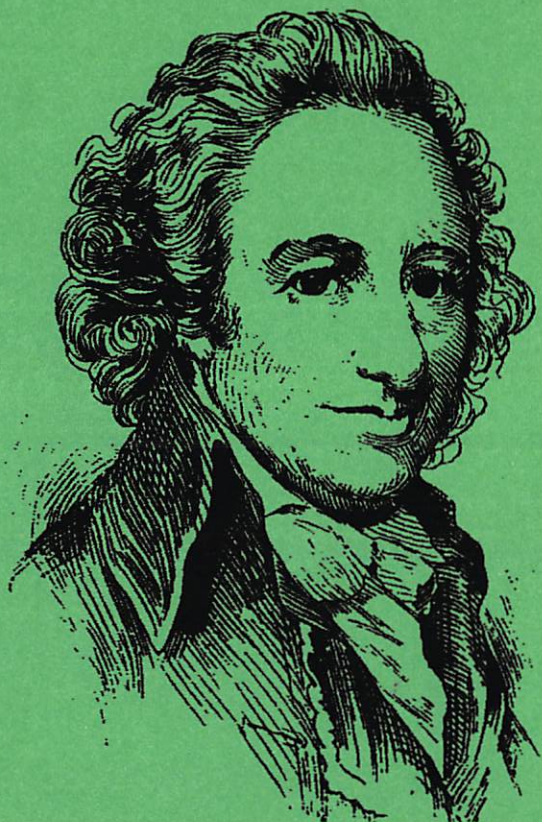


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BURNS AND PAINE

Derek Kinrade

When I joined the ranks of His Majesty's Customs & Excise in 1946, I was quickly made aware of the department's historic literary tradition, led by Geoffrey Chaucer, Adam Smith, Robert Burns and Thomas Paine. But even after nearly 200 years there seemed to be a question mark over the last of these famous men. Paine had twice been dismissed from the service, and was subsequently charged with sedition, prompting his escape to France. Burns, by contrast, appeared to be revered without reserve, though I eventually discovered that during his Excise years he too had found himself in hot water, when some of his writing and activities had called his political loyalty into question. But the two men had much more in common than their time in the service of the Crown.

There is a substantial academic literature about both Burns and Paine (in the latter case, some of it hostile). Biographies include splendid modern works by Robert Crawford (Burns) and John Keane (Paine), along with a forensic analysis of Burns' radical tendencies by Liam McIlvanney. But although both lives have been well chronicled (albeit separately), I hope there may be merit in a short selective account of the most salient features of the common radical ground shared by the two great writers, and its inspiration, a comparison that has attracted scant attention. I will not attempt condensed biographies outside that narrow focus: that would neither be possible, nor necessary.

Parallels can first be found in their origins and upbringing. Both had working class roots in rural surroundings, environments and experience that inevitably conditioned their views. It is unsurprising that both found resonance in the religious and political dissent of the 18th century.

Paine's childhood home was close to Thetford gallows and within the purview of the ruling Grafton family. He could not have failed to be aware of the rough justice handed down to the rural poor and the contrasting privilege and power enjoyed by the landed gentry. In Scotland, Burns knew from his own painful experience the penalties of toil and labour, made futile by poverty. Drudgery and

hunger racked his body, but they could not vanquish his spirit, his humour, or his innate genius. The result was, to quote Barke, that "his sympathies were for the poor, the oppressed...He hated all manner of cruelty, oppression and the arrogance of privilege and mere wealth."

Likewise, both men, as children, were exposed to religious ideology. In Paine's case direct evidence is limited, but we know at least that his parents belonged to different branches of the Christian faith - his mother to the established church, his father to the dissenting Quaker sect - and that he had regular contact with the teaching of both traditions. Although never an atheist, it appears from his later writings that he was not persuaded by either theology. He said in *The Age of Reason*: "from the time I was capable of conceiving an idea, and acting upon it by reflection, I either doubted the truth of the Christian system or thought it to be a strange affair." But more important than the influence of parental indoctrination is the evidence of Paine's *voluntary* association with Methodism. There is a record that he heard John Wesley preach on one of his several visits to Thetford. Later, as a 21 year-old, he is said to have preached as a Methodist in both Dover and Sandwich. Eight years later, while in London waiting for an Excise vacancy, he is said to have again turned to occasional preaching. There is even a suggestion in the Oldys biography (repeated by Conway) that Paine sought from the Baptist minister Daniel Noble an introduction to the Bishop of London with a view to ordination. It is certainly reasonable to think that Methodism appealed to Paine. Its preachers were enthusiastic and able to reach out to the common people. They emphasised that Christ died for *all*, and their message, although concerned with spiritual salvation, was in tune with the 18th century radical aspiration towards equality. Notwithstanding Paine's later assault upon organised religion and his repudiation of the Bible, Keane's view "that his moral capacities ultimately had religious roots" is very persuasive.

Burns was baptized and brought up in the Christian faith. His father William, a strict Calvinist, was committed to his sons' religious education, though the tone of it was somewhat tempered by the preaching of his parish minister. William Dalrymple was of the Presbyterian persuasion: a moderate, liberal man, antagonistic to divisive sectarianism, zealotry and hypocrisy, concerned to reach out to the poor, and an advocate of amity and love. Although Burns later strayed from his father's model of piety and virtue

(particularly in his sexual inclinations: according to Barke he had passionate relationships with many women, productive of fifteen children, six out of wedlock) this early teaching was later reflected in many of his poems. And despite his departure from the constraints of Presbyterian theology, he never relinquished his belief in God. Crawford notices a manual written by Burns's father addressing some of the fundamental questions of religious belief. One of these not only conditioned his children but, as I will mention later, was also very much in line with Paine's thinking:

Q. How shall I evidence to myself that there is a God?

A. By the works of Creation; for nothing can make itself and this fabric of nature demonstrates its creator to be possessed of all possible perfection, and for that cause we owe all that we have to him.

Similar parallels apply to the relatively brief formal education of the two writers. At the age of seven, Paine was fortunate to gain a place at Thetford Grammar School, but left when only twelve to serve for the next seven years as an apprentice in his father's business as a maker of stays. But as a young man, over time, he cultivated the friendship of a number of distinguished men: the Scottish astronomer and instrument maker, James Ferguson, destined to become a Fellow of the Royal Society; the well-known lexicographer and optical instrument maker, Benjamin Martin; the celebrated astronomer and Fellow of the Royal Society, Dr. John Bevis; the writer, Oliver Goldsmith, and crucially the influential Benjamin Franklin, whose support helped Paine to establish himself in America. During his time in London he extended his reading, and met like-minded people who were challenging orthodox theology and the concept of top-down government. He was introduced, as Keane puts it, "to a new culture of political radicalism that rejected throne and altar", and experienced a "long-term conversion to republican democracy."

