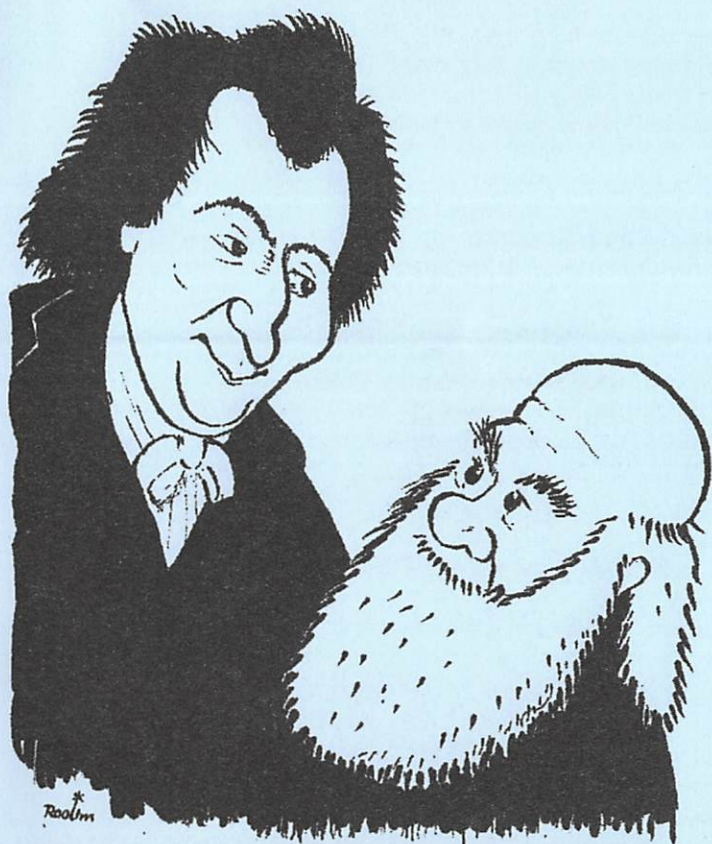


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***200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Thomas Paine.***

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**Cover**

Thomas Paine meets Charles Darwin specially drawn for the TPS by Donald Roum. 1009 marked not just the anniversary of the death of Paine but also the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, as was *The Age of Reason* in which Paine expresses his belief in creation. But what if he had encountered Darwinian evolution, would he have converted? Paine was a keen student of science, so we might conclude he would have. However, this is a matter of what if, to which no absolute answer can be made - or could it?

# An Appreciation and Summary of Thomas Paine's Classic *Age of Reason*

By David Cortesi

Thomas Paine's reputation among those who have not read his work – as I had not, before I sat down with *Age of Reason* not long ago – is as a somewhat scandalous free-thinker. According to A.J.Ayer, on whose 1988 critical biography *Thomas Paine* I have relied in preparing this appreciation, "As late as the beginning of this century, Theodore Roosevelt, twenty-sixth president of the United States, chose to refer to Thomas Paine as a 'filthy little atheist.'" Had you asked me, I would have guessed Paine to be an atheist, although omitting the adjectives. The truth is that, although Paine was a ferocious enemy of religion, he was not at all an atheist.

## Introduction

What you notice first about *Age of Reason* is Paine's resonant style. His words have a paradoxical impact because his grammar and vocabulary are so simple. He gets great impact from a series of one-syllable words, as in the well-known phrases "My own mind is my own church," or "These are the times that try men's souls." Some of the most pungent paragraphs of *Age of Reason* are crafted entirely of words of one and two syllables.

Was the book all rhetoric, or did it present reasoned argument? Was it an antique or could it speak to modern readers? I read it carefully; I checked some of Paine's Biblical assertions; then I wrote this Appreciation in order to come to better terms with the book.

In the end I found arguments that are sensible and detailed – although put forward in vitriolic, impassioned rhetoric – and behind them an amazingly up-to-date mind, one that could easily adapt to modern cosmology and notions of "emergent" phenomena. Paine the philosopher deserves to be better-known, especially among technologists.

## The Opening Theme

*Age of Reason* is in two parts that were originally written and published a year apart. Paine set forth his own creed at the outset of the first part.

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow creatures happy.

However, he wastes no time demonstrating why conventional believers find

him uncomfortable:

I do not believe in the creed professed by...the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my church. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

These are the two main themes of the two volumes that comprise *Age of Reason*: A case for Deism, the belief that God can only be apprehended by rational study of the creation; and an energetic, passionate, and reasoned attack on the legitimacy of all organized religions, and in particular on the legitimacy of Christian dogma.

## Attack on Revelation

Paine wastes no words on attacking the behaviour of churches or religionists. He realizes that an attack on the basis of behaviour, however bad the behaviour might be, is only peripheral and can easily be defended. Are the priests of some church venal? Well, they are only weak humans, and in any event their divinely-ordained rituals are still efficacious. Does some church sanction violence? Well, there are historical or cultural excuses, and in any event, this other church does not, what about it? And so forth.

Instead, Paine attacks directly the one claim that has to be the anchor of every church's dogma: that the church does the work of a Deity as revealed by the Deity.

Every national church or religion has established itself by pretending some special mission from God, communicated to certain individuals...Each of those churches show certain books, which they call revelation, or the word of God.

Paine mentions the Judaical scriptures, the Christian Bible, and the "Turkish" Koran (the Ottoman empire was the chief Islamic power of his day). How he would have relished having the *Book of Mormon* or *Science and Health* for further examples!

Paine takes the axe of his rhetoric directly to this core concept, the very idea of "revelation," as a message from God to a human.

No one will deny or dispute the power of the Almighty to make such a communication, if he pleases. But admitting, for the sake of a case, that something has been revealed to a certain person, and not revealed to any other person, it is revelation to that person only. When he tells it to a second person, a second to a third,... and so on, it ceases to be a revelation to all those persons. It is revelation to the first person only, and hearsay to every other, and consequently they are not obliged to believe it. It is a contradiction in terms and ideas to call anything a revelation that comes to us at second-hand, either verbally or in writing.

