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THOMAS PAINE

LECTURE.

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Eric Foner

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THOMAS PAINE

AND THE

AGE OF REASON

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Gordon Stein

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THE SECOND IRON

BRIDGE MYSTERY

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Audrey Williamson

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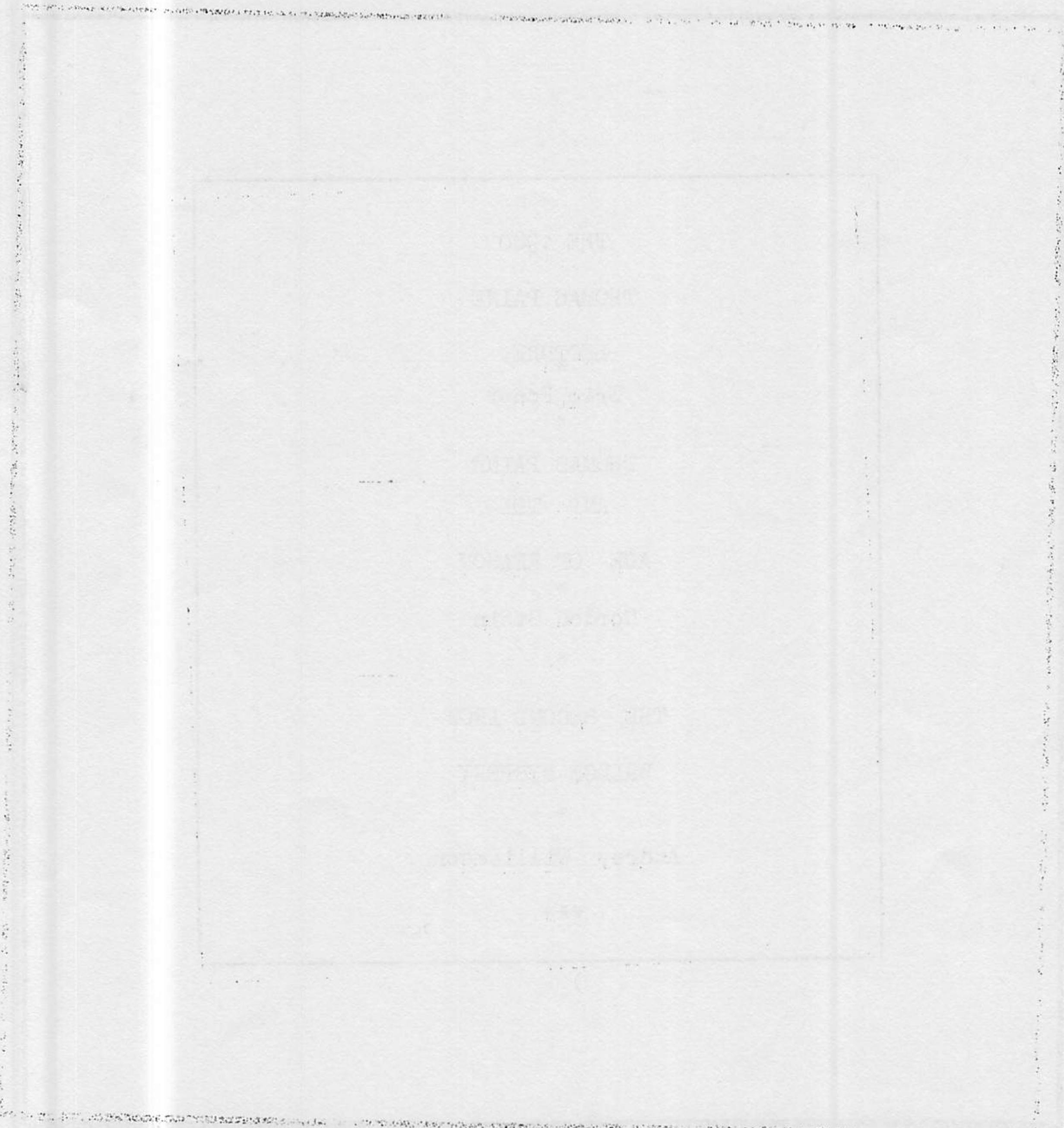

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THOMAS PAINE AND THE AMERICAN RADICAL TRADITION

Eric Foner*

The Thomas Paine Lecture, delivered at the University of East Anglia on 18 November, 1980.

OF THE MEN who made the American Revolution, none had a more remarkable career, or suffered a more peculiar fate, than Thomas Paine. While his friends Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, and his ideological antagonist John Adams, came from middle and upper class families long established on American soil, Paine's origins lay among the lower orders of eighteenth-century England, and he did not even arrive in America until the very eve of the revolutionary war. Unlike Alexander Hamilton, another leader of the Revolution born abroad, Paine always remained something of an outsider in America, never developing true local roots there. Paine's profound influence on American events was acknowledged by friends and opponents alike, but after his death, he was excluded from the group of revolutionary leaders canonized in American popular culture. His memory was kept alive primarily by succeeding generations of radicals, who rediscovered him again and again as a symbol of revolutionary internationalism, free thinking and defiance of existing institutions. Even among radicals, Paine was by no means the most pervasive influence in the development of American radical thought. In England, as E.P.Thompson reminds us, Paine's writings became the "foundation text" of the working class movement; in America, however, his aggressive infidelity, his assault upon revealed religion and institutionalised Christianity in The Age of Reason and subsequent writings, cut him off from the evangelical fervour which inspired so many reform movements of 19th century America. Many American radicals found they could get their democratic ideals from Jefferson, without having to take on the added burden of Paine's religious beliefs.

If it is difficult to find a sustained tradition of "Paineite radicalism" in 19th century America, however, it would be wrong to underestimate Paine's impact on the evolution of the American radical tradition. I want to argue that Paine's influence on that tradition was, in fact, profound because, more than any other individual, he defined the terms, created, if you will, the political language of nineteenth century radicalism. Even those who rejected his religious beliefs could not escape the impact of Paine's radical variant of the republicanism which had come to dominate American political culture as a result of the Revolution. Paineite republicanism provided a vision of the good society, a utopian definition of active citizenship, with which the actual development of 19th century American society often stood in sharp contrast. It therefore helped to inspire many of the expressions of radical protest ranging from the labour movement of the 1830s down to the Populist uprisings of the 1890s. Yet at the same time, the limitations and ambiguities of republicanism as a vision of society, particularly its weaknesses in analyzing the economic, as opposed to the political components of the social order, posed difficulties which many American radicals found it difficult to transcend. Thus, despite the fact that Paine as an individual was often forgotten, Paineite radicalism, both provided inspiration for, and set limits to, the development of radical thought in 19th century America.

In discussing the complex relationship between Thomas Paine and the American radical tradition, it is necessary first to suggest a definition of American radicalism. I do not propose to be detained by the classic question posed seventy years ago by the German sociologist, Werner Sombart, "why is there no socialism in America?" for I am convinced that this is a bad question which has misled many fine scholars into proposing grandiose abstract theories about American society, all of which have collapsed in the cold light of empirical reality. There have in fact been highly significant expressions of radicalism in American life; the problem for the historian is not to deny their existence, but to explain the unique constraints within which they have to operate, and their persistence despite a relative lack of success. Instead, I want to focus on what I consider to be the three characteristic features of radicalism in American history, and Paine's relationship with each. The most important radical movements of the late 18th and much of the 19th centuries derived from the republicanism of the American revolution, a comlex ideology in which the autonomous, property-holding citizen was viewed as the repository of social virtue and the basis of republican government. Alonside this republican radicalism arose a second expression, based on the ideal of the free individual, not, as in classical republicanism, defining his freedom through active citizenship and a commitment to the good of society, but standing, rather, in opposition to state and society. In its most extreme form, this individualism became the "native American anarchism," the hostility to all government so prominent in the 19th century and with echoes still surviving in American politics today. Finally, by the late 19th century, there emerged radical movements based on social class as the fundamental dividing line in American society. Drawing at first on Paineite republicanism for their political language, they were soon forced to transcend it in an effort to analyze the new and unique characteristics of the modern industrial order.

