Ireland." This change led to the founding of the United Irishmen in Belfast, and a few weeks later in Dublin, the most radical movement in Irish history, one that has had a lasting influence on the politics of the Irish people.

Paine supported the United Irishmen's revolutionary republicanism, knew some of its leaders, including Tone and Lord Edward Fitzgerald, the egalitarian aristocrat chosen to lead the 1798 rebellion, and befriended James Napper Tandy, a Dublin democrat and fellow exile in Paris. Tandy, a somewhat boastful man, believed that his name would spark rebellion in Ireland. He is remembered in the ballad, "The Wearing of the Green." He and Paine could be found in the Irish Coffee House, a Paris meeting place for Irish revolutionaries, often in the company of Thomas Muir, the Scots radical who was tried for sedition because he had told someone to read Rights of Man. All three talked treason against the Crown, the Pitt government was told by its many secret agents.

Tone wrote in his diary on March 3, 1798: "I have been laterly introduced to the famous Thomas Paine and like him very well. He is vain beyond all belief, but he has reason to be vain and, for my part, I forgive him. He has done wonders for the cause of liberty both in America and Europe, and I believe him to be conscientiously an honest man. He converses extremely well and I find him wittier in discourse than in his writings, where his humour is clumsy enough. He read me some passages from a reply to the Bishop of Llandaff, which he is preparing for the press, in which he belabours the prelate without mercy. He seems to plume himself more on his theology than his politics, in which I do not agree with him. I mentioned to him that I had known Burke in England and spoke of the shattered state of his mind in consequence of the death of his only son Richard. Paine immediately said it was the Rights of Man which had broke his heart and that the death of his son gave him occasion to develope the chagrin which had preyed upon him ever since the appearance of that work. I am sure the Rights of Man has tormented

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Burke exceedingly, but I have seen myself the workings of a father's grief on his spirit and I could not be deceived; Paine has no children...He drinks like a fish - a misfortune which I have known to befall other celebrated patriots. I am told that the true time to see him to advantage is about ten at night, with a bottle of brandy and water before him, which I can very well conceive."

Tone disliked The Age of Reason, calling it "damned trash." He did not object to it on religious grounds - of Anglican stock, he was likely a freethinker - but thought Paine must be doting to switch from politics to theology; yet he remained an admirer of Paine.

In the summer of 1798 rebellion broke out in Ireland. Tone tried to organise a French expedition to aid the United Irishmen. An expedition under General Hoche at Christmas 1796 had reached Bantry Bay but was forced by the winds to turn back. Tone was aboard. Paine worked with Tandy to help the rebels. He sent a memorial to the Directory for a thousand men and five thousand guns. In August 1798 General Humbert sailed for Killiala in County Mayo with a thousand men. The Irish flocked to his flag. He defeated General Lake at "the races of Castlebar," and broke through to the heart of the country, only to be surrounded a couple of weeks later by Lord Cornwallis at Ballinamuck. Humbert surrendered, his Irish allies were executed.

Shortly after Humbert sailed, Tandy set out for Ireland on a fast ship, the Anacreon, landing on the Donegal coast north of Mayo. He learned that Humbert was a prisoner, the rebellion defeated. He scattered a few proclamations,then sailed back to the continent via the Orkneys and Norway with the British in hot pursuit. Tandy eventually reached Hamburg and asked for asylum. He held the rank of Major General in the French Army, but despite this was handed over to the English in October 1799. Tried, convicted and sentenced to death, he was reprieved after Napoleon, then First Consul, threatened reprisals,and was ordered transported beyond the seas. And then he was permitted to return to France a free man. Up to now the reason for this has been a mystery.The explanation, it turns out, was Paine.

Robert Livingstone, Secretary of Foreign Affairs under the Continental Congress, was Thomas Jefferson's Minister to France. Paine's letter to Livingston for Tandy came to light in the summer of 1979 when Paul O'Dwyer, former President of New York City Council,* a great admirer of Paine, found it among Livingston's papers. The letter, dated "25 Brumaire Year 10," reminded Livingston of an incident during the American Revolution in which both were involved. An English officer, Captain Charles Asgill, was sentenced to death by the Americans as a reprisal. The French court was shocked, especially the Queen. Livingston enlisted Paine's polemical skills, first to explain the matter publically, secondly to have Asgill reprieved. Paine blamed the English for Asgill's plight, then wrote to Washington a plea for Asgill's life. Congress lifted the death sentence and everyone's honour was upheld.

Paine's letter for Tandy opens with the salutation, "Dear Friend,"and went on to explain the reason for writing, "to engage your benevolence, and,as far as you can give it, your assistance in behalf of an honest unfortunate old man whom you know by name, Napper Tandy, who after several years of imprisonment is now sentenced to Botany Bay.