He expands on this point for a few pages, but the fundamental thrust is home: the only proof that a particular scripture is a divine revelation is the assertion by a series of people that it is. Because all those reporters are human and capable of being deceived (and of deceiving), one has no reason to treat a scripture any differently than any other piece of reportage. Unless, of course,

you can find something in the scripture that could not have been composed by human mind. Paine doesn't expect you will. For example, the commands claimed by Moses to have been given by God,

...carry no internal evidence of divinity with them; they contain some good moral precepts, such as any man qualified to be a lawgiver, or a legislator, could produce himself, without having recourse to supernatural intervention.

Revelation, if it happens, is personal and cannot demand the belief of any other than its recipient. But Paine says there are other reasons to distrust scriptures of all kinds. First, it is trivial and demeaning to call simple history "revelation" or "inspired":

For if I have done a thing, or seen it done, it needs no revelation to tell me I have done it, or seen it... Revelation, therefore, cannot be applied to anything done upon earth, of which man himself is the actor or the witness; and consequently all the historical and anecdotal parts of the Bible, which is almost the whole of it, is not within the meaning and compass of the word revelation, and, therefore, is not the word of God...When we contemplate the immensity of that Being who directs and governs the incomprehensible WHOLE, of which the utmost ken of human sight can discover but a part, we ought to feel shame at calling such paltry stories the word of God.

Most important, human language is simply inadequate as a container for anything called divine:

...we must necessarily affix the idea, not only of unchangeableness, but of the utter impossibility of any change taking place, by any means or accident whatever, in that which we would honour with the name of the word of God; and therefore the word of God cannot exist in any written or human language.

The continually progressive change to which the meaning of words is subject, the want of a universal language which renders translations necessary, the errors to which translations are again subject, the mistakes of copyists and printers, together with the possibility of wilful alteration, are of themselves evidences that the human language, whether in speech or in print, cannot be the vehicle of the word of God.

But is not revelation verified by miracles? Of course not, Paine says, and gives three reasons. First, we don't know the extent of the laws of nature, and second, miracles can be faked.

As, therefore, we know not the extent to which either nature or art can go, there is no positive criterion to determine what a miracle is, and mankind, in giving credit to appearances, under the idea of there being miracles, are subject to be continually imposed upon.

But third, report of a miracle is simply ineffective as an inducement to belief; even supposing the miracle occurred, the very report of it invites disbelief:

If...we see an account given of such a miracle by the person who said he saw it, it raises a question in the mind very easily decided, which is, is it more probable that nature should go out of her course, or that a man should tell a lie?...it is more difficult to obtain belief to a miracle, than to a principle evidently moral without any miracle.

This is a restatement of Hume's maxim on the miraculous, from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "When anyone tells me that he saw a

dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened." Hume's work was published in 1758 and it is hard to imagine Paine would not have known of it. Paine's prose, as usual, is the more pungent.

## Deism

If no prophet or scripture can be trusted, what is left? Paine said he believes in a God; where would he read the Deity's nature? As befits an old revolutionary, his answer is at once radical, egalitarian, and liberating.

The WORD OF GOD IS THE CREATION WE BEHOLD and it is in *this word*, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man.

...The Creation speaketh an universal language, independently of human speech or human language...It is an ever-existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed....In fine, do we want to know what God is? Search not the book called the Scripture, which any human hand might make, but the Scripture called the Creation.

This is the key tenet of Deism, and the point that Paine most wanted to convey.

At this point, Paine articulates versions of the First Cause and Design arguments for God's existence. But he does not simply state them; he uses them as a springboard to advocate reason as the tool for religious understanding. He arrives at a conclusion that ought to make him the patron philosopher of every scientist or technologist:

That which is now called natural philosophy, embracing the whole circle of science, of which astronomy occupies the chief place, is the study of the works of God, and of the power and wisdom of God in his works, and is the true theology.

In a lengthy argument, Paine uses the geometry of the triangle to show that "mechanics," the practical application of science, is based on universal principles that are discovered, not invented, by man. "It is the structure of the universe that has taught this knowledge to man," he says. But the same power of reason that enables us to discover and use the creation cannot stomach what is called theology:

...it is certain that what is called the Christian system of faith...[is] irreconcilable, not only to the divine gift of reason that God hath given to man, but to the knowledge that man gains of the power and wisdom of God, by the aid of the sciences and by studying the structure of the universe that God has made.

It is almost eerie for a modern reader to see that phrase "the structure of the universe" used twice, clearly in the sense we use it, but in a book published in 1794. How delighted Paine would have been, if he could have watched the unfolding of modern cosmology as it discovers ever deeper and stranger aspects of the structure of the universe.

## **The Writing of *Age of Reason***

Paine was a failure at business and marriage when he emigrated to the American colonies. The political ferment of the time awakened him to his true talent, a genius for arguing a cause. He published the pamphlet *Common Sense* early in 1776, and by the end of the year it had sold 150,000 copies -- in a country that had a population of a few million, where all news moved by horse or sail. The pamphlet played a decisive part (says biographer Ayer) in turning public opinion toward secession and away from accommodation with England. During the war Paine published more pamphlets, the first of which begins with the famous sentences

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.

In 1787 Paine returned to England, mainly to promote his design for an iron bridge. In 1790 the conservative philosopher Edmund Burke published a criticism of the French Revolution and a defence of privilege and a stratified society. This inflamed Paine, who immediately wrote and published his greatest work, *The Rights of Man*, an eloquent and detailed proposal for a democratic state based on universal (male) suffrage, with no unearned privilege and with features such as salaries for legislators, public health care, public education, and old-age pensions, all to be paid for by a graduated income tax. Each of these was a novel idea at the time.

*The Rights of Man* was an immediate best-seller, but was also quickly ruled "seditious libel" by the British Government. Paine fled to France just ahead of an order for his arrest. The Crown tried and convicted him in absentia, and he never set foot in England again alive. Printers who sold his book were convicted and sentenced to jail or transportation, but the book continued to sell, ultimately passing 300,000 copies.

Meanwhile the French welcomed him, made him an honorary citizen, elected him a representative to the National Convention, and appointed him to the committee that was compiling a new constitution. But this was the beginning of the Terror, when anyone not affiliated with the cadre in power was subject to arrest at any time, and dozens were taken from cells to the guillotine every day. Later Paine would write

The intolerant spirit of Church persecutions had transferred itself into politics; the tribunal styled revolutionary, supplied the place of an inquisition...I saw many of my most intimate friends destroyed, others daily carried to prison, and I had reason to believe, and had also intimations given to me, that the same danger was approaching myself.