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Despite the fact that many American radicals shrank from a full acceptance of his religious views, Paine's contribution to all three variants of American radicalism was profound. This is not a question of individual "influenec" - a difficult thing to measure in any case - but the way Paine helped to shape the modes of thought and expression which became characteristic of the American radical tradition. In his writings both in America and Europe, Paine helped to create the language of revolution of the late 18th century, and transformed the meaning of the key words of political discourse. In Common Sense he was among the first writers to use "republic" in a positive rather than a derogatory sense. In Rights of Man he abandoned the old classical definition of "democracy" as a state where each citizen participated directly in government, and created its far broader, far more favourable modern meaning. Even the word "revolution" was transformed in his writing, from a term derived from the notion of the planets and implying a cyclical view of history, to one signifying vast and irreversible social and political change.

It was Common Sense, that remarkable pamphlet advocating the independence of the American colonies from Britain, which more than any other document impressed Paine's language on the American radical tradition. For through his attack on the monarchy, and the entire principle of hereditary rule and aristocratic privilege, Paine helped make republicanism a living political issue and a utopian ideal of government. Paine's savage attack on "the so much boasted Constitution of England" contained the most striking passages in that pamphlet. His description of the accession of William the Conqueror would become one of his most frequently quoted passages: "A French bastard landing with an armed banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original.... The plain truth is that the antiquity of the English monarchy will not bear looking into." Or, again, his assault on the principle of hereditary rule: "of more worth is one honest man to society...than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived." Instead of the debased constitution of England, Paine proposed the establishment of republican government in America, based on new state legislatures with broad suffrage, popular representation through frequent elections, and a written constitution guaranteeing the rights of persons and property and establishing freedom of religion. He went on to paint a utopian picture of an independent America, trading freely with the entire world, pursuing a policy of friendship with all nations, promoted by a strong continental government. In lyrical rhetoric, he outlined a breathtaking vision of the meaning of American independence: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again.... the birthday of a new world is at hand." Paine transformed the struggle over the rights of Englishmen into a contest with meaning for all mankind: "O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her as a stranger and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind."

Common Sense, as is well known, had an astonishing success. It went through twenty-five editions and reached thousands of readers in 1776. Paine's antagonist, John Adams, always resented the fact that Common Sense was credited with having contributed so much to the movement for independence and republicanism. Its discussion, he insisted, was simply "a tolerable summary of the argument which I had been repeating again and again in Congress for nine months." Nothing in it was new, Adams believed, except "the phrases suitable for an emigrant from New Gate, such as 'the royal brute of England.'" Adams may have been ungrateful, but to some extent he was right. What was unique in Paine was not simply simply his ideas, but his mode of expressing them. Paine was the conscious pioneer of a new style of political writing, one designed to extend political discussion beyond the narrow bounds of the 18th century's "political nation." His savage attacks on kingship, and his careful exposition, in language common readers could understand, of republicanism, were two sides of the same coin: both were meant to undermine the entire system of deferential politics.

In Common Sense and his subsequent writings, Paine outlined a vision of republicanism which had a profound impact on the American radical tradition. For Paine, a republic was simply a government devoted to the public good. Its hallmarks were equality among its citizens, and a devotion to the common good rather than any particular social interest. Class conflict was, in a sense, incompatible with the essence of republicanism which, Paine believed, "does not admit of an interest distinct from that of the nation." Although Paine during his American career often found himself expressing the immediate political aims and concerns of the radical artisans of Philadelphia - the city where he spent most of his American career - his republicanism was not the ideology of a specific social class. Rather, it was a rhetoric of exclusion; the people, when set against their rulers and a narrow, non-productive aristocracy, were a homogenous body with a definable common interest.

What was characteristic of republics, for Paine and other thinkers of the revolutionary era, was not so much a particular structure of government, but a set of qualities among the citizenry. The key terms in republican discourse were "virtue" - the willingness to subordinate one's selfish interests to the good of the entire society; "equality" - which encompassed not only equality before the law and in political rights, but a fairly equitable distribution of private property, so that vast disparities of wealth would not upset political stability; and, "independence" - the ability to resist outside coercion, which was usually seen to rest on the possession of private property. Most republican thinkers believed that only property provided the autonomy which enabled men to exercise their political rights freely, and even Paine, while in America, believed personal servants should not

have the right to vote (later, in England, he came to advocate universal manhood suffrage).

America, Paine believed, because of its relatively equal distribution of wealth (always excepting, of course, black slaver), was uniquely fitted to possess a republican government. In such a circumstance, governmental structure need be extremely simple. A central axiom of Paineite republicanism was the distinction between society and government. In the opening section of Common Sense, he explained: "Some writers have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness.... The first is a patron, the last a punisher. Society is in every state a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil."

The distinction between society and government helps to explain Paine's vision of a republic without class conflict or economic oppression. Paine was, to be sure, an eloquent and scathing critic of the social order of Europe. He could comment in moving terms on the "mass of wretchedness" lying "hidden from the eye of common observation," which had "scarcely any other chance than to expire in poverty or infamy." But the cause of this wretchedness was political, not economic: the existence of poverty implied that "something must be wrong in the system of government." Paine singled out oppressive taxation, aristocratic privilege and monarchy - inspired wars as the cause of poverty in Europe - all examples of the destructive effects of excessive and unjust government. While he outlined a pioneering and far-reaching programme of social welfare measures in chapter five of Rights of Man, part two, Paine never suggested such measures needed to be applied in America. His remedy for economic injustice was the establishment of republican government.

Paine thus did not attribute inequalities of wealth to economic oppression, although his views on this subject did change during his lifetime. In Common Sense he explicitly rejected the idea that poverty was the result of "the harsh ill-sounding names of oppression and avarice," a belief he repeated in virtually the same language twenty years later in Dissertation on the First Principles of Government. Only in Agrarian Justice, written in 1796 in France, did Paine suggest that economic inequality might have a fundamental root outside the political system. In that pamphlet, Paine noted that private property in land deprived millions of men of their natural right to a portion of the soil. Yet cultivation of private property was essential for the onward progress of civilisation. Unlike Babeuf, who used similar logic to demand the outlawing of private property in general, or Thomas Spence, who demanded an end to property in land, Paine proposed that each individual reaching the age of twenty-one be given a sum of fifteen pounds (which was worth considerably more then than now) as compensation fpr "the loss of his or her natural inheritance." Spence considered the pamphlet a "dire disappointment," and condemned Paine's "poor beggerly stipends" as "contemptible and insulting" substitutes for "our lordly and just pretensions to the soil of our birth." But because it linked poverty not simply to bad government but to the alienation of land to private individuals, Agrarian Justice established Paine as a pioneer of the land reform tradition which stretched in America down to Henry George almost a century later.

In his American writings, then, Paine enunciated themes which would come to dominate 19th century American radicalism: a commitment to social and political egalitarianism, a division of society into producing and non-producing classes, a hostility to monarchy and hereditary privilege, and an American nationalism coupled with a concern for the fate of liberty overseas. All were embodied in the ideal of the republic. Yet within Paineite republicanism lay a crucial ambiguity, or, perhaps, a tension between the individualist and corporate implications of Paine's thought. On the other hand, as we have seen, Paine exalted the common good and rejected the notion of a republic divided into competing social classes. James Madison, in a sense, was much more realistic than Paine, more attuned to the dangers of class conflict in a republic - for that reason he wrote into the Constitution an elaborate system of checks and balances to prevent a propertyless majority from seizing control of the reins of government in order to despoil the rich. On the other hand, Paine's exaltation of commerce as the cement of the natural order of society, and his general optimism about economic change, led him as well in a liberal, individualisti direction. It is instructive that during the crisis in Philadelphia in 1779 over the high price of the necessities of life, Paine first sided with those favouring governmental price controls, then switched positions and advocated laissez-faire. There was a natural affinity between the new political economy of Adam Smith and the republicanism of Thomas Paine - both were based on an abhorrence of governmental interference with the natural, harmonious workings of society. Perhaps we might simply conclude that Paine's republicanism contained within it the common origins of the divergent streams of radical thought of the nineteenth century. Republican, individualist and socialist radicalism all had common origins in the radicalism of the late eighteenth century, but under the later impact of the industrial revolution, their unity was shattered and they came to develope in distinct directions.