"You remember that at the time of Asgill's Affair you were Minister for Foreign Affairs, and you will recollect a conversation you had with me respecting Asgill, in consequence of which I published a piece upon the subject and wrote to General Washington to engage him to suspend the execution of the sentence upon Asgill.

* He is also a Vice-President of the Thomas Paine Society - editor.

"During that suspension the letter of Vergennis (sic) arrived asking in the name of his Court (or rather that of the Queen) a remittance of the sentence, which terminates the affair, and relieved us all from a painful sensation.

"Now as you were an instrument for saving Asgill, I think you might find a way, without involving your diplomatic character, to throw in your aid to relieve poor Napper Tandy. What I wish to be done for him is to let him transport himself, in which case I suppose he will go to America, because since that our Government is reformed, the honest and the unfortunate will find an Asylum there.

"Neither Talyrand (sic), nor any person in the government here, knows anything of the case of Asgill, and I think you might very consistently write a private note to Talyrand to inform him of it, and to engage him to make the government acquainted with it, and to ask in return a remittance of the sentence of Napper Tandy, for though it is not now the same government, it is the same nation.

"Cornwallis, you know, was in America while the affair of Asgill was pending, and I cannot see any impropriety (keeping the Ministerial character out of the question) in your writing a note to remind Cornwallis of the circumstance and to hint to him your wish that he would be as friendly to Tandy as you had been to Asgill.

"So far from there being any inconvenience in this, I think the contrary will be the case. It will most probably happen that you and Cornwallis will meet either in company or at a public audience, and this preliminary introduction will take off the awkwardness which might otherwise take place at a first meeting, and furnish a subject of conversation when it might be difficult to start a political one and hypocritical to propose a friendly one. Nothing brings people more easily together than a joint endeavour to do a good thing.

"If you are much engaged and have not leisure to turn the whole of this affair in your mind I will throw a few thoughts together for the purpose of forwarding it; and if, while I stay here I can render you any auxiliary aid, you know there is nobody more disposed to do it than myself - In remembrance of former times and former friendshipa, I remain

Your fellow-labourer
Thomas Paine."

Cornwallis was Viceroy and Commander-in-Chief of the forces in Ireland during and after the rebellion of 1798 and the Act of Union with Great Britain thirty months later. He acted on Paine's request, though how he received it we do not know. Tandy went to France and died shortly afterwards. Even at the end of his eventful life he still dabbled in conspiracy and was loosely involved in Robert Emmet's plans for a rising in July 1803. Emmet was hanged.

Robert Emmet's brother, Thomas Addis Emmet, a founder of the United Irishmen, went into exile in America after the Peace of Amiens, March 1802, and became Attorney General of New York. He was a friend of Paine during the lonely final years. He was Paine's executor and was named in his will. There is a statue to Thomas Addis Emmet in St.Paul's churchyard, Lower Broadway,New York City.

Wolfe Tone, like Tandy, set out from France for Ireland in the autumn of 1798 to join the revolution and after a sea battle was captured by the English. Tried by court martial in Dublin, he was sentenced to death by hanging in November 1798. He committed suicide in prison, although some Irishmaintain he was murdered. He had asked to be shot because he was an officer in the

French army, but they refused his request. "In a cause like this," he said, "success is everything....Washington succeeded and Kosciusco failed,"He was prepared for the sentence of the court and would discharge his duty, he added. This cryptic remark may well explain his death. Paine's *Rights of Man* explains his life.

THOMAS PAINE - EARLY LIFE IN ENGLAND

*Harry H. Pearce

THER IS NOT only a problem, but many, about Paine's early life before he went to America, when 37 years old, a mature man. Yet Moncure Conway, the recognised standard biographer of Paine, in a work of nearly 500 pages devoted only 31 ro Paine's formative years in England. This can largely be due to the following circumstances that he details in his Life of Paine:-