In this feverish climate Paine sat down and wrote that "it has been my intention, for several years past, to publish my thoughts upon religion," and, continuing through the arguments summarized above, concluded the first part of *Age of Reason* (only 68 pages) with

...if ever a universal religion should prevail, it will not be by believing anything new, but in getting rid of redundancies...in the meantime, let every man follow, as he has a right to do, the religion and the worship he prefers.

The day he wrote that, guards came from the revolutionary government to arrest him. They were courteous enough to let Paine detour past the house of a friend and drop off the manuscript on the way to jail. The work was published as a pamphlet while he was in prison.

There he stayed for eight months, never sure when he might be taken out to have his head removed. The US representative in Paris, Gouverneur Morris, was an enemy of Paine's, and did nothing to obtain his release, while reporting to the government at home that the Revolutionary Council had refused to release him.

When Jefferson succeeded Washington as president, he sent a new ambassador, James Monroe (himself later President). Monroe was a Paine supporter, and quickly secured Paine's release. Paine was very ill, and spent months recuperating in Monroe's house. But as soon as he could write, he resumed work on the second part of *Age of Reason*.

## Flaming the Church

The pamphlet edition of the first part of *Age of Reason* had already drawn criticism. As was only to be expected, most of the of rebuttals were couched in Christian terms. Perhaps this is why, in the longer second part, Paine aims less at defining Deism as a distinct belief, and focuses on the negative task of demolishing Christian doctrine, and in particular on discrediting the Bible as a reliable document. In truth, Deism is such a spartan doctrine, the few pages he spends on it are probably sufficient. Whatever his motive, Paine swings away at the Bible with a fine iconoclastic energy.

Biographer A. J. Ayer seems to find Paine's detailed and sarcastic deconstruction of Biblical absurdities to be somehow quaint, barely relevant. "At the time that Paine wrote *Age of Reason*," he explains, "the view of orthodox Christians was that the Bible was the word of God. For example, in the case of the Old Testament, it was believed that God dictated the books of the Pentateuch to Moses and the book of Samuel to Samuel, and that it was through divine inspiration that Solomon wrote his Proverbs and David his Psalms."

Perhaps in the rational cloisters of Oxford, where Ayer writes, such beliefs are today only historical footnotes. And in fact there are no respected biblical scholars today who think that any books of the Bible (apart from some of Paul's epistles) were written by their eponymous authors. When Paine wrote, there was no such thing as biblical scholarship, in the sense of learned, non-sectarian, non-judgemental scrutiny of the Bible as a text. There was plenty of study of the Bible, but the scholars who undertook it always started with a deeply-held belief in the inerrancy and divine inspiration of the text – reading the Bible only to seek further evidence of its presumed perfection.

Outside Oxford, this is frequently still the case today. Belief in the literal, word-by-word truth of the Bible is by no means dead in this country. You do not have to go far to find people who can be shocked to the core and deeply angered by an assertion that the Gospel according to Mark might not have been written by a personal companion of Jesus named Mark. And even less-fundamental Christians commonly regard the Bible with a vaguely worshipful



attitude, treat it as a sanctified artefact, and think it is at least disrespectful, possibly even blasphemous, to examine its text in any critical way.

Paine had no such qualms. He says he had not had a Bible at hand while writing the first part of his book. But his critics:

...will now find that I have furnished myself with a Bible and a Testament; and I can say also that I have found them to be much worse books than I had conceived. If I have erred in anything in the first part of the *Age of Reason*, it has been in speaking better of some parts of those books than they have deserved.

With that he sets out to examine the Bible coldly, as a text, and to point out the grosser absurdities, contradictions, and barbarities that he finds littered through it. What is refreshing about Paine's approach is that he does not simply fulminate; nor does he appeal to science or philosophy. Any such approach would lead only to empty word-wars with the theologians. He adopts a simpler, and more deadly, approach.

The evidence that I shall produce in this case is from the books themselves, and I shall confine myself to this evidence only. Were I to refer for proof to any of the ancient authors whom the advocates of the Bible call profane authors, they would controvert that authority, as I controvert theirs; I will therefore meet them on their own ground, and oppose them with their own weapon, the Bible.

## The Old Testament

The first seventy-odd pages that follow are primarily devoted to demolishing the notion that any books of the Old Testament could possibly have been written by Moses or by any other character who is named in them. This is really quite evident, if you only examine the text without preconception. Paine takes the books in turn, exposing in each at least one statement that cannot be true if the book is written by its legendary author. Here are two brief examples to demonstrate his methods. Of Deuteronomy,

After telling that Moses went to the top of Pisgah...he [the author of Deuteronomy] tells us that Moses died there in the land of Moab, and that he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab; but as there is no antecedent to the pronoun he, there is no knowing who he was that did bury him. If the writer meant that he (God) buried him, how should he (the writer) know it? or why should we (the readers) believe him? since we know not whom the writer was that tells us so, for certainly Moses could not himself tell where he was buried.

After finishing with the Pentateuch, Paine returns to Genesis to observe verse 36:31

"And these are the kings that reigned in Edom, before there reigned any king over the children of Israel." ... [This passage] could only have been written after the first king began to reign over them; and consequently, that the book of Genesis, so far from having been written by Moses, could not have been written till the time of Saul at least...but the expression, any king, implies more kings than one...and if taken in a general sense, it carries it through all the time of the Jewish monarchy.

And by the way,

this verse that I have quoted, and all the remaining verses of the 36th chapter of Genesis, are word for word in the first chapter of Chronicles, beginning at the 43rd verse.

As indeed they are. Intrigued, I verified this and some others of Paine's reports of contradictions and found no mistakes. For example, he later notes

As one proof, among others I shall produce, to show the disorder in which this pretended word of God, the Bible, has been put together, and the uncertainty of who the authors were, we have only to look at the first three verses of Ezra, and the last two in Chronicles; for by what kind of cutting and shuffling has it been that the first three verses in Ezra should be the two last verses in Chronicles, or that the last two in Chronicles should be the first three in Ezra?

Given his remarks in the first part of the book on the fallibility of any written text, he relishes finding this and other proofs of just such failings, which show the disorder and ignorance in which the Bible has been put together, and that the compilers of it had no authority for what they were doing, nor we any authority for believing what they have done.

While passing through the Old Testament he reacts to some of the barbarous cruelties it celebrates.