Burns's first formal education was even shorter, spent between the ages of six and nine in a local school at Alloway Mill, before having to leave to help on his father's isolated farm at Mount Oliphant. He was, however, fortunate through those years in having a young, inspirational teacher, John Murdoch, who before his departure to Dumfries imparted a thorough grounding in the technicalities of language, with an expectation far wider than was customary for children of such tender years. This, combined with Burns's voracious and wide-ranging reading, established a literary

disposition that would prosper against the grain of physical labour and frugal living on the land. Much credit for that is also due to Burns's father. Despite the necessity of setting his sons to farming, William Burnes contrived to continue their education at home, conversing with them as adults, and procuring books for them designed both to nurture their faith and spur their imaginations. It was fortunate, too, that in 1772 Murdoch returned to teach at another school in Ayr and was concerned enough to find time to sustain intermittent contact with the Burns brothers in pursuit of their development. Unlike Paine, Burns could not yet add personal acquaintance with leading intellectuals, but he did so at second-hand, gleaning counsel from literature, not least Arthur Masson's *Collection of English Prose and Verse* and John Newbury's anthology of letter-writers of distinguished merit.

In 1777 the family moved to Lochlea. There, although still committed to hard labour in the fields, Burns was not without friends. As he reached manhood he found particular inspiration among the Masons of Tarbolton, warming to their principles of friendship, benevolence and religious toleration. But the final shaping of Burns's muse was forged in the depths of adversity. His problems during 1782 to 1784 have been well documented: a business venture that literally disappeared in flames; a breakdown of mind and body; the failing family farm, with the prospect of utter destitution; his father's legal struggle in the face of a writ of sequestration. Burns's response, as Crawford puts it, was to write his way out of it. Surrounded by deep recession and gloom across rural Scotland, he fixed upon ideals that would underpin his later poetry: dignity in poverty and admiration for men of independent minds, prepared to reject the lure of wealth and position. In 1783 he began his 'Commonplace Book', and gradually his identity as a ploughman gave way to that of a poet and the emergence of his distinctive style and language. By the following year he had come to think that he might be capable of exposing his work to a wider public. And among many strands of his eager imagination were political ideas drawn from his harsh, personal experience that were pointedly radical in their day.

The legal action against Burns's father was decided in his favour in January 1784. By then, however, he was exhausted and ill, dying a few weeks later. Throughout the travails of their lives at Lochlea, Burns and his brother had respected their father dearly. But his death and release from debt, allowed a move to Mossiel, a new

beginning, a freer lifestyle and the burgeoning of Robert's romantic poetry.

Quite when Paine moved from personal conviction to written advocacy remains unclear. More than once he insisted that he wrote nothing in England, though appearances suggest otherwise. What is certain is that in January 1775, having overcome a serious illness picked up on the voyage to America, he was taken on as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. Articles and poems in this new periodical and in William Bradford's earlier *Pennsylvania Journal* appeared anonymously or under pseudonyms, but it is generally accepted that Paine was the author of a number of them, including a broadside against slavery, an exposure of cruelty to animals, and a plea for women's rights. The battle of Lexington in April 1775 stirred him to give vent to increasingly radical views about British tyranny, and to consider the necessity of using force to secure human liberty. In July 1775 he penned a song *Liberty Tree*, the final verses of which were unequivocal in their call for revolution:

But hear, O ye swains ('tis a tale most profane),
How all the tyrannical pow'rs,
King, Commons, and Lords, are uniting amain'
To cut down this guardian of ours;

From the east to the west blow the trumpet to arms,
Through the land let the sound of it flee:
Let the far and the near all unite with a cheer,
In defense of our Liberty Tree.

In the *Journal* of October 1775, Paine (as Humanus) followed this with an article headed *A Serious Thought* in which he reflected on the barbarities wrought by Britain, particularly the importation of negroes for sale. He declared that he would "hesitate not for a moment to believe that the Almighty will finally separate America from Britain".

His direct, terse and incisive prose appealed to the common citizen, and found its most positive expression with the publication, in January 1776, of his seminal pamphlet *Common Sense*. I need not recapitulate the arguments of this famous text, save to notice that its opening pages drew on ingrained tenets of English radicalism, with an insistence on natural rights to liberty and a vision of a new world order. Its impact was, of course, dramatic and a major factor in setting the course in favour of the war of

independence.

Chronologically, Burns literary début came ten years later, with the publication in July 1786 of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (the so-called Kilmarnock edition). Burns was then only 27, some ten years younger than Paine had been at the time of his first Pennsylvania articles. The collection was a chosen, wide-ranging miscellany of 36 poems, verses, songs, odes and dirges, previously written alongside his farming at Mossgiel. One reviewer thought the love poems “execrable”, and most critics regretted that they were written in some measure in “an unknown tongue” which limited their audience to a small circle. But there was general recognition of Burns as “a native genius”. He was seen as the ‘ploughman poet’; a phenomenon bursting from “the obscurity of poverty and the obstructions of laborious life”. Yet in all this, only two reviewers briefly mentioned occasional “libertine” tendencies, dismissed as regrettable but excusable in the light of his origins.

In fact, the edition contained three overtly political poems, written shortly before publication: *The Twa Dogs*, *A Dream*, and *The Author’s Earnest Cry and Prayer*. Like all the other pieces, they pre-dated Burns’s Excise service, and, according to his *Preface*, had not been “composed with a view to the press”. Nevertheless, one can perhaps detect a note of caution in Burns’s approach. He commonly made a virtue of his low social standing and used the paradox of a simple bard appealing to a refined audience.

The Twa Dogs is a gem. Briefly, the dogs are represented as friendly observers of the lives of their keepers: one a local dignitary, the other a ploughman. The poem, masterly crafted, contrasts the pleasure-seeking, self-interest and dissipation of the gentry (leaving aside “some exceptions”) with the destitution and toil faced by the poor, who nevertheless, in their respite from labour, find joy in the simple, frugal, common recreations of rural life:

A countra fellow at the pleugh,
His acre’s till’d, he’s right enough;
A countra girl at her wheel,
Her dizzen’s done, she’s unco weel;
But gentlemen, an’ ladies warst,
Wi’ ev’n down want o’work are curst:
They loiter, lounging, lank an’ lazy;
Though deil-haet ails them, yet uneasy:

Their days insipid, dull an' tasteless;
Their nights unquiet, lang an' restless.

A Dream began with a vindicatory preamble:

Thoughts, words and deeds, the Statute blames with reason; But
surely Dreams were ne're indicted Treason.