> "In 1802 an English friend of Paine, Redman Yorke, visited him in Paris. In a letter written at the time Yorke states that Paine had for some time been preparing memoirs of his own life, and his correspondence, and showed him two volumes of the same. In a letter of January 25, 1805, to Jefferson, Paine speaks of his wish to publish his works, which will make, with his manuscripts, five octavo volumes of four hundred pages each. Besides which he means to publish 'a miscellaneous volume of correspondence, essays and some pieces of poetry.' He had also, he says, prepared historical prefaces, stating the circumstances under which each work was written. All of which confirms Yorke's statement and shows that Paine had prepared at least two volumes of autobiographical matter and correspondence. Paine never carried out the design mentioned to Jefferson, and the manuscripts passed by bequest to Madam Bonneville. This lady, after Paine's death, publish a fragment of Paine's third part of The Age of Reason, but it was afterwards found that she had erased passages that might offend the orthodox (My emphasis - H.H.P). Madam Bonneville returned to her husband in Paris, and the French Biographical Dictionary states that in 1829 she, as the depositary pf Paine's papers, began 'editing' his life. This, which could only have been the autobiography (my emphasis - H.H.P.)was never published. She had become a Roman Catholic (same -H.H.P.). On returning to America in 1833, where her son, General Bonneville (also a Catholic), was in military service, she had personal as well as religious reasons for suppressing the memoirs. She might naturally have feared the revival of an old scandal concerning her relations with Paine. The same motives may have prevented her son from publishing Paine's memoirs and manuscripts (same - H.H.P.). Madam Bonneville died at the house of the General in St.Louis. I have a note from his widow, Mrs. Sue Bonneville, in which she says: 'The papers you speak of regarding Thomas Paine are all destroyed - at least all which the General had in his possession. On his leaving St.Louis for an indefinite time all his effects - a handsome library and valuable papers included - were stored away, and during his absence the storehouse buned down, and all that the General stored away were burned.'
>
> "There can be little doubt that among those papers burned in St.Louis were the two volumes of Paine's autobiography and correspondence seen by Redman Yorke in 1802. Even a slight acquai-

*Harry H. Pearce is President of the Secular Society of Victoria, Australia, and this paper was given as his Presidential Address to the Society on July 17, 1979.

ntance with Paine's career would enable one to recognise this as a catastrophy..." (Conway, x-xi).

A similar catastrophy occurred to Lord Byron and Sir Richard Burton and our own Bernard O'Dowd. Is it any wonder that a modern writer says that, "considerable mystery surrounds (Paine) and his career. One can begin with the paradox of Common Sense....written by a man with only the briefest experience in this country (America). Until now historians have failed to explain eitherthe unique impact or the roots of the ideas expressed by Paine."(1)

THE ROOTS OF THE IDEAS EXPRESSED BY PAINE!

The same author says, "The problem of Common Sense, however, is only one facet of the larger problem....Biographers have always faced an unenviable task, and not only because of the complexity of Paine's personality and the fact that most of his correspondence and papers...were accidently burned over a century ago. To depict Paine in his entirety requires a knowledge of the History of America, England and France in the Age of Revolution and familiarity with Eighteenth century science, theology, political philosophy and radical movements. Paine's connections must be traced among the powerful in Europe and America, and also in the tavern-center world of political artisans in London and Philadelphia. The questions central to an understanding of Paine's career, in fact, do not lend themselves to exploration with the confines of conventional biography" (p.xii).

"We can only speculate about Paine's contact with the coterie of nonconformist artisans, clergymen, and intellectuals who made up Franklin's 'Club of Honest Whigs' in London...Among the members who seem to have influenced Paine were three writers: James Burgh, a London schoolmaster, Richard Price, a dissenting minister and teacher, and Joseph Priestly, a dissenting clergyman and scientific and political experimenter."(2)

We are told that Lewes was "a center of political disaffection," and that Wilkes at one stage visited it The Wilkes movement played an important role in engaging the political energies and broadening the political education of the artisans, shopkeepers and humbler professional men among whom Paine moved. (3)

So it is with this man, so well known of, but so inadequately known about, or the makings of him are, that I wish to give some account of in so far as I have been able to gather from the biographies of Paine that I have, and I think that half the trouble is due to the historic religious hatred, lies, slander and libel by Christian apologists that has helped to prevent the preservation of documentary and oral records that escaped destruction in the fire mentioned. Christians did all they could by all means they had to wipe out every vestige of anything favourable to the memory of Paine. To advise anyone even to read Paine was a treasonable offence, and even to mention his name was enough to be thought treasonable (Thomas Muir had among the charges laid against him one that asserted that he had advised a person to read Paine).

Paine burst upon the world with his Common Sense in support of the American colonists after he went to the colonies in 1774. But what was his English background that gave him the astounding ability to write that pamphlet and have it published by January 1776? He was just forty years old.

Despite the importance and influence of Paine on America and England there is no in-depth study of his first thirty-nine years. Even Moncure Conway has only 31 pages devoted to this period. It is about time the situation was rectified. I have half-a-dozen Lives of Paine, the authors of which also skip

over his early years in a similar manner, with only passing reference to the most significant events without examining the vital implications they could, or did, have in forming Paine's ideas. At 39 years of age it must be obvious that he would have formed very definite and mature opinions to have been able to write Common Sense so soon after landing in America.

So I can only take what has already been published as I have no means in Australia of making original research. But in this paper I hope to set the pattern for someone to follow-up. In doing so I can only take what seem to me to be the most significant events in Paine's early life. A lot of other things I must pass over.