When we read...that they (the Israelites) came by stealth upon whole nations of people, who...had given them no offence; that they put all those nations to the sword; that they spared neither age nor infancy; that they utterly destroyed men, women, and children; that they left not a soul to breathe -- expressions that are repeated over and over again...are we sure all these things are fact? are we sure that the Creator of man commissioned these things to be done? and are we sure that the books that tell us so were written by his authority?

## **The New Testament**

After 75 pages of going "through the Bible, as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder, and fell trees," Paine turns to the New Testament and in particular to the four Gospels. When he wrote, belief was that the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were personal reportage from the pens of four of Jesus' twelve apostles (a belief not uncommon today in some quarters, as I mentioned). It was this belief that Paine assumed and set out to undermine. He had no difficulty in seeing that

The disordered state of the history in those four books, the silence of one book on matters related in the other, and the disagreement that is to found among them, implies that they are the production of some unconnected individuals, many years after the things that they pretend to relate, each of whom made his own legend; and not the writings of men living intimately together...in fine, that they have been manufactured, as the books of the Old Testament have been, by other persons than those whose names they bear.

Today, nonfundamentalist scholars think this is exactly the case, but it was by no means the common opinion in the 18th century. (For an accessible, readable analysis of the history and content of the Gospels, see *Asimov's*

*Guide to the New Testament.*) Paine opens his treatment of the Gospels by saying

I lay it down as a position which cannot be controverted, that the agreement of all parts of a story does not prove the story to be true, because the parts may agree and the whole may be false; secondly, that the disagreement of the parts of a story proves the whole cannot be true. The agreement does not prove true, but the disagreement proves falsehood positively.

This established, he notes the complete disagreement between Matthew's and Luke's genealogies of Jesus.

The first chapter of Matthew begins with giving a genealogy of Jesus Christ; and in the third chapter of Luke, there is also given a genealogy of Jesus Christ. Did those two agree, it would not prove the genealogy to be true...but as they contradict each other in every particular, it proves the falsehood absolutely.

For the reader's convenience, Paine sets out a table of the 28 generations cited by Matthew and the 43 given by Luke, so you can easily see that it is "only the two names of David and Joseph that are alike in the two lists."

Now, if these men...set out with a falsehood between them...in the very commencement of their history...what authority...is there left for believing the strange things they tell us afterward? If they cannot be believed in their account of his natural genealogy, how are we to believe them when they tell us he was the son of God begotten by a ghost, and that an angel announced this in secret to his mother?

And in a strange inverted prevision of Pascal's Wager, Paine pleads

Can any man of serious reflection hazard his future happiness upon the belief of a story naturally impossible...and related by persons already detected of falsehood? Is it not more safe that we stop ourselves at the plain, pure, and unmixed belief of one God, which is Deism, than that we commit ourselves on an ocean of improbable, irrational, indecent and contradictory tales?

Continuing, he cites the contradictions in even the simplest matters of fact. Mark says the crucifixion was at the nine in the morning, John says at noon. Each of the four books cites the written inscription supposed to be put above Christ on the cross, yet no two quote the same words. "We may infer from these circumstances, trivial as they are, that those writers, whoever they were, and in whatever time they lived, were not present at the scene."

Paine has high sarcastic fun with the apocalyptic account in Mark of events at the crucifixion (the veil in the temple rent, darkness, earthquake, graves opening) which is not corroborated by any of the other books. The books contradict each other about the events at the tomb and after. Matthew says that eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain, where they saw the resurrected Jesus. But Luke and John say the disciples were assembled in secret in Jerusalem, and Jesus appeared among them. Mark says Jesus ascended to heaven immediately after the meeting in the room; Luke says Christ led them out as far as Bethany. "Yet this is the evidence," Paine says earlier, "and these are the books that have been imposed on the world, as being given by Divine inspiration, and as the unchangeable word of God."

## **Immortality**

Leaving the Gospels, Paine turns to the epistles of Paul; and this provokes him to discuss his own thoughts on immortality. It most offends Paine that "the doctrine he [Paul] sets out to prove by argument is the resurrection of the same body..."

[But] if I have already died in this body, and am raised again in the same body...it is presumptive evidence that I shall die again...The Personal powers of man are so limited, and his heavy frame so little constructed to extensive enjoyment, that there is nothing to induce us to wish the opinion of Paul to be true.

In these words I think I can hear the voice of an ill, aging man. But this is also the first place at which Paine is less than careful in his reading of the Bible. Paul explicitly says the resurrected body is not the same tired one (I Corinthians 15:42-44), and Luke has Jesus address the same point (Luke 20:35-6).

Is Paine guilty of the debater's trick of setting up a straw-man argument? No; he turns immediately to his own alternative vision of resurrection. It does not involve bodies at all, and like all Paine's notions, it is original. Indulge me as I quote at length, as it is so original, and stands out as an oasis of constructive philosophy in a long trek of criticism.

[The consciousness of existence is the only conceivable idea we can have of another life, and the continuance of that consciousness is immortality. The consciousness of existence, or the knowing that we exist, is not necessarily confined to the same form, nor to the same matter, even in this life.

We have not in all cases the same form, nor in any case the same matter that composed our bodies twenty or thirty years ago; and yet we are conscious of being the same persons...[W]e know not how much, or rather how little, of our composition it is, and how exquisitely fine that little is, that creates in us this consciousness of existence; and all beyond that is like the pulp of a peach, distinct and separate from the vegetative speck in the kernel.

Who can say by what exceedingly fine action of fine matter it is that a thought is produced in what we call the mind? and yet that thought when produced, as I now produce the thought I am writing, is capable of becoming immortal, and is the only production of man that has that capacity...[P]rint and reprint a thought a thousand times over, and that with materials of any kind...the thought is eternally and identically the same thought...if, then, the thing produced has in itself a capacity of being immortal, it is more than a token that the power that produced it, which is the self-same thing as the consciousness of existence, can be immortal also; and that as independently of the matter it was first connected with, as the thought is of the printing or writing it first appeared in...it is not more difficult to believe that we shall exist hereafter in a better state and form than at present, than that a worm should become a butterfly, and quit the dunghill for the atmosphere...

This passage has an astounding modernity. Early in the book, Paine used "the structure of the universe" almost the way a modern cosmologist would use it. Here he comes within a hair of arguing that consciousness is a pattern or arrangement, independent of the medium on which it appears. It's as if

Paine had eavesdropped on a lecture by, say, Douglas Hofstadter, 200 years in his future.