Burns went on to pretend that he had fallen asleep after reading Thomas Warton's *Laureate's Ode for His Majesty's Birthday, 4 June 1786*, and in his dreaming fancy had imagined his own, alternative address. It was a daring device, for whereas Warton's ode had lavishly flattered George III, Burns' satire made it clear that he would do no such thing, but instead addressed the king with mock reverence, feigning loyalty while favouring defection, reminding him of the embarrassment of the loss of the American colonies and the failures of his ministers. He hoped that the King might wring corruption's neck, and reduce the burden of taxation: levied till 'old Britain' was fleeced until she had 'scarce a tester' (an old Scots silver coin of small value). A cloak of pretended adulation and a representation of being but a humble poet might not normally have been enough to escape dire retribution, but Burns' destiny appears somehow to have been charmed.

The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer was addressed to the Right Honourable and Honourable Scotch representatives in the House of Commons. Burns again began with mock deference:

To you a simple Bardie's prayers are humbly sent.

But thereafter his 25 stanzas and postscript of a further seven were unmistakably critical: an ironic blast against the 45 Scottish members, apparently supine in the face of legislation to increase the duties on whisky:

In gath'rin votes you were na slack;
Now stand as tightly by your tack:
Ne'er claw your lug, an' fidge your back,
An' hum and haw;
But raise your arm, an' tell your crack
Before them a'.

He followed this with a swipe at those whose ranks he would shortly join: "damn'd excisemen in a bustle"! But his main thrust was aimed at the liaison of Scottish and English members, which

he clearly saw as an unholy alliance:

Yon mixtie-maxtie, queer hotch-potch,
The Coalition.

An opinion that, albeit in a different context, has a certain resonance today.

In 1787, though written in 1784, a further political offering appeared in a second expanded edition of Burns's poems, published in Edinburgh. This was a ballad conveying his thoughts on the American Revolution. Aware that it might be thought "rather heretical", he had decided not to publish it in the Kilmarnock edition, but later, with the advice of Lord Glencairn and Henry Erskine, caused it to be included in the new edition. Whereas Paine, in 1776, had fomented the war of independence, and throughout had continued to support it in eight issues of *The Crisis* (the last in April 1783), Burns now reflected, after its conclusion, on the tide of events. Though the facts were no doubt gleaned from other sources, it remains a brilliant and witty summary of the hapless record of Britain's generals and politicians, remarkable for having been constructed alongside the drudgery of Burns's ordinary occupation.

For some years Burns added almost nothing to his political output. To make ends meet, he joined the Excise service as a common gauger, receiving his commission in 1788 and starting work in September 1789. Like myself, a condition of appointment required a pledge of allegiance to the monarch. While his poetic output was undiminished, he was now on the whole careful either to avoid contentious political issues or to try to ensure that controversial material did not appear over his name.

Not so Paine, who was in Paris during the winter of 1789-90, seeing for himself and documenting the beginnings of the popular revolution. In January 1790 he wrote enthusiastically to his friend Edmund Burke, intimating that the French Revolution was "certainly a forerunner to other revolutions in Europe". The reaction from Burke, a supporter of the American Revolution, was unexpected. We now know that he had already been mightily disturbed by Dr Richard Price's address *A Discourse of the Love of Our Country*, given at the London Revolution Society on 4 November 1789. Rather than welcoming the new revolutionary

movement, Burke denounced it his vitriolic *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published on 1 November 1790. This drew from Paine his famous response, *Rights of Man*, published in two parts, brought together in February 1792, drawing inspiration from France and making the case for government of the people. Despite huge sales (in Britain alone, 200,000 by 1793), public opinion was divided. Those who ached for reform saw the French National Assembly's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens* as a most desirable model for Britain; many had found in the American Revolution a prospect for change, and in the French uprising a hope that a new politics might flourish in Europe. Whereas Burke, along with the government and entrenched conservative opinion, viewed the events across the Channel with alarm, dreading the possibility of civil resistance and a copycat disturbances; the more so as violence and vengeance escalated in Paris. In May 1792 George III issued a Royal Proclamation against sedition, subversion and riot. In September, Paine, indicted to stand trial on a charge of promulgating seditious libel, and under constant harassment, escaped to France. He was, of course, later tried in his absence, found guilty, and vilified by the ruling establishment.

Burns was undoubtedly aware of the furore created by Paine's pamphlet, and sympathetic to the reformist view; but also acutely conscious that as a government officer, needing the salary that went with the job, he must not parade his sentiments. He was careful to require that his poems should bear his name only with his agreement. However, on 30 October 1792 this show of neutrality was severely tested. In the newly opened Theatre Royal at Dumfries, with friends, he was in the pit for a performance of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, also attended by some of Scotland's elite. When at the end of the play *God Save the King* was called for, there were shouts from the pit for *Çà ira*, the song of the French revolutionaries. Scuffles accompanied the singing of the national anthem, through all of which Exciseman Burns remained in his seat.

There could be no real doubt as to where Burns's heart lay. Four weeks later he wrote to Louise Fontenelle, a touring London actress he admired, offering her an 'occasional address' to use on her benefit night on 26 November. *The Rights of Woman*, published anonymously in *The Edinburgh Gazetteer* on 30 November, all too obviously echoed that of Paine's notorious,

inspirational text. Harmlessly, Burns extolled female rights as those of protection, decorum and admiration; far more interesting, however, are the lines with which he topped and tailed his thoughts:

While Europe's eye is fix'd on mighty things,
The fate of empires and the fall of kings;
While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
And even children lisp the Rights of Man;
Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
The Rights of Woman merit some attention.

When awful Beauty joins with all her charms,
Who is so rash as rise in rebel arms?
But truce with kings, and truce with constitutions,
With bloody armaments and revolutions;
Let Majesty your first attention summon:
Ah! Cà ira! The Majesty of Woman!

As the year drew to its close, and Burns became more confident of what he believed to be the impending triumph of the British reform movement, he was quite unable to restrain his feelings, giving vent to a ballad, *Here's a Health to Them That's Awa*. This unreservedly raised a series of toasts to reformers over the border. Its message was undisguised:

May Liberty meet wi' success'
May Prudence protect her frae evil!
May tyrants and Tyranny tine i' the mist
And wander their way to the Devil!

Here's freedom to them that wad read,
Here's freedom to them that would write!
There's nane ever fear'd that the truth should be heard
But they whom the truth would indite!

And wha wad betray old Albion's right,
May they never eat of her bread!

Sadly, Burns's optimism was misplaced. Doubts about his loyalty had been brought to the notice of the Excise Commissioners, who promptly launched an inquiry. Learning of the Board's misgivings, and fearful of the consequences, Burns wrote on 31 December 1792 to one of the Excise commissioners, Robert Graham of Fintry, to assure him that any such allegation was unfounded, in that he was devoutly attached to the British Constitution "on Revolution principles [i.e the 1688 'Glorious Revolution']", next after

his God". Remarkably, Graham promptly responded on 5 January to reassure Burns that his job was safe. And, by return, Burns then replied to the specific allegations, admitting that he had at first been an "enthusiastic votary" of the French Revolution, but had altered his sentiments when France came to show her old avidity for conquest. Some writers have judged that the tone of Burns' letters was contrite, even abject; that effectively he renounced his reformist stance. This is certainly the feeling they convey on first reading; but McIlvanney makes a convincing case that on closer analysis there was no apostasy and no apology.