Paine was born in Thetford, Norfolk, 29th January, 1737, of Quaker/Anglican parentage, and went to the Thetford Grammar School, which he left at 13 years of age. Now, here is the first significant thing, the implications of which have been completely missed. This school was not an ordinary one depending on parish support, as its name "Grammar" scholl should indicate. It was founded in 1566 on a legacy left by a Sir Richard Fulmerston, and did not depend on public funds, and taught such things as history and the sciences, which would, almost for certain be along the lines of what would then be called Natural Philosophy, which is now divided up into the various branches of study such as astronomy, physics, chemistry, etc., including mathematics. (4)

Knowing, as we do, the interest that Paine took in these things, here we have at the very outset of his life, a form of education that has not been followed up. I need only just mention at this point his interest in designing iron bridges. With the teaching of "history," whatever its nature may have been, the implications of it we might validly suggest, could have set Paine's thinking along social and political lines, or led onto these, or stood him in stead, when he took up political thinking, as a background.

After leaving school he ran away to sea. Even the "implication" of this suggests an independent, self-reliant and bold character that he displayed throughout his life. It was short-lived, but he went to sea a second time, and later told Clio Rickman that during his time at sea he learned a lot, and that there was hardly a period in his life that he was not learning something.(5) Paine said, "I scarcely ever quote; the reason is I always think." (6) The implication again being the education he received at the old "Grammar" School, in "the sciences," which would be based in the principles of reasoning, ie. thinking, and its expression and understanding in clear and intelligent "language," which, again, his whole literary work demonstrates how well he learned its principles.

After his second return from the sea, when he was 20 years old, he was in London, employed as a staymaker, his father's trade, for two years, "in which time he zealously studied astronomy and attended the lectures of Martin and Ferguson."(7) This is quoted by Paine himself and repeated in a number of biographical notices, and where Paine says that he bought himself a pair of globes and some instruments. Woodward, quoting Paine, draws attention to him becoming acquainted with Dr.Bevis "of the Society called the Royal Society, then living in the Temple, and an excellent astronomer..." (8)

Adam Ferguson was a professor of Natural Philosophy. He wrote a book on Civil Society, and another on Refinement, defended the morality of stage plays that were under attack at the time. He had a reputation in the classics, mathematics and metaphysics, and was a friend of David Hume and had visited Voltaire. His lectures were attended by a number of non academic hearers.

Benjamin Martin was a mathematician, instrument maker, astronomer, and travelled giving lectures on Natural Philosophy; he was the author of several books including, Philological Library of Literary Arts and the Sciences.

Dr.John Bevis, is said to have had Newton's Optics, as his "inserarable companion," and was a proficient astronomer, being a friend of Halley,and himself had discovered a new comet in 1744. He was elected to the Royal Society in 1765, and to the Berlin Academy of Sciences. He was the author of numerous publications. Both Hawthorn (9) and Edwards (10) say that Ferguson introduced Paine to Bevis.(11)

This clearly shows that Paine, at 20 years old, was for a period of up to two years on intimate terms with at least Ferguson and Bevis, and, we may assume, not only attended their lectures, but read their literature. I obtained my biographical data from the National Biographical Dictionary. When 24 years old, in 1761, Paine decided to become an exciseman. His wife's father had been one (she had died some time earlier) and the project found favour. Conway says, that Paine "after passing some months of study in London, returned to Thetford in July 1761. Here, while acting as a Supernumerary officer of excise. He continued his studies, and enjoyed the friendship of Mr.Cocksedge the Recorder of Thetford."(12) Rickman says that Paine in 1761 "went back to Thetford for 14 months to study for an examination."This would seem to suggest that he "went back" for one of two reasons, or both, to stay with his father, and/or utilise the facilities of the Thetford Grammar School.(13)

Here, again, we must notice the educated class of person Paine so easily get acquainted with. I might also mention here Benjamin Franklin, though I will leave it as just an aside until I come to deal with him later. But mixing in such company so freely indicates that Paine was fulfilling his claim to have always been "learning" something. It indicates to me that he combined a natural learning capacity combined with a strong desire to take every opportunity that was offered or was available.

He passed his examination for the Excise and took up various stations for a few years until in 1768 he was stationed at Lewes in Sussex.(14)

Paine was born into a poor family and stated, "My parents were not able to give me a shilling, beyond what they gave me in education, and to do this distressed themselves." (15) He also said, "the natural bent of my mind was to science." In his almost continuous condition of poverty, it highlights a determination to educate himself beyond what his father could do for him, and it emphasises his ability to impress those above his own position in life.