Having contributed so much to the American Revolution, Paine departed for England in 1787. But even while Paine pursued his checkered career as founding father of British working-class radicalism in the 1790s, and an unhappy participant in revolutionary France, Paineite republicanism remained alive in America. In 1793 and 1794 the Democratic-Republican societies, formed to promote the party of Jefferson and defend the French Revolution, distributed copies of Rights of Man and drank toasts to Paine as a symbol of opposition to aristocratic tyranny. The ranks of Paineites were reinforced by an influx of British Jacobins in the 1790s and early 19th century. These included Joseph Gales, Sheffield newspaper

editor and leader of the Sheffield Corresponding Society, who fled that city one step ahead of the law and later became a newspaper editor and Jeffersonian leader in Raleigh, North Carolina; John Daly Burk, a United Irishman who became a lawyer, historian and playwright in Virginia; William Duane, John Binns and other Paineite newspaper editors. These men formed a distinct group in American politics - they knew and assisted one another, and, despite personal success, did not abandon their democratic, Paineite ideas. Some joined Elihu Palmer's deistic Columbia Illuminati, a society of Secularists for whom Paine did some writing on his return to America in 1802. Others pursued a host of humanitarian concerns - the abolition of slavery, reformed debtors laws, the defence of freedom of the press. Yet, as a group, their radicalism did not extend to economic matters. Only one Jacobin-Jeffersonian editor, Philadelphia's William Duane, defended the journeyman shoemakers who were convicted in a famous conspiracy trial of 1806. The others, drawing on one side of Paine's outlook, viewed any organising for the interests of a specific class as incompatible with republican government.

It was not until the 1830s that the possibilities of merging republican radicalism with the grievances of the working-class became fully apparent in America. And, in the rise of the early labour movement, Paine's memory and legacy played an important part. In response to the early manifestations of industrialism in America and the rapid decline in the skill and utonomy of the traditional artisan-class, there appeared the first workingmens' parties in any nation, as well as a class-conscious unionism which conducted the first extensive wave of strikes in American history. The key to their social outlook was Paineite republicanism. American society, they believed, was being divided into antagonistic classes, opportunities for the workingman were declining, and wealthy non-producers now accumulated the lion's share of economic and political power.

For one part of the early labour movement, Paine emerged as a hero and symbol. By the 1830s, dinners celebrating the anniversary of Paine's birth were being held in Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati and Albany, and in 1834, some 700 men and women attended a ball following the New York Paine birthday dinner at the City Saloon. While the organisers of these dinners tended to be emigrant English labour leaders, for whom Paine's memory seems to have been stronger than their American counterparts, many native-born artisans were among the celebrants. However, many labour leaders refused to attend - for an acceptance of The Age of Reason was still required to associate one's self with the memory of Paine. The toasts and speeches at the Paine dinners dealt as often with religious questions as social concerns, and the Paineites denounced not only threats to the dignity of labour, but what they perceived as attempts to unite church and state - the movement to halt Sunday mail deliveries, for example. For the men and women who celebrated his birth, Paine was above all a symbol of the evil effects of clerical persecution, and of the virtues of the free intellect, unfettered by "superstition."

But while many labour leaders were reluctant to identify themselves too closely with Paine as an individual, Paineite ideology permeated the movement, not only inspiring it, but setting limits to its outlook. For the essentially political basis of Paineite republicanism left little room for a comprehensive analysis of the causes of labour's economic discontents. While the labour movement was convinced that non-producers were somehow appropriating far too large a share of the products of labour, they found it difficult to explain this situation within the old republican paradigm. Essentially, they demanded political reforms to achieve economic ends. Their major demand was for free, universal public education, which would not only level social distinctions, but enable the labourer once again to take his rightful place as an active republican citizen. Even the ten hour day, demanded by the trade unions, was not seen simply as an economic measure, but as a way of revitalising the republican tradition by providing more time for labour to participate in public affairs. Education and the ten-hour day were "the great leverby which the Working Men are to be raised to their proper elevation in the republic. It will make but one class out of the many that now envy and despise each other." Note the traditional republican goal of transcending class conflict in the name of social unity. When the labour movement did seek for economic remedies to the problems of labour, they remained within the Paineite tradition. It was distortions caused by government which disrupted the natural and harmonious functioning of the economy. Some blamed government granted monopolies for enriching non-producers, others pointed to paper money issued by banks under government charter, or imprisonment for debt. The Paineite tradition was ill-suited for an analysis of the economic order in its own terms.

There were, however, two leaders of the labour movement who, while strongly influenced by Paine, sought to move beyond Paineite republicanism to a more specifically economic explanation and programme. Thomas Skidmore, a machinist and teacher in New Jersey, published The Rights of Man to Property - whose title suggested both a tribute to Paine, and the need to move beyond his analysis, to extend political equality, which had been achieved in America, into the economic realm. Skidmore's programme called not simply for political change, but for the abolition of inheritance. All property would revert to the community at a person's death, and each person on reaching maturity would receive an equal stipend. The idea clearly derived from Paine's programme of government grants in both Rights of Man and Agrarian Justice, but Skidmore extended this to a critique of all inequalities of property. As long as wealth was unequal, he insisted, attempts to end other inequalities would fail (and he included, by the way, blacks and women as recipients of government grants). And yet Skidmore could not escape the competitive individualism inher-

ent in Paine's vision of the natural functioning of the economy, for once individuals received their equal grants, they would compete according to their talents and industry, and could accumulate as much wealth as they were able. They would simply not be able to pass it onto their children. Yet even in this form, Skidmore's ideas were too radical for the bulk of the labour movement, which dropped his programme after briefly embracing it in 1829. His vision of an active government constantly redistributing property contradicted the more general republican belief that government intervention should be kept to a minimum.

More popular was the English immigrant radical, George Henry Evans, who also sought to make republicanism relevant to the changed economic conditions in America, this time drawing on Paine's Agrarian Justice. In conjunction with Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune and the remarkable Irish Chartist emigrant, Thomas Devyr (author of the intriguingly-titled, The Odd Book of the 19th Century), Evans demanded that the government supply free homesteads on the public land for any individual who desired to escape the bonds of wage labour. Combining Paine's argument that men had a natural right to the soil with the view that an oversupply of labourers in the east depressed the wage level, Evans warned that is something were not done, "European" conditions of poverty would soon emerge in America. Land reform was the certain way to avoid unrepublican class conflict whils at the same time providing access to the property-ownership which was the only guarantee of republican independence, equality and virtue. The homestead law, Evans argued, would give "thousands and tens of thousands, who are now languishing in hopeless poverty...a certain and speedy independence." With Evans, land reform emerged as a central theme in the trans-Atlantic radical tradition, finding expression in the Free Soil and Republican parties in the United States and Chartism in England, and later in Irish nationalism and the movement inspired in the 1880s by Henry George.

If the 1830s and 1840s revealed how a class movement - albeit one without a truly class ideology - could adopt Paineite republican views for its own purposes, the same decades also witnessed a demonstration of the ambiguities within the Paineite legacy. I am referring to the unhappy relationship between two variants of that legacy - the labour movement and individualist abolitionism. Their not too close encounter revealed that the tensions between the corporate and individualist strands of republican thought were now far more difficult to resolve than they had been in Paine's own lifetime.

In its origins, anti-slavery thought had been closely linked to the Paineite tradition. Although anti-slavery had not been a major theme in Paine's writings, he himself had on occasion condemned the institution of chattel slavery - one reason, indeed why abolitionists had at that time connotations of dangerous Jacobinism. But during the 1830s, a serious breach took place between abolitionists and articulate workingmen. The issue was the concept of "wage slavery." For workingmen this term connoted not simply low wages, but an entire spectrum of evils within the republican lexicon - the Europeanization of American society, the rise of permanent and antagonistic classes, and, most importantly, the notion that working for wages itself was unrepublican, a loss of labour's independence and autonomy.

A comparison of the conditions of "wage slaves" of the North and chattel slaves of the South became a standard feature of labour rhetoric. As one labour newspaper put it: "A great cry is raised in the northern states against southern slavery. The sin of slavery may be abominable there, but is it not equally so here? If they have black slaves, have we not white ones? How much better is the condition of some of our labourers here in the North, than the slaves of the South?" The famous Coffin handbill distributed in New York City after striking journeymen tailors were convicted of conspiracy declared, "The Freemen of the North are now on a level with the slaves of the South." The point is that the emergence of a permanent wage-earning class challenged the traditional definition of the social order of republican America.