Note, by the way, that Paine is not at all arguing for a "soul" in different words. There are profound differences between the Cartesian soul, a kind of indestructible essence attached to but separate from the body, and a pattern, or Paine's "consciousness of existence." A pattern can persist forever, but it cannot exist apart from a medium, and it can be disrupted and erased forever.

Paine does not follow up his idea in any depth. He does not speculate, for example, on what medium might carry his "consciousness of existence" after the end of his body.

## Deism and Christianity

Belatedly noting Paul's remarks on resurrection, Paine devotes some paragraphs of heavy-handed sarcasm to them, and then finally rests his prosecution by summing up the logical bind in which his exposure of its contradictions has placed the Christian scriptures.

The evidence I have produced to prove them forgeries is extracted from the books themselves, and acts, like a two-edged sword, either way. If the evidence be denied, the authenticity of the scriptures is denied with it; for it is scripture evidence; and if the evidence be admitted, the authenticity of the books is disproved.

In his conclusion, Paine restates the argument against revelation, and reminds the reader of the violence and barbarity recounted so approvingly in the Old Testament.

The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that have afflicted the human race have had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion...the Jews made no converts, they butchered all.

And Christians can't claim the loving-kindness of the New Testament exonerates them, since "the ministers preach from both books." Therefore,

It is incumbent on every man who reverences the character of the Creator, and who wishes to lessen the catalogue of artificial miseries...to expel all ideas of revealed religion.

Is there no good in the Bible? Only accidentally, for

the fragments of morality that are irregularly and thinly scattered in these books...are the natural dictates of the conscience...and are nearly the same in all religions and in all societies.

In a footnote, Paine notes Solon's description of the most perfect government, "That where the least injury done to the meanest individual, is considered as an insult on the whole constitution," as a precept superior to any in the New Testament. Solon, Paine carefully notes, lived about 500 years before Christ. Again he contrasts Deism to conventional religions, and incidentally shows again that he is himself no atheist.

If we consider the nature of our condition here, we must see that there is no occasion for such a thing as revealed religion. What is it we want to know? Does not the creation, the universe we behold, preach to us the existence of an Almighty Power that governs and regulates the

whole? And is not the evidence that this creation holds out to our senses infinitely stronger than anything we can read in a book that any impostor might make and call the word of God? As for morality, the knowledge of it exists in every man's conscience.

Yet Paine apparently recognizes that different minds must interpret the open book of Creation differently. Lacking an accepted revelation to supply a mandatory uniformity, there will be doubt. But doubt is not a problem! It an absolute necessity, because

We must know also that the power that called us into being, can, if he please, and when he pleases, call us to account for the manner in which we have lived here; and, therefore, without seeking any other motive for the belief, it is rational to believe that he will, for we know beforehand that he can. The probability or even the possibility of the thing is all that we ought to know; for if we knew it for a fact, we should be the mere slaves of terror; our belief would have no merit, and our best actions no virtue.

It is the coercive nature of revealed religion, and its absurd complexities as compared to Deism, that makes Christianity "render the heart torpid," he says. Always the political thinker, he never forgets the political purposes that religion can serve.

As an engine of power, it serves the purpose of despotism; and as a means of wealth, the avarice of priests. [and later] It has been the scheme of the Christian church, and of all the other invented systems of religion, to hold man in ignorance of the Creator, as it is of Government to hold man in ignorance of his rights. The systems of the one are as false as those of the other, and are calculated for mutual support.

In the final paragraphs Paine turns his resonant voice again to the praise of natural science.

The Bible of the creation is inexhaustible in texts. Every part of science, whether connected with the geometry of the universe, with the systems of animal and vegetable life, or with the properties of inanimate matter, is a text as well for devotion as for philosophy—for gratitude as for human improvement. It will perhaps be said, that if such a revolution in the system of religion takes place, every preacher ought to be a philosopher. Most certainly; and every house of devotion a school of science.

## The Aftermath

Paine finally returned to the United States in 1802. He was 65, not in good health, and in bad odor with almost everyone. However much he might have intended to promote the purity of Deism, what people remembered (or more commonly, all they heard as sensational gossip) was his attack on Christianity. The distinction between belief in a God, and hatred for the religion through which most people had received their notions of God, was entirely too fine for the average person to grasp or care about. From the moment of publication of *Age of Reason* Paine was an atheist in popular opinion.

In addition, he offended powerful figures that might have been his patrons. He blamed ex-President Washington for failing to rescue him from prison; and he published a series of letters strongly attacking the Federalist party for failing to hold to the democratic principles of the American Revolution.

Thomas Jefferson, now in office as President, still supported him, but other old friends refused to speak to him; and he was denounced from pulpits in many towns. At one point, when he tried to book a ride on a stagecoach, the owner of the line refused to carry him, apparently because one of his stages had once been struck by lightning and he didn't want to risk it happening again. At the end of this journey, Paine and a friend were run out of Trenton by an angry mob. Friends and disciples turned enemy, either because of his "atheism" or because of personal quarrels.

Paine died in 1809. It was his wish to be buried in a Quaker cemetery, but the Quakers denied the request. He was first interred on the outskirts of a farm he owned in New Rochelle. In a final bizarre chapter to his life, an admirer, one William Cobbett, had Paine's corpse dug up and brought to England, where he attempted to raise money for a monument by exhibiting the corpse. This endeavour failed. After Cobbett's estate was sold, Paine's body passed through several hands and eventually disappeared. As Paine wrote of Moses, "There is no knowing who he was that did bury him."

Perhaps it is just as well. "I here close the subject," he wrote, and I leave the ideas that are suggested in the conclusion of the work, to rest on the mind of the reader; certain as I am, that when opinions are free, either in matters of government or religion, truth will finally and powerfully prevail.

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#### WONDERFUL MAGAZINE



D - V I - B - S

*A wonderful Magazine, published by the author, Thomas Paine, in the year 1793, and containing a full and complete history of the American Revolution, from its commencement to the present time. It is a most interesting and useful work, and is now published in a new and enlarged edition. It is sold by all the booksellers in America, and is highly recommended by the friends of Liberty and Justice.*

This curious handbill of 1793, or thereabouts, advertising a magazine called *The Wonderful World*, shows a man outside a bookshop with a small poster at the side advertising a life of Thomas Paine - was it supposed to depict him?