The condition of the people of England at these times was a deplorable one, and that of the excisemen no better, if not worse, if that was possible. So it would seem that because of the better education and ability of Paine, he took on the work to state their case for a rise in salary by a petition to both Houses of Parliament, and so came about his first publication, The Case of the Officers of Excise, which was written in 1772 and published in 1773, an edition of which I possess was published by W.T.Sherwin in 1817.(16)

Here we see Paine at 35 years of age already in possession of the fundamental powers of strong logical reasoning, clear observation and understanding of the case he was presenting; a command of language and expression,and a co-ordinated presentation of the points he wished to bring to the attention of his readers.

If there is any problem about his writing Common Sense after he went to America, it is right here that it should start in his Case of the Officers of Excise. Right through the pamphlet of 16 pages there is unmistakably the basis for all his writing that followed. He marshalls the points of his case in the same was as in his later works.

Paine takes the various seasonal conditions under which the excisemen worked, their living expenses in detail, their duties, temptations to bribery, lack of incentive, details of the particulars of their work when away from home, maintenance of their horses, the time away from home, the total cost of their expenses as against their salary, and arrives at one shilling and nine pence farthing a day for a man on 50 pounds per year. The case for an increase in salary he builds up would do credit today to a union advocate before the arbitration court, and not only on the physical side, but also on the moral and human side.

He puntuates his case by such remarks as forecast those that he presents in Part 2 of his Rights of Man, such as (he is refering to the temptations to bribery): "The bread of deceit is the bread of bitterness; but alas! How few in these times of want and hardship are capable of thinking so? Objects appear under new colours, and in shapes not naturally their own; Hunger sucks in the deception, and necessity reconciles it to conscience." Again, "He who was never an hunger'd man may argue finely on the subjection of his appetite; and he who never was distressed, may harangue as beautifully on the power of principle. But poverty, like grief, has an incurable deafness, which never hears; the oration loses all its edge; and 'To be, or not to be,' becomes the only question."

In this last extract there is an internal link in his thinking with a similar expression in his Crisis No.1. - "POVERTY, LIKE GRIEF, HAS AN INCURABLE DEAFNESS." Right at the opening of Crisis No.1., we have the words: "TYRANNY, LIKE HELL, IS NOT EASILY CONQUERED."

Woodward says, "Paine spent the whole Winter of 1772 in trying to get Parliament to take some action," but the Case was a complete failure. "The Commissioners of Excise said there were so many applicants for places in the service that any officer who was not satisfied with his pay was welcome to quit, and they would be able to fill his place immediately." (17)

I have already mentioned that Paine had made the acquaintance of Franklin, to whom he was introduced by Oliver Goldsmith. Franklin represented the American Colonies in London from 1764 to 1775. Samuel Edwards says, "Through Oliver Goldsmith (Paine) had become acquainted with...Benjamin Franklin.But when, in the period mentioned, is not stated. It seems that Paine kept green in his contact with Goldsmith, as he seems to have done with Franklin, who thought enough of his ability to give him a letter of introduction to friends in Philadelphia and advise him to migrate there."(18)

While at Lewes, in the meantime, though, and where Paine settled for six years, 1768-1774, (19) he became a notable, even being elected to the Lewes Town Council.(20) Collins says that he "became something of a celebrity in Lewes, not only through his work on the Council, but mainly as a vociferous and well-liked member of the Headstrong Club, a discussion-cum-social society which met at the White Hart tavern, a few yards from his lodgings." (21) He was also appointed one of the two constables for Lewes.

I have written of Paine's biographers failing to follow-up the implications of what is known, however vague, about the early days and activities before he went to America. I feel that tremendously important implications were not

followed up sufficiently by such as Conway, Gilbert Vale, and Clio Rickman. Conway (22) says that after Paine left Lewes he went to London, but it is not known how he lived physically, but he quotes from a letter by Paine to indicate how he lived mentally. It is written later than the Rights of Man, which is mentioned in it. It is written to John King, "a renegade," and refers to when he and Paine met. In it Paine writes: "I was pleased to discuss with you under our friend Oliver's lime tree those political notions, which I have since given to the world in my Rights of Man (here we have a valuable piece of evidence that while at Lewes Paine was discussing "political notions" that he later gave the world in his Rights of Man) You used to complain of abuses, as well as me, and write your opinions of them in free terms - what then means this sudden attachment to Kings?"

Conway says that this Oliver was "probably" the famous Alderman of London who was imprisoned in the Tower during the great struggle of that city with the government when John Wilkes was Lord Mayor. Now, if this was so, and Paine discussed with King "those political notions" later incorporated in the Rights of Man, Paine must have already developed these before going to America, and under their "friend" Oliver's lime tree, who in turn was so intimately mixed up with the Wilkes busuness to have been confined to the Tower of London? And yet Conway leaves it here without further investigation.