The use of the term "wage slavery" to describe northern conditions does not mean that labourers were favorable towards slavery in the South. A recent analysis of New York City anti-slavery petitions in the 1830s reveals that artisans were the largest occupational group among the signers. The only New York newspaper publically to defend Nat Turner's rebellion was not an abolitionist journal, but the Daily Sentinel, edited for the Workingman party by the Paineite, George Henry Evans (Evans went on to claim, rather plausibly, that "the Government of Haiti approaches nearer to true republicanism than any other now in use or on record").

The year 1831 witnessed, of course, not only Turner's rebellion, but the appearance of The Liberator, the militant abolitionist journal edited by William Lloyd Garrison. Like Evans, Garrison, who had his own critique of the established churches in America, was an admirer of Paine. But in his very first issue, Garrison denounced the labour movement for setting class against class. Going back to Paine's comments in Common Sense on the innocuous origins of class distinctions, Garrison observed, "in a republican government...where hereditary distinctions are obsolete...where the avenues of wealth, distinction and supremacy are open to all; (society) must, in the nature of things, be full of inequalities. But these can exist...without even a semblance of oppression."

Most abolitionists, following Garrison, accepted social inequalities as a natural reflection of individual differences in talent and ambition, and perceived the interests of capital and labour as existing in harmony rather than conflict. As a result, they were unable to understand, much less sympathise with,

the aims of the labour movement or the concept of "wage slavery." But what is most striking here is not simply a difference of opinion between two reform groups, but the way their outlooks reflected two divergent definitions of liberty, each deriving in its own way from the principles enunciated by Paine. The labour movement, drawing on the classical republican tradition, equated freedom with ownership of productive property. To the abolitionists, expressing a liberal, individualist definition, freedom meant self-ownership, that is, simply not being a slave. The abolitionists, therefore, rejected labour's critique of the northern social order, for the northern wage labourer, whatever his legitimate grievances, possessed the right to leave his job if he was not satisfied. It was folly or worse to equate his condition with that of the slave. Both abolitionists and the labour movement condemned the alliance between the Lords of the Loom and the Lords of the Lash - the textile manufacturers of New England and the slaveowners of the South, but each drew from it a different conclusion. To the labour movement, factory owner and slaveowner were both non-producers who fattened on the fruits of the labour of others; to the abolitionists what was objectionable in the factory owners was precisely their pro-slavery stance, not their treatment of their employees. Like Paine, abolitionists considered the operations of the free market natural, harmonious and beneficial. They saw no reason why the labour movement should try to disrupt it, or impose its will upon the economic order.

With the decline of the early labour movement after the 1830s and 1840s, the memory of Paine faded from American radical movements. Only among immigrant freethinkers was there an organised tradition of reverence for Paine. In 1859 the Atlantic Monthly described Paine as "only an indistinct shadow" to most Americans. Yet among English radical immigrants and German refugees of 1848 Paine's legacy survived. It was at a meeting of English-born "infidels" in Cincinnati that Moncure D. Conway, who was later to write the first modern biography of Paine, was introduced to Paine's writings. After the Civil War, the great American orator, Robert Ingersoll (most famous for his great speech characterising James G. Blaine, Republican standard bearer of 1884, as "the plumed knight") gave numerous lectures on Paine, but Ingersoll, too, was a notorious atheist, a fact which helps explain the frustrations of his political ambitions. Ingersoll's brother served as Congressman from Illinois, but he himself failed in numerous attempts to obtain the governorship or a seat in the Senate. Paine birthday celebrations continued in the 1880s and 1890s among German-American deists, as well as native-born freethinkers. At one such celebration in San Francisco in 1884, Miss Eva Ballou read a poem specially composed for the occasion:

> Among the dear immortal names,
> The names that ne'er shall perish
> Whose honour, genius, worth and fame
> Americans should cherish,
> None is more worthy of their love,
> More free from taint or stain,
> Or more entitled to endure
> Than that of Thomas Paine.

Miss Ballou then went on to lament, poetically, that Paine's memory was the subject of "bitter hate, and shame, and obloquy." Yet perhaps she overstated her case. For, while Paine as an individual had faded from view, that peculiar phenomenon which I have been describing - Paineism without Paine - continued to flourish among American radicals. In the years after the Civil War, the labour movement emerged as the inheritor of the ante bellum radical tradition. Resurrecting the notion of wage slavery and the republican hostility to the wage system, organisations like the Knights of Labour returned once again to Paine's utopian vision of a republican society without class conflict. The Knights' "cooperative commonwealth" was based, not on class warfare, but on the harmony of interests among producers and the arbitration of their differences with employers. Their aim was classically republican - the abolition of the wage system. "We complain," said one Knights leader, "that our rulers, statesmen and orators have not attempted to engraft republican principles into our industrial system, and have forgotten or denied its underlying principles...There is an inevitable and irrepressible conflict between the wage system of labour and the republican system of government." And even after the decline of the Knights, Paineite radicalism lingered in the 1890s. The key elements of Populist thought harked back to the radical republicanism of a century before - hostility to banks and middlemen, belief that class divisions were a symptom of the Europeanisation of American society, emphasis on the key element of economic independence for the citizen and the unity of the "people" against the non-productive aristocracy. The ideal of the "republic" as a vision of a better world retained its resonance. The rallying cry of Tom Watson, one of the greatest of the Populist orators, attempted to link classical republicanism with a critique of the modern industrial order: "Day by day the power of the individual sinks. Day by day the power of the classes, of the corporations rises. And every loss to the individual is a loss to the Republic...In all essential respects...the Republic of our fathers is dead."

So too, perhaps, was the radicalism based on the ideal of the small producers' republic. For the next major expression of American radicalism - socialism - marked the final break with the Paineite tradition, with its emphasis on the political causes of economic discontents. The great socialist leader, Eugene V. Debs, hailed Paine as a founder of the radical tradition, but in socialist thought there was little that could be directly linked to Paine's writings. Paine remained now primarily as a symbol, a personal inspiration, the man who had said, "a share in two revolutions is living to some purpose." And as such, he would continue to inspire various individual radicals claiming his legacy -

anarchists, freethinkers, non-conformists of every variety. So often in American history, if one looks into the background of an individual who sought to supercede the conventions of his or her society, one finds evidence of Paine's legacy. To take just one further example from a realm perhaps far afield from our discussion, that pioneer of American modern dance, Ruth St.Denis, was the daughter of an English immigrant who spent his evenings in a Somerville, New Jersey tavern with a group of deistic admirers of the "good old anti-Christians" Tom Paine and Robert Ingersoll (I might add that St.Denis's mother, a devoutly religious woman and teetotaler, heartily disapproved of her husband's activities).

We return, then, to the paradox with which we began - the general exclusion of Paine from the list of revolutionary forebears celebrated in American popular culture, and his apparent neglect even among American radicals. Despite this, as I have argued, Paine's influence was indeed profound. More than any other individual he not only created the language of radical politics, but set an example of the radical cast of mind in America - his revolutionary internationalism and defiance of existing institutions, his rationalism and faith in human nature, his belief in casting off the burden of the past and remaking institutions so as to "bring forward, by a quiet and regular operation, all that extent of capacity which never fails to appear in revolutions." As a political writer and scientists (he helped design the iron bridge) Paine helped tousher in the modern world, yet at the same time he provided a body of ideas and a personal example which would continue to inspire those who believed that the modern world had betrayed, not fulfilled, the high hopes for a just social order raised during Paine's Age of Revolution.

THOMAS PAINE AND THE AGE OF REASON

Gordon Stein*

An address delivered before the annual meeting of the Thomas Paine Memorial Library, New York, on September 15th., 1978.

PROBABLY EVERYONE IS awarw of Thomas Paine's great contribution to the fight for the independence of the United States from Great Britain. Perhaps you have wondered why Paine is not more widely recognized for his contribution to the cause of independence. To a large extent, the reason for this lack of recognition lies in the fact that Paine made another contribution to freedom - to the freedom of man's mind from religious and clerical oppression. This contribution was in the form that Paine did best, namely writing. It was the book called The Age of Reason.

I am going to discuss how Paine came to write The Age of Reason, the circumstances under which the book was actually written, how the manuscript was saved from destruction under the French reign of Terror, how Paine nearly lost his life at the guillotine as he was writing the book, the controversy it stirred up, and finally what the effect of the book was both on mankind and upon Thomas Paine's subsequent life.