Yet the detail of all this is perhaps beside the point: it seems obvious that what kept Burns in his job was his high artistic reputation and good standing, based on the fame his poetry, then as now largely focused on its sentimental, urbane and apolitical content. He was fortunate to have a number of friends and supporters in high places, not least Graham; a relationship that may fairly be judged from a ballad of 1790, which opens with the lines:

Fintry, my stay in worldly strife,
Friend o' my Muse, friend o' my life,

The brush with authority has attracted microscopic attention, and certainly made Burns anxious for his future. But it must also be seen in the context of explicit violent agitation in France, where, exactly at this time, Paine was in Paris, passionately – but unsuccessfully - seeking to convince his fellow deputies of the National Convention that Louis XVI should be spared the guillotine.

The Excise inquiry reminded Burns of the dangerous ground of radical poetry. Indeed, with the execution of Louis on the 21 January 1793 and the French declaration of war on Britain on 1 February, the reform movement as a whole was forced to wake up to the perils of open defiance. For the time being the State's policy was one of such severe repression as to drive radical opposition into hiding. But at the time of the dramatic Scottish sedition trials of August 1793, Burns could no longer contain his feelings. He ventured three poems, based on the legendary heroics of Robert Bruce, all of which carried parallels, for those who could see them, to the then contemporary challenges to Scottish liberty; as McIlvanney puts it "the tendency to view one struggle for liberty

through the optic of another." The most famous of the three, sent to trusted friends and published anonymously in *The Morning Chronicle* on 8 May 1794, is *Scots Wha Hae*, with its stark call to resist "chains and slavery" Unambiguously, through the words of Bruce, it brings the challenge into Burns' own time - "Now's the day, and now's the hour"- and ends with the appeal from the lips of Bruce:

Lay the proud usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty's in every blow!
Let us do, or die!

Burns followed this up with an *Ode for George Washington's Birthday*, comparing the liberty achieved in America with the political suppression imposed from London. Although he could not then openly publicise his views, this clarion call now reveals the strength of his true feelings:

But come, ye sons of Liberty,
Columbia's offspring, brave as free,
In danger's hour still flaming in the van,
Ye know, and dare maintain, the Royalty of Man!

Here Burns is no longer the humble bard; there can be no mistaking the contemporary relevance of his historical allusions.

By this time, Paine had written the first part of his passionate but controversial essay *The Age of Reason: being an investigation of true and fabulous theology*. The astonishing story of how he took up the subject while fearing for his life is too well known to need repetition; indeed the prefaces to the first and second parts of the eventual book, separated by his incarceration in the Luxembourg prison, largely describe the perilous circumstances that attended its completion and survival. The French Revolution had turned sour. The libertarian principles that had marked its beginning had given way to bloody retribution. Paine, whose name was on the death list, had for many years intended to express his opinions on religion, and felt that he now had no time to lose. Part one appeared during February 1794, and part two, expanding his first thoughts, came out in October 1795. Together they presented the reader with a double paradox: firstly, the essays unequivocally repudiated belief in the Bible as the authentic 'Word of God', but by no means repudiated God; secondly, though despising the

purveyors and apparatus of organised religion, there was also a recognition that the eradication of Christianity in favour of a revolutionary dogma of equality and liberty could lead the French state towards atheism. As Paine explained at the beginning of his first essay:

The circumstance that has now taken place in France of the total abolition of the whole national order of priesthood, and of everything appertaining to compulsive systems of religion, and compulsive articles of faith, has not only precipitated my intention, but rendered a work of this kind exceedingly necessary, lest in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government, and false theology, we lose sight of morality, of humanity, and of the theology that is true.

As usual, Paine wrote with clarity and raw honesty, appealing to reason. He saw the Old Testament as “a history of the grossest vices and a collection of the most paltry and contemptible tales”, and the so-called ‘New’ Testament as being of doubtful provenance, lacking authenticity, heaping hearsay upon hearsay, and replete with irrational, fabulous inventions and contradictions. While not doubting the existence of Jesus Christ, he regarded him as merely “a virtuous and an amiable man”. On a questionable base of “wild and visionary doctrine”, the church had “set up a system of religion very contradictory to the character of the person whose name it bears...a religion of pomp and revenue, in pretended imitation of a person whose life was humility and poverty.” Nor was this type of construction limited to Christianity. Every national church or religion “had established itself by pretending some special mission from God, communicated to certain individuals”, each with books which they call ‘revelation’, or the word of God.

Paine’s own belief was simpler. He believed “in one God, and no more” and hoped for happiness beyond this life. He expressed belief in the equality of man, and argued that religious duties consisted of doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy. He saw God as the compassionate creator, evidenced by creation, whose choicest gift was the gift of reason. In the first part of the essay there is a particularly interesting passage:

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.* (my italics)

Paine's polemic excited huge interest, reinforcing those of a radical persuasion, but surely making more enemies than friends. Crucially, in Britain, those in gilded positions in the liaison of established church and state chose to see it only as an assault on cherished beliefs and values, a threat to good order and their own positions. Some, who cannot have read the essays, dubbed Paine an atheist. This he emphatically was not, but he undoubtedly provided his opponents with ammunition to confirm in their eyes his reputation as a disreputable trouble-maker.

Those who had welcomed the French Revolution as the dawn of a new age clung tenaciously to its original thinking in pursuit of liberty. In 1795, Burns, though still employed in the Excise (acting-up as supervisor at Dumfries), and having felt duty-bound to enlist in the Royal Dumfries Volunteers, nevertheless contrived to write his most celebrated political song. Popularly known as *A Man's a Man for a' that*, it first appeared anonymously in the *Glasgow Magazine* of August 1795. James Barke, in his edition of Burns' poems and songs, has aptly described it as "the Marseillaise of humanity". Disparaging the "tinsel show" of rank and title, Burns extols the merits of the honest man of independent mind. As others have noticed, the short verses echo the sentiments of Paine's *Rights of Man*, while Marilyn Butler has pointed out that the closing lines closely follow the letter and spirit of the revolutionary song *Çà ira!*:

Then let us pray that come it may
(As come it will for a' that)
That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth
Shall bear the gree an' a' that!
For a' that, an' a' that,
It's comin yet for a' that,
That man to man the world o'er
Shall brothers be for a' that

Paine struggled on until 1809, adding a number of less well-known studies to his archive, and at the last declining an attempt to have him accept Christ as the Son of God. Burns, like Paine, never surrendered his belief in a benevolent God. He died in 1796, still impoverished but a radical exciseman to the last. There is nothing to suggest that the two men ever met, but there may yet be one unremarked final parallel. Another version of *The Liberty Tree*, although never quite proved to be the work of Burns, bears the

hallmarks of his style. Here then, to close, are the last two verses of eleven:

Wi' plenty o' sic trees, I trow
The world would live in peace, man.
The sword would help to mak' a plough,
The din o' war wad cease, man,
Like brethren in a common cause,
We'd on each other smile, man;
And equal rights and equal laws
Wad gladden every isle, man.