Conway tells us that Paine in early life "cared little for POLITICS,which seemed to him a species of 'jockyship.'" There is a very vague, even meaningless statement, How "early in life?" And does politics include systems of government? But Conway does go on to say that, "the contemptuous word (jockyship) proves that Paine was deeply interested in the issues which the people had joined with the king and his servile ministers.(23) Did Paine by "jockyship" simply mean the"art" of playing politics? I think so.

Collins in a footnote says, "The discovery that Paine served on the Lewes Town Council was made as recently as 1965 by Leslie Davey of Lewes, a member of the Thomas Paine Society.(24)

The White Hart "Headstrong Club," says Rickman (22) kept a book of its activities called the Headstrong Book, which was no other than an old Greek Homer which was sent the morning after a debate to the most obstinate haranguer of the Club. In it was a statement that it had been "revised and corrected by Thomas Paine," and it contained the following:

Eulogy on Paine

Immortal Paine, while mighty reasoners jar
We crown thee General of the Headstrong War;
Thy logic vanquished error, and thy mind
No bounds, but those of right and truth, confined:
Thy soul of fire must sure ascend the sky,
Immortal Paine, thy fame can never die:
For men like thee their names must ever save
From the black edicts of the tyrant grave.

Rickman says that Paine as an excise man at Lewes was a Whig in politics, and "....notorious for that quality which has been defined as perseverance in a good cause and obstinacy in a bad one. He was tenacious of his opinions, which were bold, acute and independent, and which he maintained with ardour, elegance and argument." (23)

One series of events that Paine became interested in, but a silent spectator of, was the fight by John Wilkes against the British Parliament for the right to report and criticise the proceedings of Parliament. Years la-

ter Paine said that he had been deeply moved by the ideas which Wilkes had expressed in his writings (26). Wilkes' platform was, 1. Reform of Parliament. 2. Enfranchisement of the lower classes. 3. Suppression of rotten boroughs. 4. Protection of individual liberty.

To completely understand Paine one must understand the political, social and living conditions of the people from whom he came and among whom he grew up. His whole life and writings show this.

Wilkes was elected to Parliament when Paine was 17 years old, in 1757. Wilkes was a Whig and fell out with the Government over his criticism of the King's Speech, which traditionally was recognised as having been written for him by the Prime Minister, who had been a friend of Wilkes. To have a platform for his criticism Wilkes established a paper called the North Briton, in number 45 of which he severely criticised the Speech under the impression that it would be taken as a criticism of the policy of the Government. But not so. Wilkes was charged with high treason, but escaped to France, and was outlawed, and his seat in Parliament declared vacant. The developments became too complicated to detail here. The public took up the cause of Wilkes, who later was elected Lord Mayor of London amid a series of public demonstrations, riots, petitions, etc. Three times Wilkes stood for Parliament and was three times elected, and three times the seat was declared vacant, until elected again for a new seat no action was taken to unseat him, and which has been acclaimed a victory for the right and freedom of the press to report and criticise proceedings of Parliament. Wilkes became the hero of the people. Richard Carlile said, "No other name, nor the conduct of no other person, save the late Queen, ever agitated the country so much as the name and conduct of Mr. Wilkes did after the publication of the North Briton.....such was the clamour for 'Wilkes and Liberty' that the phrase was common within the walls of the palace..."(26)

The events must have had an important influence on the formation of Paine's ideas and attitude to the Government of his day.

Conway says that Paine's "studies of the Wilkes conflicts (were) a lasting lesson in the conservation of despotic forces."Franklin witnessed it. Paine grew familiar with it. And to both the systematic inhumanity and injustice were brought home personally. "Franklin recognised Paine's ability."(27)

Eric Foner, in his Tom Paine and Revolutionary America, says (p.6),"Like so many other figures of the eighteenth century, Paine's thoughts about the political and social world were influenced by Newtonian science. The Newtonian universe was one of harmony and order, guided by natural laws." (28). And Newton was not orthodox, being"some kind of Unitarian," as disclosed after his death.(29) He wrote in a letter on the "Corruptions of Scripture" relating to the doctrine of the Trinity.