By the time The Age of Reason was begun, in 1793, Paine had already had an interesting career. He had been born in Thetford, England in 1737. At first he apprenticed to his father as a staymaker. Later, he became a tax collector at various port cities. Finally, a lucky meeting with Benjamin Franklin, then in England, obtained for him a letter of introduction to Franklin's son-in-law in Philadelphia and the advice from Franklin that he seek his career in America.

Paine came to the "colonies" in 1775 and became editor of the Pennsylvanian Magazine. His unique clear and direct style of writing seems to have been honed by this writing and editing experience. He called for independence in his book Common Sense. Over 500,000 copies of the book were sold in a short time, and they united popular sentiment for independence. During the Revolutionary War, Paine wrote a series of pamphlets called The Crisis, which General Washington had read to the troops in the field to inspire them to continue fighting. By the end of the War, Paine had established a hero's role for himself in the United States, and can also be credited with some role in framing the language in the Declaration of Independence.

Paine returned to England in 1787. He was anxious to have an iron bridge which he had invented actually built. He also became friendly with Edmund Burke. Burke attacked the French Revolution (which began in 1789) in a work entitled Reflections on the French Revolution (1790). Paine responded to this book with one of his own, Rights of Man. He wrote the second part of this in France. The French welcomed him as a hero for his book, and he was eventually invited to become a member of the Convention (similar to the Congress of the revolutionary regime).

In the meantime, Paine had become a wanted man in England. He had barely escaped arrest for having published Rights of Man. Paine was charged with having published "a false, wicked and seditious libel." He was tried in absentia in 1792, and found guilty. Paine had already left England to take his seat in the French Convention. This prevented him from being actually jailed after the guilty verdict had been obtained, so he was declared an outlaw in England. This meant that any British subject had the right to kill him on sight, with no charges being lodged against them for having done so.

Paine also got into trouble in France, this time for suggesting that the life of the deposed king, Louis XVI, be spared. This humanitarian gesture by Paine greatly angered many of the deputies in the Convention. At this time there was also a strong feeling that foreigners (like Paine) could not be trusted to be faithful to the aims of the Revolution.

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Many of Paine's friends in France were being takenaway to prison. Each day another one or two of them disappeared. Paine had always told John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson that he would someday write his opinions on the Bible, but that he would wait until "the latter part of my life" to do so. Now it looked as if Paine's life would not go on much longer, as many of the people in prison were being executed. With the fear of his own imprisonment and death hanging over him, Thomas Paine finally began his long postponed book on the Bible.

Paine finished the first part of The Age of Reason about March, 1793. He turned the manuscript over to Francois Lanthenas, who produced a French translation and then showed a proof copy of the typeset book to Georges Couthon. Couthon, along with Robespierre, served as the Committee of Public Safety's informal overseer of French religion. Couthon was offended by the work, although he did not try to block its publication. The first part was issued a few months later. Until recently, this edition was thought to be lost, but in the 1950s, Col.Richard Gimbel, a great collector of Paine's works, discovered a copy of a work called La Siecle de Raison (The Century of Reason), purporting to be by F.Lanthenas. Close inspection showed that this was indeed an early version of Paine's The Age of Reason, although the name of Thomas Paine does not appear on the work. The book differs considerably from the first part of The Age of Reason as we know it.

Paine was discouraged by the official hostility to the work but, by coincidence, the de-christianisation campaign of the Revolution began about this time. The spirit of de-christianisation again encouraged Paine to continue his writing. The entire work was begun anew and completely rewritten. As the reasons why he felt this necessary are unclear, nothing further can be said about it. Perhaps the oringinal manuscript in English had been lost or destroyed. Paine finished the new manuscript of Part 1 of The Age of Reason just six hours before he was arrested.

Paine had decided to spend the night at a hotel at which he had lived some time previously. Unfortunately, this was the very address which the police had listed for him. By coincidence, Paine arrived ahead of them, and the guards arrested him as a foreigner. They searched his room, but found no incriminating papers. They looked at the manuscript of The Age of Reason, but did not confiscate it. One of the guards thought that its publication would "do much good." Paine knew that it was essential that he get his manuscript into the hands of his friend Joel Barlow. Barlow, who already had the first half, must be given the remainder before Paine was taken away to prison. In order to do this, Paine thought of a clever ruse. He told the police that his papers would all be found at Joel Barlow's house. The guards took him to Barlow's house, where Paine gave Barlow the manuscript. A search of Barlow's house, of course, turned up no papers of Paine's.

On December 28, 1793, Paine was taken to the Luxemborg Prison. This was an old palace which had been converted into a prison. Paine was placed in a damp room on the ground floor, a fact which both led to him taking ill, and a fact which also spared his life. Paine assumed that his stay in prison would be brief. As an "honorary" American citizen, he thought that the American consul would seek his speedy release. A group of 16 Americans pleaded with the Convention on January 20th to release Paine. President Vadier answered the petition for his release by saying that Paine was not a Citizen of the United States, but of England. This was technically true, but Vadier was trying to avoid offending the United States, whose aid France needed, while trying to maintain the law, which called for the arrest of all foreigners from countries at war with France (as England then was). Paine remained in prison. Only an appeal to the American minister to France, Gouvenor Morris, was still a possibility to gain Paine's freedom. Morris had never liked Paine. Now he felt that Paine's only claim to American citizenship had been given up when Paine sat in the Convention of France as a delegate of that foreign power. Morris, in effect, refused to appeal for Paine's freedom. France, in turn, seemed to want Paine in jail only to prevent him returning to the United States and telling of all the abuses of freedom which he had seen in France. This might turn the United States against France.

Meanwhile, Paine spent each day in prison not knowing if it would be his last. Every night at midnight ten or more prisoners were taken away and executed without warning. Paine spent several months discussing religion with Anacharsis Cloots, who had been arrested on the same night he had. On March 24th, Cloots was taken away and executed. Paine continued writing, revising Rights of Man. On July 27th, Robespierre fell from power. The daily executions ceased. How close Paine came to being executed can be seen from the story he told (which may well be accurate) that Paine's own cell door had been marked with the chalk "X" which indicated that he was to be executed later that night. However, his cell door had, by accident, been opened outward when the "X" was marked on it. The fact that it was closed (thereby putting the "X" on the inside, out of sight) when the guards came to take the prisoners out to their deaths, was the only thing which saved him.

Paine again appealed for his freedom ten days after Robespierre was executed. Again he received no response. Several other people also appealed for Paine's release in vain. A new American minister to France was appointed. He was James Monroe, later to become President of the United States. Paine wrote to Monroe, but received no response for a month. Finally Paine hearing that Monroe was not convinced that he was an American citizen, wrote Monroe a 43 page essay setting forth his case to be considered

an American citizen. Monroe finally answered, saying that the delay was due to the very long time it took the French to recognise and accept Monroe's credentials as the new American minister to France. Monroe said he was convinced that Paine was as American citizen. Monroe had difficulty convincing the French to release Paine, but he finally succeeded and Paine was released from prison on November 4th., 1794. He had been there then months and nine days.

Thomas Paine had no money (prisoners had to buy their own food, and his last money was was depleted during the time he was in prison). He also had no place to stay after he was released. James Monroe invited him to stay at his house as his guest, thinking that he would be there for only a week or two. Paine accepted. He remained at the Monroe home for a year and a half. During this time he wrote Part II of The Age of Reason. It was published in 1795. Both parts of the book continued to sell well in France, England and the United States. There were many editions published in 1795 and 1796.

By the time Paine had emerged from prison, enough time had passed for a public reaction to be expressed about Part I of The Age of Reason. Written "answers" to Paine's book had started to appear. They were all by clergymen, and Paine summarised them by saying that they "contend and wangle and understand the Bible, (but) each understands it differently; but each understands it best; and they have agreed in nothing but in telling their readers that Thomas Paine understands it not."

The first part of The Age of Reason contains on the first page a statement which should have caused most of the clergymen who pronounced Paine an atheist to have held their tongues. The statement is "I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life." Paine was a Deist - one of those who thinks that God created the universe and man, set them in motion and then had no further contact with them. The Age of Reason is a book in the Deist tradition, but comes towards the end of the Deist period. Although Paine did not have access to a Bible when he wrote Part I, he overcame this difficulty by examining the concepts and actions of the people in the Old and New Testaments rather than analysing individual Biblical verses. The results are expressed in strikingly clear and often sitirical prose, with a devastating effect.