Wae worth the loon wha wadna eat
Sic halesome, dainty cheer, man!
I'd gie the shoon frae aff my feet
To taste the fruit o't here, man!
Syne let us pray, Auld England may
Sure plant this far-famed tree, man;
And blythe we'll sing, and herald the day
That gives us liberty, man.

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And, of course, the works of Paine and Burns referred to in the text.



Robert Burns

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS AND THOMAS PAINE

Terry Liddle

If I were granted three wishes, the first would be to be free of the physical ailments and afflictions which blight my life. The second would be to write like Christopher Hitchens and the third would be to write like Thomas Paine. Although in our youth we were in rival Trotskyist groups, Hitchens and I share a number of heroes on the Left, the Pole Jacek Kuron, the Trinidadian CLR James and the Russian Victor Serge. We share an interest in George Orwell, although Orwell's class origins are nearer to those of Hitchens than to mine. And for both of us Thomas Paine is a hero of heroes.

Both Hitchens and Paine are in that fine tradition of English radical dissent which blasts the pretensions of autocratic rulers and canting priests. Both men were far from teetotal, it was exciting to see the allegedly alcoholic Hitchens lambaste the teetotal Catholic turned advocate of political Islam George Galloway MP. It would have been fascinating to down a glass or two with both men and talk long into the night.

In his autobiography *Hitch 22* Hitchens says little about Paine. He writes: "...I read Thomas Paine saying that to have played a part in two revolutions was to have lived to some purpose. This was the sort of eloquence I wish I could have commanded..." The idea of a time before kings and lords and bishops and priests, says Hitchens, can be found in Paine.

Paine is dealt with at greater length in *God Is Not Great*, a work which ranks besides Paine's *Age of Reason* as a demolition of religious orthodoxy. Hitchens writes of Paine, "...his memory has outlasted the calumnious rumour that he begged to be reconciled with the church at the end. (The mere fact that deathbed repentances were sought by the godly, let alone subsequently fabricated speaks volumes about the bad faith of the faith-based)." He reveals that the Calvinist Abolitionist John Brown kept Paine's works in his camp.

The magnum opus by Hitchens on Paine is *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man*. Perhaps *The Independent* was indulging in hyperbole when it called Hitchens "a Tom Paine for our troubled

times", but there can be no doubt that he writes eloquently and sympathetically about his subject.

Although he only got a third class degree from Oxford, his days were spent advocating socialism and his nights partying and swilling champagne with the middle class, Hitchens has a good knowledge of radical history. He writes at length about the Sheffield file maker and poet Joseph Mather. At a time when what Hitchens calls the "Hanoverian usurpation which endures on the British throne to this day" was adopting *God Save The King* as the national anthem, Mather penned a parody which began " God save great Thomas Paine." It is, says Hitchens, taught in no school and sung in no assembly.

Hitchens discusses the tree of liberty, which Paine's friend Thomas Jefferson held should be watered with the blood of tyrants. As a radical symbol particularly among the United Irishmen, *Rights of Man* was translated into Gaelic. He writes that Burns wrote a poem dedicated to the Tree of Liberty, and states that Burns best known poem *For 'a' That* "breathes with a mighty scorn for the conceits of heredity and the heredity principle, so comprehensively lampooned by Paine." Burns wrote "The rank is but the guinea's stamp, the man's the gold for 'a that." Paine would have echoed this sentiment.

Of *Rights of Man* itself Hitchens writes that it is "both a trumpet of inspiration and a carefully wrought blueprint for a more rational and decent ordering of society, both domestically and on the international scene."

Hitchens reminds us, as that Paine stated, that monarchy has a tendency to over breed and inbreed. The spare children which are many are maintained at the public expense. Hitchens compares Burke's "tear stained" evocation of Marie Antoinette with the hysteria surrounding the mysterious death of Diana Spencer, also in Paris. Hitchens asks " which European royal house since 1791 has not lamented , like our very own Windsor's, the ghastly problem of what to do with the proliferating, subsidized and under-achieving offspring? " Perhaps they should be sent to doss under London *Bridge* on one of the government's make work schemes.

Chapter 5 of the book by Hitchens discusses Paine's *The Age of Reason*, which he sees as a counterpart and completion. Paine

wrote "The most formidable weapon against errors of every kind is reason. I have never used any other, and I trust I never shall." Hitchens recounts that when Paine was writing part one of the book he did not have access to a Bible. Hitchens writes: "Paine was an engineer and amateur scientist, and stood on tiptoe to see as far as he could over the existing horizon."

Hitchens writes that "Paine was a leading member of that British radical tradition that saw wars and armies as additional burdens on the people, and as reinforcements of existing autocracies. What better way for a ruling class to claim and hold power than to pose as the defenders of the nation? And what better way to keep unschooled and unemployed serfs in line than give the king's shilling and put them into uniform... " Hitchens seemed to endorse this view. He was on the 1966 CND march from Aldermaston. I too was on that march. He came into politics because of his opposition to the Vietnam war being recruited into the International Socialists, the forerunner of today's Socialist Workers' Party. The SWP is now an apologist for political Islam.

Yet by the time of the First Gulf War despite his obvious detestation of George Bush we find Hitchens quoting his fellow Marxist Fred Halliday "You can oppose war, but only by leaving Kuwait in the hands of Saddam...you can be anti-imperialist but you will have to decide if imperialism is worse than fascism" as his defence of what was in essence an imperialist adventure. If Iraq grew carrots rather than produce oil, the West would not have been interested.

Although he had broken with organised socialism, Hitchens still claimed to be a Marxist; still admired Che and Lenin. He had become an apologist for Western imperialism which differs from Saddam and his Ba'ath Party which disgraces the name of socialism as America disgraces the word democracy, only in quantity not in kind. It is as if Paine had joined the Church of Rome on the grounds it was somewhat better than Lutheranism! Hitchens was a man of many unresolved contradictions. How anyone could find Mrs Thatcher sexy is beyond me! And there are far better examples of the distillers' art than Walker's Black Label. But if his writing about Paine encourages people to read Paine's works he will have earned his redemption.