## THOMAS, DO NOT PUBLISH IT!

A letter supposedly sent to Paine by Benjamin Franklin

*This letter is said to have been first published by William Temple Franklin, Benjamin Franklin's grandson, and was supposedly sent to Paine by his grandfather. Considering that he was on his own admission a life-long deist, the sentiments in it are clearly not his. So who wrote it and for why? It is printed here out of interest.*

Dear Sir,

I have read your manuscript with some attention. By the argument it contains against a particular Providence, though you allow a general Providence, you strike at the foundations of all religion. For without the belief of a Providence, that takes cognizance of, guards, and guides, and may favor particular persons, there is no motive to worship a Deity, to fear his displeasure, or to pray for his protection. I will not enter into an discussion of your principles, though you seem to desire it. At present I shall only give you my opinion, that, though your reasonings are subtle, and may prevail with some readers, you will not succeed so as to change the general sentiments of mankind on that subject, and the consequence of printing this piece will be a great deal of odium drawn upon yourself, mischief to you, and no benefit to others. He that spits in the wind, spits in his own face.

But, were you to succeed, do you imagine any good would be done by it? You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous life, without the assistance afforded by religion; you having a clear perception of the advantages of virtue, and the disadvantages of vice, and possessing a strength of resolution sufficient to enable you to resist common temptations. But think how a great portion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced, inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their virtue, and retain them in the practice of it till it become *habitual*, which is the great point for its security. And perhaps you are indebted to her originally, that is, to your religious education, for the habits of virtue upon which you now justly value yourself, You



might easily display your excellent talents of reasoning upon a less hazardous subject, and therefore obtain a rank with our most distinguished authors. For among us it is not necessary, as among the Hottentots, that a youth, to be raised into the company of men, should prove his manhood by beating his mother.

I would advise you, therefore, not to attempt unchaining the tiger, but to burn this piece before it is seen by any other person; whereby you will save yourself a great deal of mortification by the enemies it may raise up against you, and perhaps a great deal of regret and repentance. If men as so wicked with religion, what would they be without it. I intend this letter itself as a proof of my friendship, and therefore add no professions to it; but subscribe simply yours,

B. Franklin.

Unsourced copy provided by Ann Kalloudis.



A caricature by Robert Cruikshank showing William Cobbett flying home with Thomas Paine's bones. *Morrell Paine Library.*

# REGARDING THOMAS PAINE

Claire Rayner

"The moment we begin to reason upon the hereditary system, it falls into derision,, let but a single idea begin and a thousand will soon follow. Insignificance, Imbecility, childhood, dotage, want of moral character, in fine, every defect, serious or laughable, unite to hold up the hereditary system as a figure of ridicule".

Thomas Paine: *First Principles of Government*, 1795.

When Thomas Paine died two hundred years ago he was the most noted radical thinker of his age. He wrote a great deal on politics and philosophy, including two of the most important books in English, *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*.

He supported the American Revolution and fought against the King of England and contributed to the Declaration of Independence. He took part in the French Revolution, declaring himself a Republican, wanting to see the monarchy overthrown and France a Republic. All remarkable activities for a boy born in the country market town of Thetford in East Anglia to follow his father's trade as a corset maker!

But enough of a great man's history. There have been many great men and women who have left legacies of wise words and inspiring action, but few who have provided modern radicals with so-called revolutionary ideas quite so relevant to our hopes and aspirations. What is as interesting as Thomas Paine's past is what he might choose to fight for in the present.

It isn't guesswork to list the causes he would now support, his books, pamphlets and papers make his thinking abundantly clear.

The monarchy would have been his first target. He did not think it right that one person should inherit a throne in which to sit in pomp above the citizenry. He would think so today. The Windsor family who occupy and own so much of Britain (the eldest son of the current monarch has become obscenely rich because of his

inherited lollipop, the Duchy of Cornwall, on which he pays a fraction of the taxes he should, just as his mother does from her massive income) living in great palaces and country houses for which we, the citizens of this country have contributed large chunks of our taxes and of which we actually own, while people too poor to pay taxes live in squalid housing estates or sleep rough on the streets. The Windsor's seem sublimely unaware of such "subjects" existence, let alone showing concern about our welfare.

Like today's British Republicans Paine would not choose to chop their heads off a la Française but would strip them of most of their assets for public use, leaving them enough to live in moderately sized houses where they would be expected to seek real jobs.

The monarch's 'job' would be filled by an elected Head of State, a well regarded non-politically active person who would be intelligent, wise and lacking any desire for riches or pompous living and unable to influence the Government, although available as a confident if asked (a sort of relationship guidance counsellor). After all, the job requires only handshaking of visiting Heads of State, factory inspecting, admiring babies and acceptances of bunches of flowers.

Reform of Parliament would be an inevitable outcome of the removal of the monarchy. An unelected second House would be impossible in a country with an elected Head of State. So, Paine would help us to do away with the Lords in the permanent seats with their ridiculous titles. Many current members of the second house are so old they only attend for their daily expenses and to sleep on the red benches. Which leaves some of the younger ones to indulge in a quiet corruption, well, quiet until a newspaper finds out.

Separation of state and religion would be another long desired effect. Throwing the bishops in their pretty sleeves out of the House might make it look less cute but it would be a huge step towards getting rid of religious meddling in lawmaking religion.

Finally, a written Constitution like the one that makes US citizens secure in their rights (as long as they've elected a good President, the awfulness of Bush and his trampling of Constitutional Rights at Guantanamo et al shows us how vital a non-political powerless Head of State is for us.

If only we had a Thomas Paine and his perfect code back - 'My country is the world, my religion is to do good'. But at least the *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason* remain in print.