Paine recognised that the Bible was a fraud because it was contradictory, contained errors and made no sense in many places. The fact that Paine thought that the Bible was not a production of God did not mean that Paine did not believe in God. Rather, he was a Deist, and thought that God existed, had created man and nature and should be honoured. God had left no guidelines as to how this was to be done, however.

When Paine finally wrote Part II of The Age of Reason, he did have access to a Bible and other reference books. The work was also written at greater leisure at James Monroe's house. Therefore, Part II contains a book-by-book analysis of the Old and New Testament. Paine felt that he had "detected and proved" that none of the books of the Old and New Testament were the word of God, that none were written by their supposed authors, and that all contained enough contradictions to make them suspect as hsitories. The critics of Part I, Paine said "...must return to their work." In Part II he has "...gone through the Bible as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder and fell trees! Here they lie, and the priests, if they can, may replant them. They may, perhaps, stick them in the ground, but they will never make them grow."

Paine underwrote the cost of publishing Part II of The Age of Reason himself, including the printing of 15,000 copies for the American market. The money probably came as a loan from James Monroe. Paine borrowed quite alot of money from Monroe, who died bankrupt many years later. Congress eventually settled former President Monroe's accounts after his death.

Part II of the book was quite popular, especially with the working class. This was Paine's greatest "crime." He "let the cat out of the bag" by telling the common man that his Bible and religion was a fraud. For that the clergy never forgave him. They were still telling lies about his purported death-bed "recantation" a hundred years after he had died. But we will come to that later.

The responses to both parts of The Age of Reason number in the hundred. The best of them, and the only one which Paine thought worthy of an answer from him, was by Richard Watson (the Bishop of Llandaff). It was called Apology for the Bible. Watson was compelled to admit that many of Paine's arguments against the truth of the Bible were accurate. He also quoted a good deal from Paine's book, thus spreading a knowledge of the contents of the book to many Christians who would not have read Paine's work themselves. Watson's book enjoyed some popularity, but as with all other answers to Paine, it is forgotten today, while The Age of Reason is still read.

In addition to the immediate responses to his book, Thomas Paine was, in effect, ostracised from American society for the rest of his life. He never returned to England, so it is unknown how he would have been treated there had he returned - he was still legally an "outlaw" there. In America he had his few friends when he returned there in 1802. His health was never good after his release from the damp prison room in which he had been confined. Some eminent men remained his friends and correspondents. Paine spent his time on his farm at New Rochelle (a gift from the State of New York for his

services to the cause of liberty) and in New York City. Stories were spread about his drinking by his detractors. Although Paine did drink occasionally to excess, he was certainly not a chronic drunkard as some Christians claimed. Paine's mental powers remained undimmed until his death, which occurred in 1809. There were the usual deathbed repentance stories told about Paine. Since these relate to a supposed change in his religious opinions from those he stated in The Age of Reason, perhaps we ought to examine the facts of Paine's death to see whether he did recant his opinions on religion.

Thomas Paine died at 8am., on the morning of June 8, 1809. Two clergymen had invaded his bedroom shortly before he died. As soon as they asked Paine about his religious opinions, Paine said "Let me alone; good morning." Madam Bonneville, who had attended Paine during his last illness, asked if he had been treated satisfactorily in this house. His answer was "Oh, yes." These were his last words.

During the last few days of his life, Paine was visited by John Wesley Jarvis and Captain Daniel Pelton. Both asked Paine about his opinions on Jesus Christ. They went away saying that Paine had "expressed a continued belief in his written opinions." on the subject. Dr.James R.Manly, his physician, mad a last effort to have him recant. "Do you wish to believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God?" the doctor asked. "I have no wish to believe on that subject," Paine replied. With this testimony, how could there be any idea that Paine had recanted? Besides, other parts of the doctor's statement have been challenged as false by an eyewitness.

Well, unfortunately, some clergymen have no need for the truth to be involved in anything they say. It seems that several newspapers in the 1840s published a long article called "The Last Hours of the Great Infidel, Thomas Paine." This was in the form of a letter written by "Benedict, Bishop of Boston" (ie., Benedict Joseph Fenwick).

Bishop Fenwick (or whoever wrote the letter - Fenwick had just died) claims that he and another priest were specifically requested to call on Thomas Paine by Paine himself when he was on his deathbed. Fenwick's letter seems to be based in part on the statements of Dr.Manly and Mary Roscoe Hinsdale, who claimed she was a servant in the house where Paine was dying. Gilbert Vale, in his biography of Paine, shows that Dr.Manly was paid to perjure himself with a statement about Paine even discussing Jesus (although Manly never said that Paine recanted). Mary Roscoe never actually saw Paine when he was dying, Vale discovered. The entire matter begins to smell fishy. It becomes even more so when we are asked to believe that Paine specifically sent for two Catholic priests. We are then asked to accept that Paine, near death and in great pain and discomfort, discussed and issues raised in The Age of Reason with these two priests.

The Fenwick letter next has Paine refusing to admit that God existed, when Paine always said he believed in God. The priests then supposedly tried to convince Paine that God existed, but Paine stopped them. He supposedly also called Jesus an "imposter," a term he distinctly did not use for him in The Age of Reason, where he called him "a virtuous and amiable man." The priests then claim to have called Paine a "monster" and left the room.

The interesting thing about all this is that even if the above scenario actually happened (which is extremely unlikely), it still shows that Paine did not convert on his deathbed. It certainly provides no grounds for saying that he did. Yet this letter, plus the earlier libelous biography of Paine by James Cheetham in which he tried to paint Paine as a drunkard and a hypocrite, began these stories in circulation. Even though the charges have been forcefully refuted by subsequent biographers and historians, there are probably still today people who are opposed to Paine's ideas on religion, and who think that Paine was a drunkard who recanted his infidel beliefs on his deathbed, as all other infidels invariably do.

Let us now see what happened to other people as a result of Paine having written The Age of Reason. In 1797, a poor bookseller named Thomas Williams was tried and found guilty of selling one copy of The Age of Reason in London. The prosecution was begun by the "Society for the Suppression of Vice and Immorality." This society, encouraged by the British Government, was formed with the main purpose of fighting the influence of Paine's writings. Williams was prosecuted by Thomas Erskine, the very attorney who had defended Thomas Paine in the Rights of Man trial. Williams was sentenced to one year in prison. An appeal was made to Erskine directly by Williams' wife, who brought the attorney to her hovel of a home to show him the miserable conditions under which she presently lived. With her husband in prison, they would be considerably worse off still. Erskine was moved, but Bishop Wilberforce, head of the Vice Society, refused to go along with the request for mercy. Williams served his year in prison.

In 1812, Daniel Isaac Eaton, the publisher of the so-called "Third Part" of The Age of Reason (about which more will be said later), was convicted and sentenced to 18 months in jail for the publication of all three parts of The Age of Reason. Eaton was an old man in poor health at the time of his conviction. His conviction slowed the circulation of The Age of Reason in England for a few years, but in 1819 Richard Carlile bravely re-issued an edition of the book, as well as a number of other "blasphemous" works.

Carlile was convicted of publishing The Age of Reason and given a year and a half in jail for that. He

received an additional year and a half for publishing Elihu Palmer's Principles of Nature. In addition, he was fined £1,500. The assets of his shop were seized, but it was claimed they were not enough to satisfy the fines. Since Carlile refused to pay anything at all towards the fine, he served another three years in jail to satisfy the fines. During his trial, Carlile insistedupon reading the entire text of The Age of Reason to the jury. He then republished a transcript of the trialcontaining the entire text of the book as a way to continue the circulation of the forbidden work.He only got away with this for a short time. However, many people from all over Britain volunteered to sell Paine's works in Carlile's shop. Several dozen people were sent to jail, one after another, for doing so. Finally the government gave up, and Paine's works have been free from prosecution in the English-speaking world from then on.

Thomas Paine had at one time indicated his desire to write an additional part of The Age of Reason. This part would presumably treat the New Testament's relation to the Old Testament in more detail. An exact description of what Part 3 would have contained was never given by Paine. He never actually wrote anything which he called The Age of Reason, Part 3, although there were notes on the subject found amongst his papers.