Obituary

JOHN MILLAR, 1929-2012

We regret to have to report the death of our member John Millar, who has died recently age 82. He was a remarkable man with a wide range of interests. Grammar school educated, one of his teachers being Edward Britton, later knighted for his educational and trade union activities. Britton's political and social radicalism seems to have rubbed off on John, though to what extent this influenced him becoming an atheist is uncertain, but what is certain is that at an early age he lost any religious belief, as he told me himself some years ago. However, over the past few years he moved away from atheism, although his position may be summarised as a form of moderate radicalism.

John became well known as a speaker on the National Secular Society platform in London's Hyde Park, and it was there that he met his wife Joy. One individual who became a great "fan" of John was another John, namely John Lennon of Beatles fame, who frequently made the journey to the park specifically to hear John. They became firm friends, and the two exchanged correspondence. I first met John when he drove Len Ebury, reputed to be the NSS's best outdoor orator, to Leicester for him to speak at the Leicester Secular Hall, now the only secular hall in Britain still in use for what it was built for. John had a deep admiration for Thomas Paine and knew his works very well. He, and his wife Joy, became members of the TPS not long after its foundation. He remained a member until his death.

John eventually left the NSS, giving his reason as their inconsiderate treatment of their president, F. A. Ridley, and then became actively involved with the breakaway London Secular Group, that had been established by Len Ebury and other Secularist activists. John continued as a speaker in Hyde Park, but now for the new group, which he also supported financially. John met the cost of the group's first publication, *Frauds, Forgeries and Relics*, which was chapter from G. W. Foote and J. M. Wheeler's, *Crimes of Christianity*. However, with the deaths of Len and his wife, the LSG faded away.

As well as freethought John had other interests. He was active in CND and the peace movement in general. But above all else was his love of music. He played the trumpet and was involved with brass bands. This brought him into contact with the miners colliery bands, notably the Grimthorpe Colliery Band,

which led to his support for the miners in their struggle against the Thatcher regime. I discovered this side of his life when I accompanied John and his wife to a mining museum in Scotland.

Another of his interests, in fact it could be described as a passion, was rifle shooting, but when he was involved in a serious accident from which he was lucky to recover, it robbed him of the use of one arm. Unable to use a rifle he switched to pistol shooting. The ban on private ownership of weapons such as pistols, which he opposed, compelled him to switch to France to enable him to continue with competitive shooting. Both John and Joy also enjoyed the music of Richard Wagner, being members of the Wagner Society and they regularly attended the annual Bayreuth Festival, where they became acquainted with the Wagner family. John was also actively involved in charitable work, notably on behalf of the Cystis Fibrosis Trust, a young relative of his suffering from this genetic disorder.

Considering atheist background and long standing support for Secularist ideas, many may find it surprising that he should have become involved with the Sauniere Society, named after the suspended Roman Catholic priest, François Sauniere, whose activities and claims became the subject of a book, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, published in 1982. When John and Joy joined it the society had got stuck in a rut, so to speak, but their active interest transformed it into a very different type of organisation, sponsoring weekend and one day conferences in Edinburgh, London and Folkestone, as well as residential symposium at Newbattle Abbey near Edinburgh. The programmes are devoted to a wide range of subjects, many of which might justifiably be described as “fringe” or “alternative”, more conventional subject matter has included Egyptology, Christianity, Freethought and Secularism, various scientific disciplines, animal welfare, free speech and human rights, each conference having a mix of such subjects. The present writer has spoken at some on Thomas Paine. In May, 2007, the society sponsored a conference in association with the Thomas Paine Society and the Freethought History Research Group, of which John and Joy were members, themed around free speech and dedicated to the memory of F. A. Ridley, at which Terry Liddle spoke on him.

I sometimes wondered what had first attracted John to the Sauniere Society, though I never put that question to him. However, it may be that he had been greatly influenced by the ideas advanced by another reverend, Dr. Robert Taylor, a staunch advocate of the “astronomical-theological hypothesis” of Christian origins, which he once told me had been drawn to his attention when he had read Herbert Cutner’s, *Jesus, God, Man or Myth?* (1950) [Cutner was a Vice-President of the TPS], who himself had been impressed

by Taylor's ideas. I recall John's distress when his copy of the Freethought Publishing Company's 1884 reprint of Taylor's, *The Devil's Pulpit* went missing from his library. This, with a biographical introduction, was a reprint of a series of "sermons" given by Taylor advocating his hypothesis. Taylor had been thrown out of the Anglican Church because of his radically unorthodox opinions about Jesus and the origins of Christianity, which caused him to be dubbed "the Devil's Chaplain" by his critics, who were further annoyed when far from being upset by it he adopted it. He spend three years in prison for his "blasphemous" ideas. I have been told by Joy that he anxiously wanted to replace it - if any TPS member has a copy they want to sell please let me know and I will pass the information to Joy.

Our condolences go to John' wife Joy, and his son Christopher, best known as Rat Scabies, a musician with the band The Damned, and the central subject of Christopher Dawes book, *Rat Scabies and The Holy Grail* (2005), on their loss.

Robert Morrell.

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Copies of *Frauds, Forgeries and Relics*, are available from S. Henley at APRA Book, price £1.50 plus 50p. Postage.

Also available is Herbert Cutner's, *Robert Taylor, The Devil's Chaplain*. Price 6.00, postage 50p.

Contact: syd_henley@msn.com / Web Site: <http://apra-books.vpweb.co.uk>

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John Millar

Book Reviews

LITERARY WALKS IN BATH, Eleven Excursions in the Company of Eminent Authors. Andrew Swift & Kirsten Elliott. Bath, Akeman Press, 2012. xii & 320pp. Illustrated. Paperback. ISBN 978-9560989-3-1. £15.00.

Last year I spent a week on holiday in Bath, a picturesque and historic Somerset city whose roots reach back to pre-Roman times, but achieved national, if not international, fame in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a spa town, the water of which was reputed to be particularly efficacious, a belief that attracted to the city the great and good, and the not so great and good, all anxious to partake of its water, or be seen in the company of the famous in British society. As well as this side of Bath's story there is its rich literary heritage, and it is this side of the town's story on which the author's concentrate.

Both authors are well qualified to write on the town for they have long experience in conducting walking tours of the city, as well as authoring several other books on it, or aspects of it. Reading this book left me wishing that I had it when I stayed in Bath as it would have made my time there much more rewarding. However, this said, what has it to do with Thomas Paine, who, to my knowledge, never visited it? Well while there is nothing in the book that indicates he ever did, what it also brings to the fore in chapter seven, which is entitled, 'The Rhythm of Tom Paine's Bones', are details of the interest in and reaction locally to Paine's ideas, as is indicated in the chapter's sub-heading, "Radicalism and Repression in Pitt's 'Reign of Terror'".