Reprinted from: *Good Company, Ideas on Modern Republicanism, Marking the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Death of Thomas Paine.*



## **Book Reviews**

**THOMAS PAINE AND AMERICA, 1776-1809.** Edited by Kenneth W. Burchell. 6 volumes. 2496pp. London, Pickering & Chatto, 2009. ISBN-13-9781851969647. £495.00. \$875.00

When Thomas Paine arrived in Philadelphia in 1774 he faced an uncertain future. He was seriously ill from an ailment picked up on the voyage to America, although thanks both to the captain of the ship on which he had travelled, having a cabin to himself, and the letters of introduction he carried from Benjamin Franklin to relatives, he received medical assistance on arrival that led to his recovery. Because of the actions of the British government in imposing unpopular taxes and what was perceived to be restrictions on trade, there was considerable unrest amongst the populace which was accompanied with a feeling that change was called for. As for Paine himself, his first and most pressing need was to find employment, for although he was given the job of tutoring the sons of some prominent individuals, one of the recommendations in the letters being that he could undertake this as he had been a schoolmaster in London, he was not destined for this, as a chance meeting in a bookshop with one of the two proprietors of the newly established *Pennsylvania Magazine*, led to an invitation to him to contribute to it and before long he was appointed as it's editor, a job in which he proved an outstanding success.

Paine had some experience of writing as he had been asked when working as an exciseman in Lewes, to draw up a document for presentation to the British parliament setting out the arguments supportive of giving the low paid excisemen an increase in their salaries, only to have the members of parliament refuse to accept it. His *Case of the Officers of Excise* has been described as the first national trade union manifesto. But it was to have unfortunate consequences for Paine, as the Commissioners of Excise, who had asked him to draw up the appeal, dismissed him following its failure, then his marriage broke down and the shop he ran in Lewes failed. The future for him must have looked exceedingly bleak. However, he had got to know Benjamin Franklin in London, a friendship stemming from their common interest in science, and Franklin suggested to him that he should make a new start by emigrating to Pennsylvania. Paine, who rarely ever appears to have taken note of advice, this time did so. Perhaps the astute

Franklin had sensed that he had potential, but it is unlikely that he had any inkling of the impact Paine was destined to make on the political life of the thirteen British colonies in America.

Although the magazine Paine edited was officially apolitical, this did not prevent him including material that had a political slant, although most of his interest in political and social controversy was given voice to in letters he wrote to newspapers. Paine was no stranger to controversy having served an apprenticeship, so to speak, in the cut and thrust debates at the Headstrong Club that met in Lewes, of which he was a leading member. It is also believed that he was a supporter, if not an active helper, of the radical politician John Wilkes. Thus he would have taken a close interest in the discussions in the coffee houses and taverns of Philadelphia as well as in private gatherings that centred around the disputes with the government in London during which the idea of independence probably cropped up from time to time, for the radical John Cartwright had suggested the idea in one of his works that circulated in the colonies. Then late in 1775 Paine resigned as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, not a step to be taken lightly for one new to the colony who did not possess private means. This would suggest that something was afoot.

In January 1776, there appeared on sale in Philadelphia a pamphlet entitled *Common Sense*, that created a tremendous stir accompanied by much speculation as to the identity of its anonymous author. Written in what might be described as a journalistic style, it marshalled the arguments not just for the colonies becoming independent of Britain but also that their form of government should be republican, a suggestion that went far beyond Major Cartwright's ideas. Such was the pamphlet's persuasive impact that there can be little doubt that it prepared the ground for the Declaration of Independence issued by the American Continental Congress on July 4, of the same year. Thus Paine may be said to have been the inspiration for that document, although some Americans have gone further and argued that while he may not have been one of the signatories he was, in effect, its actual author (cf. Joseph Lewis. *Thomas Paine, Author of the Declaration of Independence*. New York, Freethought Press Association, 1947). Although most historians reject this hypothesis, a far more probable case can be made for some of his ideas having had an input into the Declaration, particularly a clause that had it been included would have banned slavery in

America, however, this was eliminated from the final draft because of opposition from plantation owners, bankers and others of that ilk.

Evidence of how *Common Sense* swayed opinion in favour of independence is provided by the anonymous author of *Civil Prudence, Recommended to the Thirteen United Colonies of North America*, which had been written, so the author states, not long after the repeal of the Stamp Act. He had heard of the pamphlet and its advocacy of the case for independence, which disturbed him and had led him to conclude it to have been the "the invention of some Tory, to sow discord among the Colonies, and to set our friends in Great-Britain against us", but once having obtained and read a copy, he underwent a complete change of mind, finding it had given him "a new set of thoughts, and opened a wider door to the flourishing of trade and common wealth, as well as of the due preservation of liberty" than he had ever imagined to be the case. As a consequence he decided to dedicate his own work "To the most excellent Patriot, COMMON SENSE, Defender of natural Right and Liberties of Mankind".

In contrast to the opinion expressed by the writer of the foregoing, are the arguments set out in another response. The writer, who describes himself as "An American", entitled his pamphlet, *The True Interest of America Impartially Stated in Certain Strictures on a pamphlet intituled Common Sense*. As far as he was concerned *Common Sense* was "one of the most artful, insidious and pernicious pamphlets" he had ever met with, in which the author "gives vent to his own private resentment and ambition". His "scheme", the writer believed, would be found to be "shocking to the ears of Americans. The man who penned these hostile sentiments is now known to have been Charles Inglis, a prominent New York cleric and outspoken critic of both independence and republicanism, who left America after the British forces withdrew from New York, though he was later to return to the continent following his appointment as the first Anglican bishop of Nova Scotia in Canada,

The two pamphlets cited from above are included among the hundred other pieces of varying length reprinted in *Thomas Paine and America*, making this an important source of contemporary works written in response to those of Thomas Paine, none of which are included. Although the overwhelming majority are

American published and written, there are five by British writers, all critical of Paine, included, for, as the editor Kenneth Burchell explains, they had been specifically addressed to an American readership and their known influence was almost exclusively limited to America. Most of the works reprinted are reproduced as facsimiles, each of which has been digitally cleaned to make for easier reading, while the remainder which did not allow for such treatment have been reset. Collectively the six volumes of *Thomas Paine and America* have in excess of two thousand pages. The organisation is thematic and chronological, with each item being prefaced by a short introductory note presenting relevant information that includes, whenever possible, the identity of those writers who wrote anonymously or used pseudonyms. Some limited bibliographical data is also provided. According to the editor, the criteria employed when it came to selecting works for inclusion was governed by an intention to concentrate on lesser known responses as the better known essays are more easily accessible. As a consequence, many of the works to be found in *Thomas Paine and America* are reprinted there for the first time since the original dates of their publication, although some have been cited in books on Paine..