Thomas Paine did write a lengthy essay which he called Examination of Passages in the New Testament, Quoted from the Old, and Called Prophecies of the Coming of Jesus Christ. If this was intended to be a draft or a part of Part 3, Paine never so indicated. The Examination was finally published in 1806, long after it had been written. It was first called The Age of Reason, Part 3 by Daniel Isaac Eaton, who published the first English edition of the work in 1811. In fact, Part 3 was one of the publications for which he was accused, tried and convicted of publishing. The work has often been included in editions of The Age of Reason since that time. It is an interesting and powerfully written investigation of those sections of the Old Testament (mainly Isaiah) which have been quoted by Christians as predicting the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. Paine makes short work of exposing these so-called prophecies. Much of what he said is accepted today by the more liberal Bible scholars.

We now ought to examine what the effect of The Age of Reason has been upon those who have read it. Probably more non-believers have been made by reading the Bible carefully than by reading any other book. In second place is almost certainly The Age of Reason, while Ingersoll's works probably occupy third place. Of course, the Bible is a much older work than the other two, and has therefore been available to be read for a longer time. However, Paine's book is still in print after over 180 years, which must certainlycertainly be a record for an "infidel" work.

Many people who later achieved some degree of fame have said that reading The Age of Reason in their youth had a profound effect upon their later religious outlook. Among these have been Richard Carlile, Robert Taylor, Charles Bradlaugh, Robert G.Ingersoll, Clarence Darrow and Joseph Lewis.

The comment has been made that an entire room of bookshelves could be filled with copies of different editions of The Age of Reason and with copies of the various answers to it. I cannot say that this is correct, but I do know of at least 100 different editions of the book. Of the answers, I am not so certain how many there were or how many editions of each were published. The book has also been translated into a number of foreign languages.

I remember quite well going to the library of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, where Col.Gimbel's fine Paine collection is currently housed, and asking to see all the editions of The Age of Reason published before 1900. At first they were a little hesitant to bring them all out at once, but eventually a three-level book cart, with a total of six shelves, was wheeled into the reading room. It was just about full. Of course, Gimbel's collection was far from complete for editions of The Age of Reason. No one can ever hope to have a complete collection. There were a great number of editions published by fly-by-night publishers on cheap paper. Many copies of early editions were confiscated and destroyed by the police or other "authorities." Today there are several editions which are known to have existed only because we have found advertisements for them, but no actual copies are now known to exist.

The Age of Reason is still worth reading today by believer and unbeliever alike. It still reads well and is still quite capable of converting people away from belief in the Bible as the word of God.

Re-printed from The American Rationalist c 1978 Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

BOOK REVIEW

RADICALS, SECULARISTS AND REPUBLICANS. Popular freethought in Britain, 1866-1915 by Edward Royle. xii & 380pp. Manchester University Press, £19.50. Reviewed by Robert Morrell.

IN HIS EARLIER work, Victorian Infidels (Manchester University Press, 1974), Edward Royle examined the roots of modern freethought before going on to take an in-depth view of the characters and events central to freethought during the first half of the 19th century, showing in the process just how influential the works of Thomas Paine were, particularly The Age of Reason. This new work commences at the point the previous book left off, 1866, which was the year during which some freethinkers sought to establish a body which could speak for freethought nationally. This policy was put into effect by a very able individual, Charles Bradlaugh, who aided by Charles Watts, sought to channel radical political feeling, which was coupled with a rejection of Christianity, so as to make it an effective force for change in society. The religious antagonism was a continuation of the attitude adopted by Paine towards Christianity, for he saw that cult as a major barrier against social change. With the passage of time the new body Bradlaugh formed, the National Secular Society, drifted away from politics and became identified in the public eye not so much with politics as with the criticism of religion pure and simple. The ability to compartmentalise minds was even manifested by Charles Bradlaugh, who after his election as M.P. for Northampton is said by Dr.Royle to have given no further aid to his local freethought followers.

It is clear from Dr.Royle's narrative that secularism made a major impact upon large sections of the urban working class during the last half of the 19th century, but astonishingly it also reveals that the class structure so evident in British society was also reflected in the freethought movement, for if the NSS was representative of working class unbelief, its rival, the British Secular Union, sought to sell itself as a highly respectable organisation which eschewed what it saw as the unintelligent crudity of the NSS, rejecting what it termed as people who "shouted at street corners and under railway arches." In some respects the situation in secularism reflected that in the British Labour Party at the present time with a rather unreal dispute between moderates on the one hand and what the self-styled moderates prefer to label as extremists on the other. On closer examination the "moderates" tend often to be rather more extreme than the extremists. G.J.Holyoake, the secularist pioneer of the Co-operative movement, took a "moderate" stance, adopting the title agnostic instead of atheist, as the former was more respectable. G.W.Foote, founder of The Freethinker, and Bradlaugh's successor, characterised the term agnostic as being typical of England, "the home of timidity and compromise in logic of thought." Foote aptly described agnostics as "atheists in top hats." It is a sad reflection on secularism that it supported class distinctions rather than eradicated them, even if that support was seen mainly in terms of intellectualism. It was, perhaps, inevitable that militants moved elsewhere with many able working-class secularists going over to socialism. The dilemma the secularist leadership faced was that they needed the well-off who paled in the face of militancy (though not always), but they also required the numerical strength that militancy could bring, but as Dr.Royle shows, the problem was never really overcome.

It took courage to be a secularist during the 19th century, for not only were immense social pressures brought to bear against them but the law was designed to protect the Christian cult from criticism, and this was applied viciously against secularists individually and collectively. Many secularists were sent to prison and the treatment and conditions inside effected the health of several of them badly, some certainly had their lives shortened by it, notably J.W.Gott, a remarkable character about whom I would have liked to know more. Christians, as we well know, never fail to protest vociferously about persecution, which usually means that they have lost their privileges and cannot indoctrinate children with their particular brand of superstition, but they maintain a deafening silence when it comes to their own record of persecuting those with who they differed.

Numerically secularism was never a mass movement, although it is difficult to adequately assess its real strength among the British population as a whole. Dr.Royle gives the strength of the NSS for the various years his book covers, and this shows an up and down pattern with a top strength of 3,792 for 1884 down to 860 for 1915. Mrs.Besant claimed the NSS to have had 6,000 members in 1880, but Dr.Royle holds this figure as suspect - the current membership of the NSS was recently given as 5,000, which includes Michael Foot, the newly elected leader of the Labour Party.

Radicals, Secularists and Republicans is nothing if not comprehensive. It tells us much about the national leadership of secularism, however, it is refreshing to find that Dr.Royle gives considerable coverage to grassroots secularism, and a host of little known figures flit across the pages of the book. The net result of this is to make at least one reader wish he knew more about many of them - just who was the oddly named Epenetus Earwaker other than that he spoke at open-air meetings? He even fails to make Dr.Royle's index, though the equally oddly named Malfew Seklew does - twice.

Dr.Royle has written a very important book on a subject largely neglected not only by academics but also by secularists - even the Freethought History and Bibliography Society recently closed down. It is not a cheap book, a fact that cannot help but mean that many who might benefit from reading it will probably not see it - with current inflation many libraries might not purchase it. This is to be regreted as it will be very difficult to research freethought without reference to what Dr.Royle says. Perhaps these fears may be ill-founded, but they have to be voiced. The book has an excellent bibliography, a good, though not complete, index, and is divided into three related themes - the national prganisation of freethought, the anatomy of freethought and freethought and reform. Radicals, Secularists and Republicans is marked by a very balanced treatment of its subject matter and is a major contribution to the understanding of the British freethought movement. Hopefully the author will make it a trilogy by writing another volume which brings the story up-to-the present.

THE SECOND IRON BRIDGE MYSTERY

Audrey Williamson*

THROUGHOUT 1979 THE bicentenary of the world's first iron bridge, at Coalbrookdale, was much commemorated. This bridge remains intact and was directly involved with its designer's family, the Darbys, who made such bridges possible by the invention of the strengthening process of smelting iron with coke or coal, instead of charcoal.

Largely forgotten now, outside works by civil engineers and writers on Thomas Paine is England's second iron bridge over the River Wear near Sunderland, although it was almost equally celebrated in its time. This bridge has long been claimed to have been designed by Paine.

It was erected between 1793 and 1796, when Paine was in France: first as a prisoner in the Luxembourg, where he was jailed with other foreigners whose countries were at war with revolutionary France, and afterwards as a sick man during the Directory and the rise of Napoleon.