What the chapter relates offers is a tour of the places in the city associated with individuals known for their support either for Paine and/or his ideas. It commences with Henry Hunt, who in 1817 is said to have addressed between twelve and twenty thousand people at a gathering in Orange Grove, though the *Bath Chronicle* put the figure at five hundred, the purpose of the meeting being to agitate for universal suffrage. The military, so the authors note, kept a watchful eye on the crowd but did not, as they also point out, act as they did at St. Peter's Field in Manchester two years later. Others who were to address meetings in bath included Henry Vincent the Chartist, who also called for universal suffrage.

The authors offer an account of the life of Paine that extends over two pages and includes a portrait of him. This leads to a discussion on Paine's critic Hannah More, who has a commemorative plaque on a building in Great Pultney Street, where she had lived. Her attacks on Paine's ideas are covered

in reasonable detail, in the course of which the author's support for Paine becomes evident, although they make the mistake of calling his book *Rights of Man*, *The Rights of Man*. They go on to notice the city prison in Grove Street "where many of Paine's supporters, and others fighting for their rights ended up". Details are also given of the numerous occasions near Bath where locals hung or burned Paine in effigy, while membership of the Loyal Bath Association which had a membership of seven thousand, although, they note, that many of those who signed up had done so at the behest of their employers and for them not to have done so would have entailed their dismissal and denunciation to the authorities.

John Thelwall, who had assisted in the formation of the London Corresponding Society is buried in Bath and details are given as to how to find his grave. The chapter, a truly fascinating and informative read, even if you do not visit the city, also offers an explanation for the chapter's title, it comes from a song, described as "stirring", by Graham Moore, "The Rhythm of Tom Paine's Bones", though they add the thinking behind the song's title "is a convoluted and bizarre one. They with by citing a tribute by Robert Ingersoll to Paine and the words of Graham Moore that Paine can still provide inspiration for those fighting new threats to the Rights of Man.

Those interested in radicals and radicalism will also find the previous chapter: 'Rebels and Romantics, Catharine Macaulay, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Shelley & Percy Bysshe Shelley', a productive read. Of those in the title the least known is Catharine Macaulay, and the authors devote considerable coverage to this remarkable woman, a republican, supporter of the American colonists in their struggle for independence, who writing to Washington on events in France, in which she referred to "all friends of Liberty on this side of the Atlantic are now rejoicing for an event which in all probability had been accelerated by the American Revolution". Mary Wollstonecraft wrote of Catharine Macaulay that she had been the woman of the greatest abilities undoubtedly this country had ever produced.

Literary Walks in Bath is not a dull repetition of the common place, but a scintillating tour of the city's literary heritage, and in many respects of Britain's, doing so in eleven detailed chapters. The authors have as well as a detailed knowledge of their city but an in depth literary knowledge. They write well and are not beyond the humorous anecdotes. it's a wonderful book from which I emerged with a greater increase in my knowledge on aspects of Britain's literary heritage than I had before I read it. Do I have any criticism, strangely yes. I would have liked an index.

Robert Morrell.

In God's Shadow: Politics In The Hebrew Bible, Michael Walzer, 232 pages hardback, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, ISBN 978-0-300-18044-2.

This is a book about a book, and not just any book! The *Sepher Torah* (Old Testament) remains a Holy Book for three religions. True the Jews set more store by the Biblical commentaries of the *Talmud*, the Christians by the *New Testament*, and the Muslims by the *Koran*, but the *Old Testament* remains an important weapon in the armoury of religious ideology and the machinations of priesthood.

Michael Walzer is not a theologian, he admits he has only a schoolboy's knowledge of ancient Hebrew and a layman's understanding of the history and archaeology of the ancient world. He is a professor of social science at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton and his aim is to examine the ideas about politics, the understandings of government and law that are expressed in the Hebrew bible.

Israel, he tells us, was founded twice once as a kin group and once as a nation. Both times there were alleged covenants with the god YHWH. Yet the stories of these events were written long after the events not as history but as religious propaganda. The story of the covenant of Abraham with YHWH is an obvious explanation for the replacement of human sacrifice with animal sacrifice much of which was appropriated by the Levite priesthood.

Walzer accepts that many Jews were in exile in Egypt although not actually employed as slave labourers building the treasure houses of the ruling class. He accepts they were lead out by Moses and Aaron and after wandering in the desert set about conquering and stealing the land of their more advanced Canaanite neighbours in the process forging another covenant with YHWH. They were led by a mysterious religious artefact, the Ark of the Covenant supposed containing the commandments given to Moses, which equally mysteriously vanished just as later the Christian Holy Grail would vanish.

Archaeology suggests they were marginalised Canaanites who coalesced into twelve tribes and whose priesthood adopted the faith of YHWH. Moses allegedly the faith of what was a Kenite

mountain and thunder god when he wed into the tribe in the Land of Midian, Yet the use of the plural Elohim in the first lines of *Genesis* suggests the Jews were originally polytheists.

This is understandable considering the local goddess cults were more fun and far more sexy than the rather austere worship of YHWH. In Kabbalah there is a female figure, the Shekinah, who sits on the right hand of God. And in song the Sabbath is depicted as a bride eagerly awaiting the coming of her husband.

For three hundred years the Jews were ruled by those mysterious figures the Judges, the Bible names twelve of them. Walzer writes that the whole of the Jewish intelligentsia such as it was, was engaged in arguing about the law. In practice they were deciding what the content of the Sinai covenant should be and also legitimising their own role. Ultimately the Law, like everything else, was God's. But with anything that in origin is really human there are contradictions and the *Talmud* refers to the contradictory works of Hillel and Shami as both being "the words of the living God."

After the prophet Samuel the failing of the rule of the Judges became obvious and the Jews adopted a monarchy which eventually split into two rival kingdoms, Israel and Judea. These two kingdoms not only fought threatening foreign powers but often fought each other. The Jewish nation had been founded on the genocide of seven Canaanite nations, monotheism being a convenient ideological excuse for this. Polytheism was far more tolerant and multicentric. Now the Jews often found themselves conquered by more powerful, more technically advanced nations many of them vanishing into the dominant population. Ten of the twelve tribes vanished as did the dynasty of the David kings. Jesus may well have laid claim to this, if he existed at all.

As Walzer points out the Old Testament starts out as the history of a very dysfunctional family. The struggle continued except that now it is a struggle for a royal inheritance. The common people fade into the distance.

The Bible has much to say about kingcraft and priestcraft but nothing about democracy or a republic, common terms in ancient Greek politics. Not surprisingly Messianism, the hope for future redemption in which a messiah plays a leading role, became popular among the subjugated masses. Jesus either deliberately

adopted or was painted into this role. In comparison to the Jewish savages, the Greeks were miles ahead! In political and philosophical terms were owe far more to them than to the Jews of antiquity.