With the picture I have presented it is easy to see why Benjamin Franklin became interested in Paine. Franklin founded the Philadelphia Library in 1721, and established the American Philosophical Society in 1744. He obtained degrees from Oxford and Edinburgh in 1762, and was elected to the Royal Society. His style of writing and expression was expressed by a fellow scientist, Sir Humphrey Davy, thus, "The style and manner of his publication on electricity, are almost as worthy of admiration as the doctrine it contains. He has endeavoured to remove all mystery and obscurity from the subject. He has written equally for the uninitiated and for the philosopher, and he has rendered his details amusing and perspicacious, elegant as well as simple. Science appears in his language, best adapted to display

her native loveliness. He has in no instance exhibited that false dignity, by which philosophy, is kept aloof from common applications."(30)

I must compare that with what Rickman says about the style of Paine's writing. Paine is speaking: "In my publications I follow the rule I began, that is to consult with hobody, nor let anybody see what I write till it appears publically" (Rickman notes that Paine was so tenacious on this subject that he would not alter a line or word, at the suggestion even of a friend. "I remember," notes Rickman, "when he read me his Letter to Dundas in 1792, I objected to the pun MADJESTY as beneath him; 'Never mind,' he said, 'they say MAD TOM of me, so I shall let it stand MADJESTY.'" Rickman continues, "were I to do otherwise (let others influence me) the case would be that between timidity of some who are so afraid of doing wrong that they never do right, as if the world was a world of babies in leading strings, I should get forward with nothing. My path is a right line, as straight and clear to me as a ray of light. The boldness (if they will have it so) with which I speak on any subject is a compliment to the person I address; it is like saying to him, I treat you as a man and not as a child. With respect to any worldly object, as it is impossible to discover any in me, therefore what I do, and my manner of doing it, ought to be ascribed to a good motive. In a great affair, where the good of man is at stake, I have to work for nothing; and so fully am I under the influence of this principle, that I should lose the spirit of pride, and the pleasure of it, were I conscious that I looked for reward." (31) This illustrates how sure Paine was about what he wanted to say.

Paine's personality is given by Rickman, who knew him both at Lewes before he went to America, and when he returned to England, and in whose house in London Paine lived and wrote some of his famous works. He was, Rickman tells us, about five feet ten inches tall, rather athletic, broad shouldered, stooped a little. His eye had "exquisite meaning," was full, brilliant, singularly piercing, and had in it the "muse of fire." His hair "cued" (a twist of hair at the back of the head), with side curls, and powered, like "a gentleman of the old French school." Easy and gracious manners. "His knowledge was universal and boundless." Among friends his conversation had "every fascination that anecdote, novelty and truth could give it." In mixed company and among strangers he said little, and was no public speaker.(32)

Paine's character I would say was clearly studious, highly intelligent, logical, scientific, self confident, a consecutive thinker who thought out an idea from premise to conclusion. He knew what he wanted to say and said it fearlessly. He had strong human sympathies, great powers of observation and penetration to get to the heart of a problem. In these and other characters he was very similar to Benjamin Franklin, which I think was the key to Franklin's interest in him, particularly after he had read his <u>Case of the Officers of Excise</u>, in which Paine's ability to gather together, sum up and state the excisemens case. In fact Franklin's own style of writing was similar to that of Paine. Franklin was long sighted as to the future of the American colonies, and I feel sure that there was some deep-seated purpose in him advising Paine to go there. Everything in Philadelphia seem all set-up for Paine when he arrived there, ready for him to fall into, with a job as editor of the <u>Pennsylvanian Magazine</u> which Conway says was a "seed bag for Paine to"scatter the seeds of great reforms...." In about fourteen months he had actually published <u>Common Sense</u>, with the assistance of Franklin. Paine had arrived in America in November 1774, and the following October he said that Dr.Franklin proposed giving him such materials as "were in his hands towards completing a history of the present transactions...I had the formed the outlines of <u>Common</u>

Sense, and finished nearly the first part..." (Conway,p.27).

Paine, I am sure, was never "just" an exciseman, a teacher, staymaker, or storekeeper. His mental activity, interest in science, government and human relations, implied that there was far more bigger and grander things for him to do. But, his meeting with Franklin, seems to me, to have been the trning point that led on to those things.

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"THE NATURAL BENT OF MY MIND WAS TO SCIENCE"
Observations on Paine and his Interest in things Scientific

*R. W. Morrell

THE BICENTENARY OF the erection of what was probably the first iron bridge in the world took place in July, 1979, and moved a writer in the Daily Telegraph to draw attention to Thomas Paine's interest in the use of iron for the construction of bridges.(1) Paine spent considerable time, effort and money to promote his ideas for bridge construction, but failed to find either individuals or governments to back him financially. Many words of praise for his ideas flowed out but these words were not backed by deeds.

Paine's interest in the problems of bridge building was stimulated when he considered the difficulties present in erecting a bridge across the Schuylkill River. According to Paine, "the vast quantities of ice and melted snow at the breaking of the frost in that part of America render it impractical to erect a bridge on piers" over the river. To surmount these difficulties he proposed a bridge made from iron. Nothing, however, came of this suggestion, and it was to be in England some years later that Paine took out a patent on his design (specification of patents No.1667 of 1786).