Paine's Rights of Man in 1791 and 1792 - the second volume was devoted to arguments for ameliorating the lives of the poor through social welfare and old age pensions - had precipitated his London trial for "seditious libel," mainly because of his attacks on monarchial government in Part 1. He had missed this 1792 trial by going to France a few months before at the invitation of the then moderate revolutionary government. He had spoken against the execution of Louis XVI at the king's trial, and this did not endear him to the architects of the Terror which soon followed. In any case, having been outlawed in absentia at his own trial, Paine was in no position to return to England, and in 1802 went back to America where his close friend, Thomas Jefferson, had become President.

This explains some of his apparent inaction over the Sunderland bridge, which is still so often claimed to have been constructed to his design, although it was attributed officially at the time to Rowland Burdon. This mystery continues to be discussed, although it is not always realised that Paine's friend, the banker Sir Robert Smyth, did try to make a claim on Paine's behalf.

The answer Smyth received was equivocal, but certainly not a denial. No recompense, it was said, was possible owing to the financial situation of the firm that built it; and as an outlaw Paine was in no position to seriously pursue the matter.

How did Paine, an English-born journalist, war correspondent and for a time an official close to George Washington and his government, come even to be associated with iron bridges?

One feature of the 18th century was the active interest of prominent people in the burgeoning new discoveries of science, soon to develope into the Industrial Revolution. Paine's friends Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were both politicians and inventors (the lightning conductor is attributed to Franklin). Already before he left America, to which country he had emigrated at Franklin's suggestion not long before the outbreak of the War of Independence, Paine had been experimenting with the idea of a bridge over the Schuylkill in Pennsylvania. It was to be of a revolutionary single arch span of 400ft., designed thus to avoid the winter ice blocks which made a normal bridge impossible. A model of this was set up in Franklin's garden in Philadelphia, and on New Year's Day, 1787, it was exhibited at the State House.

It was, however, an expensive project and the American Assembly fought shy of it. Franklin advised Paine to submit his model to the Academy of Sciences in Paris, where Jefferson was now American Minister; and Paine accordingly shipped it and himself to France, where it was very highly commended by the Academy as a new extension of the application of iron, "tres ferme et tres solide." The Academy in its report had no doubts whatever that the design could be carried out with "grand succes;" but as in Lyons, where the French had attempted, as early as 1755, to build a bridge with one arch of cast iron, the Paris Academy ruled out the experiment because of its cost. Paine had hoped for the erection of such a bridge over the Seine.

Paine took the design to England, and at the Rotherham Iron Works of Walker Bros. helped to build a large model of his single arch bridge. It was originally a 90ft span, ultimately extended to 110ft.

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Paine explained the design and building of it in highly technical detail in a 16-page letter(still in the archives of the Royal Society of Arts) to Sir George Staunton, Bart, dated May 25th, 1789. Staunton commended its writer to the Society as one possessing "a Genius for Mechanics that promises much Benefit to Mankind;" but the letter was not published as he suggested, probably because Staunton shortly left on a diplomatic mission to China. The Society had asked him to request Paine to submit a drawing, but there is no record of Paine's doing so.

It is in this letter to Staunton that one finds the most meticulous description of Paine's design and experiments, which allowed for every detail of varying weather and pressure on the bridge. It included Paine's graphic, if only periphally scientific, explanation of how he had found some inspiration in the carefully studied sections of a spider's web; but his basic theory was serious, and also practical....

"A method for extending the Span and lessening the height of Arches has always been the desideratum of Bridge Architecture. These points are accomplished by this Construction. But it has other advantages. It renders Bridges capable of becoming a portable Manufacture, as they may, on this Construction be made and sent to any part of the World ready to be erected; and the time that it greatly increases the magnificence, elegance and beauty of Bridges, it considerably lessens their expense, and their appearance by repainting will ever be new - and as they may be erected in all situations where Stone Bridges can be erected-they may, moreover, be erected in certain situations, where, on account of Ice, infirm foundations in the Beds of Rivers, low shores, and various other causes, stone Bridges cannot be erected."

In fact, by the time this letter was written Paine's model had been shipped on his ingenious new "prefabrication" principle from Yorkshire to London, where it was set up outside a public house, the "stingo," near Lissom Grove in the Paddington Green area. A charge of one shilling was made to people to stand on it and test its strength. Here it remained for one year, "much visited and exeedingly admired by the Ladies," wrote Paine, "who, tho' they may not be much acquainted with Mathematical principles are certain judges of taste."

Nevertheless, once again Paine was defeated by finance. His American business partner fell into difficulties and the model was shipped back to Walker Bros, who had some claim on it to cover their costs. Edmund Burke (who visited the Rotherham works when the model was under construction) had moved away from his friend Paine's political position and attacked the young French Revolution in a classic which Paine felt bound to challenge. And this challenge, Rights of Man, took Paine finally away from the peaceful world of iron bridges.

When Walker Bros built the second English iron bridge in 1793, to span the River Wear, it was ostesibly to the design of Rowland Burdon, a former M.P., who put up most of the money. Yet this claim was so constantly attacked that in 1859 Burdon's clergyman son felt obliged to publish a long "Letter" attempting to vindicate his father, with technical arguments which were strong although not as conclusive as he thought. Charles Hutton, Charles C. Schneider (a President of the American Society of Civil Engineers) and other authorities on bridges continued to ascribe the bridge to Paine, but without, it would seem, comparison of Paine's letter and patient with the actual design.

Certainly there were weaknesses in the bridge which caused ominous rockings within a few years, and when Burdon's son wrote it had long disappeared. Comparing the Burdon and Paine ideas it would seem that the bridge was mainly of cast iron, whereas Paine's was mainly of wrought (or malleable) iron. More seriously, Burdon used open blocks of iron, each block being itself a distinct keystone, as his son pointed out; and he kept "the usual form and principle of the stone arch," merely ensuring greater lightness by the use of iron instead of stone. Paine, on the other hand, had foreseen a totally new construction principle to make the fullest possible use of the new material; and it is his ideal which has survived the test of time.

It is interesting that Burdon had studied architecture for a time under Sir John Soane (of Soane's Museum), and a drawing or copy drawing of Soane's (reproduced in a recent book by Ted Ruddock, Arch Bridges and their Builders, published by Cambridge University Press) is labelled in Soane's handwriting, "A slight Sketch of Thos Paine's patient cast Iron Bridge proposed to be executed over the Rivèr Wear near Sunderland." As Ruddock points out, the shape of the main curved bars suggest that these were probably of wrought and not cast iron. It seems Soane received this drawing from Burdon; so why the attribution to Paine? Another mystery.

The Science Museum in London has a finer drawing which came to it early in the 19th century, purporting to be Paine's own. It is a very different design, showing three arches - but this, of course, does not invalidate it. As Alan Butcher, Assistant Keeper in the Museum's Department of Mechanical and Civil Engineering, points out, Paine's patent states "when this arch is to be applied to the purpose of of a bridge which requires more arches than one...." and goes on at length to describe arrangements

precisely reflected by the drawing. Mr.Butcher's conclusion is that the drawing is probably Paine's, and is most likely one of several done in explaining his ideas to the Walkers in 1789.

What seems clearly possible is that Paine's design, which was certainly not originally envisaged for the River Wear span of 240ft (Paine hoped for erection over the Thames as well as the Seine), was seen by Burdon at Walker Bros, and he adapted it to his own (as it proved) less durable design, using at least some of the materials of Paine's model.

In the end, it was Paine, in his civil engineering as in his political writings, who built bridges to the future. The iron bridge over the Wear lives on in pictures on collectors' pieces: Staffordshire china mugs, plates and similar souvenirs. But it was Paine who anticipated pre-fabrication and the catenary of the suspension bridge, even if the famous Wear bridge was not based on another and quite different bridge design by Paine.

Postcript

Since my article on Thomas Paine's iron bridge design, and the bridge over the Wear near Sunderland erected in 1793-96 and attributed to Rowland Burdon, further material has been brought to my notice by Mr.Alan Butcher, of the Science Museum, London, and Mr.W.L.Goodman, an authority and author on historical craftsmanship, of Bristol. This shows that the Wearmouth bridge, although weakened by structural faults, did not disappear as early as some authorities claim.

It was, in fact, extensively altered, strengthened and repaired by Robert Stephenson in 1858 (as a lithograph made after this date shows), and a new steel arch structure only replaced it in 1929.

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