The first volume concentrates exclusively on *Common Sense*, and includes a total of seven works all dated to 1776. The second volume has a threefold division, the first part of which is devoted to the dispute Paine had with Silas Deane, although only two works are reprinted, one a brief letter favourable to Paine and the other the anonymously written *Echo from the Temple of Wisdom*, thought to be by Deane himself. The second part to the reaction to *Rights of Man* and reprints sixteen pieces including a sequence of letters published in the press and two poems. One of the more substantial works included is Henry Mackenzie's, *An Answer to Paine's Rights of Man*. The author, a Scottish lawyer who lived in Edinburgh, describes his book as being "addressed to the people of Great Britain", although no British imprint is currently recorded. The edition reprinted here is that published by William Cobbett in Philadelphia in 1796 when he was living and working there. It includes a hostile dedication to Joseph Priestley written by him as P[eter] Porcupine. Priestley, like Paine, had strongly supported the French Revolution and was known for his support of Paine's political ideology. He had been forced to leave England in 1774 and had settled in Northumberland Town in Pennsylvania. The final part of the volume reprints three replies to *The Age of Reason*, a



theme continued throughout the next three volumes, which is illustrative of the interest in, and controversy aroused by Paine's book, which prompted Priestley join the many who replied to it, although his *An Answer to Mr. Paine's Age of Reason*, that was first written and published in America in 1794, but is not amongst those reprinted. The final volume has a two-fold division, the first part containing six pieces relating to Paine's public criticism of George Washington for, in his view, not having responded to an appeal he had sent to him requesting that the president, whom he had considered to be a personal friend, use his influence with the French to gain his release following his arrest in Paris in 1793. One of the pieces reprinted here is an anonymously written attack on Paine by William Cobbett. The second part reprints some forty-two pieces published in American newspapers and journals reacting to the news in 1802 that Paine intended to return to the United States having been away for fifteen years.

Concluding each of the six volumes is a section containing fully detailed and annotated end-notes, while in addition to these, the final volume also has a general index relating to the various reprints but not to editorial matter. An index covering this would have been of value.

*Thomas Paine and America* is competently edited by the American Paine scholar Kenneth Burchell, who in the introduction found in the first volume explains the rationale behind the work, stating it to have been the aim to "place a large single collection in the hands of scholars and others concerned with the debates that surrounded Paine and the American Early Republic", for Paine's works "were at the centre of the most important debate on democratic principles in history, from which emerged for the first time the full range of recognizably modern political ideologies, ranging from conservatism to Whiggism and liberalism to radicalism".

The introduction also has some critical notes appertaining to the first two biographies of Paine, the first of which had been written by George Chalmers, a government employee who concealed the fact by using the pseudonym 'Francis Oldys, A. M. of the University of Pennsylvania', his book being entitled, *The Life of Thomas Pain (sic), the Author of Rights of Man, With a Defence of his Writings*, which was first published in London in 1791 by John Stockdale, and was anything but a "defence", instead the use of

the word sought to lull supporters of Paine to buy the heavily subsidised book in the hope that after reading it they would drop their support for Paine and his radical, republican ideas. If that was truly the government's hope then it cannot be considered a success. Yet, as it contains material on Paine's early life not available elsewhere, it possesses some value. It is interesting to note that Stockdale also published John Quincy Adams's *An Answer to Paine's (sic) Rights of Man*, which is reprinted in *Thomas Paine and America*, from the Stockdale edition. John Quincy Adams father, also named John, had himself written a response to Paine's *Common Sense*, although without mentioning it by name: *Thoughts on Government: Applicable to the Present State of the American Colonies*. He had been alarmed by amongst the populace for Paine's proposals, which he considered to be "foolish", as he records in his diary from which Burchell quotes. Adams considered the ideas in *Common Sense* to have flowed from what he terms "simple ignorance", and had been written from a "desire to please the democratic party in Philadelphia". Nowhere in his pamphlet, which some have seen almost like a monarchical manifesto despite its references to republicanism, does he refer by name to Paine's pamphlet. Adams' work can be read in volume one.

The second biography discussed is that written by James Cheetham, and was published in Philadelphia in 1809, a few months after Paine's death. Cheetham may be said to have popularised the stories about Paine having been personally dirty, smelly and a drunkard, tales destined to become the stock-in-trade of later critics of Paine that included some scholars, notably Sir Leslie Stephens, although he retracted his comments and apologised after he had been challenged by John M. Robertson. The Cheetham biography has been dubbed as having been the first muckraking work in American literary history. Regarding the Chalmers/Oldys biography, in the course of his discussion the editor makes two questionable assertions, the first being that the pseudonym used by Chalmers was 'Sir Francis Oldys', but of the many copies I have examined that have been published in both the United States and in Britain, none have prefaced the pseudonym with the title 'Sir'. The second point is that Chalmers had sought to infer that 'Oldys' was a clergyman. Reading copies of the book have certainly not left me with that impression.

Those studying the reaction by Americans to Thomas Paine's

ideas, and, perhaps, to him as an individual, will find the judicious selection of works reprinted herein of immense value. Of course, there are works that one feels should have been included, but where does this process end, another six volumes? It has to be accepted that the selection process for a work of this character must in the last analysis always be subjective and so can never satisfy everyone. For some the cost of the work may seem high, but try finding copies of the originals, assuming it is possible to locate them, but if you manage to do so be prepared for a fright. It is the editor's hope that *Thomas Paine and America* will make a substantial contribution to Paine's bicentenary. I feel it to do so, and congratulate both him and his publisher for having produced so valuable a work.

Robert Morrell.

**GOOD COMPANY, IDEAS ON MODERN REPUBLICANISM MARKING THE 200<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF THOMAS PAINE.** Edited by Meg Green. Large paperback. 32pp. Brighton, Republic, 2009. £4.99.

This short publication is made up of various article and essays written by British republicans to mark the bicentenary of one of Britain's, indeed the world's greatest republicans and radical activist Thomas Paine. The various essays are supportive of the case for the abolition of the monarchy in Britain, each being prefaced by an appropriate quotation from one of Paine's works, with the last essay being Paine's, *First Principles of Government*.

The contributors to the publication are Michael Mansfield, QC, a barrister, Bill Emmott, a former editor of *The Economist*, Peter Tatchell, a well known human rights campaigner, Brendan O'Neill, editor of *Spiked*, Graham Watson, a member of the European Parliament, Piers Brendon, a writer and former Keeper of the Archives at the Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge and Clair Rayner, a journalist and author, whose essay is reprinted in this issue.

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