The second iron bridge to be erected in Britain was over the River Wear at Monswearmouth, and opened to the public as a toll bridge in 1796. For many years this bridge was thought to have been based on Paine's technique, and some parts of a bridge made for Paine do appear to have been incorporated into it, while men used by Paine, and a firm employed by him, were also used by the people behind the Wear bridge. However, a study of the history and techniques by S.T.Miller has clearly demonstrated that the bridge was constructed according to the ideas drawn up and patented by Rowland Burdon (specification No.2066 of 1795). (2) Burdon's idea was to use iron in the same manner as stone (the first(?) ironbridge at Coalbrookdale was based upon the principles of wood construction), whereas Paine's project was, as Miller notes, more appreciative of the potentialities of iron. Miller refers to the Presidential Address to the American Society of Civil Engineers in 1905 by Charles Schmeider, in which it was pointed out that Paine's design was of the modern girder type, so modern in concept that it was "the prototype of the modern steel bridge."

Paine's fame as a writer on social, political and religious themes plus his controversial activities, has tended to obscure his passionate interest in scientific matters. Paine was perhaps the first person to recognise the critical implications of the growing stream of scientific discoveries to religion, using these to attack Christianity in The Age of Reason. In point of fact this work is fundamentally "a democratic treatise" aimed at the "politico-religious ruling class" of his day.(3) Taking a broad look at Paine's published works and his letters, it becomes clear that his attitude towards science would not be out of place among advanced thinkers today. He looked upon scientific work from a very practical angle, measuring its value in terms of use; he was essentially a technologist rather than a scientist proper.

In The Age of Reason Paine states that "the natural bent of my mind was to science."(4) He claimed that the human mind "has a natural disposition

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to scientific knowledge, and the things connected to it."(5) "Natural philosophy," remarks Paine, "embraces the whole circle of science,"(6) and this "is the study of the works of God..." Paine went on to say that "natural philosophy, mathematical and mechanical sciences, are a continual source of tranquil pleasure....the study of these things is the study of true theology...."(7) Our knowledge of Paine's frantic efforts to obtain backing for his bridge project suggests that not every situation involving science brought a sense of tranquility, whatever he might claim. The practical nature of Paine's approach to science was reflected in the friendship of Benjamin Franklin with him, and it is worth noting that in the letter of recommendation from Franklin that Paine took with him to the American colonies, as they then were, when he left England in 1774, was the suggestion that potential employers might find him a good "assistant surveyor."

It was not as an "assistant surveyor" that Paine found employment on his arrival in the colonies, he turned instead to journalism, being appointed editor of the newly established Pennsylvania Magazine. Under his editorship the journal flourished, and its content matter included a series of technologically oriented articles, most of which Paine appears to have written himself. Illustrations included plates showing, among other things, a new type of threshing machine, something likely to attract the agricultural readership. With the farmers in mind again he published also an article on methods to be employed to improve the fertality of the soil. Paine's attitude towards labour saving inventions prompted his biographer, Audrey Williamson, to recognise in him "the true American." (8)

In one article Paine speculated about the potential wealth which might be tapped if America expanded westward. This line of thought was prompted by a visit he paid to examine the geological collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia. A.O.Aldridge calls this "a fossil collection,"(9) which in fact it was not. Paine himself refers to it as being mainly European, with the American section consisting of "several specimens of earth, clay, sand, etc., with some account of each, and where brought from.(10) In the terminology of 18th century geology, fossils were generally called "petrifications," and could also be termed minerals. We might bear in mind here that the actual word geology was not introduced by J.A.de Luc until 1778.(11)When Paine wrote his geological essay, in which he displays a grasp of geological time far more modern in concept than many of his contemporary colleagues who displayed greater interest in the subject, the literature on American geology was very limited, and the first proper geological study of any part of the country, Beytrage zur mineralogischen Kenntniss des ostlichen Theils von Nord-Amerika und seiner Geburge, by Johann David Schopf, was not published until 1787, and then in Germany. Paine betrays no indication of having heard of this work in his later works, and even if he had he did not read German. Paine was not the only individual unfamiliar with the book,few geologists knew of it, and a full English translation did not appear until 1972. However, he may well have met the author. Schopf served as a surgeon on the British side during the War of Independence, and following its conclusion he stayed on and spent the better part of a year doing an extensive geological tour. During this time he met various leaders of American scientific life, including Paine's friends, Benjamin Rush and David Rittenhouse. Schopf left America in 1784, three years before Paine did. As mineralogy was rather less specialised in meaning than it is now, Schopf's book took in all aspects of geology as it was then known, though the title of his book when rendered into English is Contributions to the mineralogical knowledge..(12) This same broad meaning is to be found in Paine's magazine article, which appeared in the February 1775 issue of the Pennsylvania Magazine. One wonders whether Schopf also visited the collection which so interested Paine.

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