One may think all this is very ancient history but the past, even the past of a savage tribe of genocidel killers, affects the present. The British monarchy is obviously based on that of ancient Judea which in turn borrowed from the more civilised Egypt. The monarch doubles as head of church and state and on coronation is anointed with oil, the monarchy still commands the armed forces, the Prince of Wales is circumcised according to Jewish ritual and the monarch rules by the Grace of God and is defender of the faith. And there are strong links between Masonry, which sees its roots in the construction of the Temple by Solomon, and the monarchy. And Queen Victoria was a British Israelite, she thought the Anglo-Saxons were descended from a lost tribe.

As humanity emerged from the long dark night of the Middle Ages, the ideas of religious and monarchical hegemony began to be challenged. Foremost among those doing this important work of demystification and enlightenment was Thomas Paine in his *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, works still full of meaning for today's troubled world.

Marxist historians have written about ancient Egypt and Greece. It is high time their incisive dialectical analysis, the materialist conception of history, was fully applied to the ancient Middle East.

Terry Liddle.

RELIGION FOR ATHEISTS. Alain de Botton, London
Hamish Hamilton. Hardback ISBN 978-0-241-14477-0 £18.99

Alain de Botton describes his book as a non-believers' guide to the uses of religion. Looking at religious practices, he thinks we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater in our modern secular society. He looks only at the bathwater; he believes sacramental processes are needed to form the gel of a caring community. At a low level, he fails to notice the squabbles these generate; what happens when flowers are arranged in a church to the dislike of certain parties, and similar issues?

How can the 'nice' bits of religion be separated from their ideologies which have generated fear, hatred and persecution? Practically all enlightened progress since the Renaissance has been made in the face of opposition by representatives of religion. Paine, and his publishers were no exception.

Atheism until recently was only admitted with caution. This book comes close on the heels of other publications taking a 'soft' approach to atheism; Londoners may note this is akin to waiting for a bus, then several turn up at once!

In 2008, the English translation of French philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville's, *The book of Atheist Spirituality*¹ appeared. This attempted to re-discover a spiritual heritage lost through being too closely intertwined with religion. Comte-Sponville writes, "It is possible to do without religion but not without communion, fidelity or love". De Botton finds these latter essential qualities found in religion! A third book, Ariane Sherine's compilation, *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas (2009)*² was a lighter look at how non-believers can celebrate the winter solstice; it contained contributions from, among the usual suspects, Dawkins and Grayling. Taking a more robust view, Robert Stovold's, *Did Christians steal Christmas? (2007)*³ is an historical stance on pagan and more modern origins of the December festival.

De Botton is a non-believer of Jewish parentage, a multimillionaire, founder of 'The School of Life' and proponent of a vast atheist temple. He is often heard on the radio and television. But there is a great deal missing in this book.

Religion for Atheists is a curious book. The author has nostalgia

for something he never experienced. But he finds remnants in Jewish, Christian and Buddhist religions which appeal to his sense of community which these faiths provide. I have heard this called 'belonging' rather than 'believing'. At the outset he dismisses debates about the truth of any religion as "the most boring and unproductive question one can ask". I have been involved in discussions about the existence of god and I'm inclined to agree. There are no answers to convince those of the differing camps. De Botton sees only the good he wants to see in religion. Nineteenth century secularists, Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins might never have existed. In this book we are stuck with the old conventions of BC and AD, not the updated form of BCE and CE.

The longest chapter deals with education. The author derides too much concentration on grades and exam performance. This may be good; education, education, education was the mantra of New Labour in 1997. What we got was war, war, war. De Botton finds the concentration of book learning in such as John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century at the root of our move from true education. As he has a double-starred first in history at Cambridge, he should know!

In this book of some 300 pages, there is lots of white space, and also paintings and photographs; some Old Master paintings, albeit only in black & white, enhance the text while other pictures leave the reader wondering as to their significance. The word Islam, and the religion associated with it, get no mention. He loves so much about the rites and rituals; but male circumcision in Judaism and Islam is not included. As this practice is considered barbaric by some, and certainly rarely consensual, it provides further example of de Botton's blinkered approach. He admires the spirit of neighbourliness, the joining of congregations for singing, communion and feasting. He extols the way religion brings abasement of monarchs at feet washing ceremonies for the poor and its lack of concern with worldly success or wealth. He should tell that to the Vatican City and those who shunned the 'occupy' camp at St Paul's recently. The tents may have deterred some paying visitors to the Cathedral, but otherwise it was the nearby Starbuck's customers who were most discomfited!

So what are we left with? The word secular is used in the sense of non-religious, not the purist definition of separation of church and

state touted by the National Secular Society. Humanism, as a positive code of morality without religion or superstitious back-up fails to gain entry. Yet new ways of celebrating a life at time of death, as well as baby naming and weddings are the most common source of knowledge about humanism and the British Humanist Association. These ceremonies without god are on the increase year on year.

De Botton applauds all the wonderful human gatherings and festivities generated by religious organizations; he also praises the works of humans in music, poetry, art and architecture. True many patrons have been found through religion for the creation of these artefacts. But there are many secular equivalents, and just a few which have been borne out of non-religious ethical groups. In London, Conway Hall is home of the South Place Ethical Society; its roots may have been religious, but it has long dropped the connexion to become a centre of humanist thought and action. Above the proscenium in the main hall are proclaimed Shakespeare's words: 'To Thine Own Self Be True'. In Leicester is the even older Secular Hall, with statues of Socrates, Owen, Paine, Voltaire and, perhaps surprisingly Jesus.

In the nineteenth century Auguste Comte put forward ideas for a Religion of Humanity, with institutions and buildings for 'secular churches'. This did not succeed; de Botton sees in Comte recognition that humans have a need for religion. Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, used this as part of his theory about the part religion plays in human 'camaraderie and solidarity'. De Botton recognises our sense of anomie, but barely accepts attempts to overcome this in the past.

Visiting cathedrals, minsters and churches are notable aspects of modern pilgrimages, which we call tourism. I think walking into a centuries old country church gives one a feeling for history and the past in a very human way; it has nothing to do with religious observance, it is just somewhere to find a place that has been trodden by forbears and find out about their lives. Before a certain date, all records of birth, marriage and death were in the parish registers.

In common with some of his generation, de Botton finds Buddhism offers 'something' missing from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Even Sam Harris, in his 2004 *The End of Faith*⁴ veers in this direction;

though Harris spoilt it by suggesting Islamic terrorists should be nuked before they get us!

Apart from the humanist rites of passage mentioned, there is a clear need for this 'something' our lives as non-believers. In the 1960s, with more optimism than we appear to have now, Richard Robinson wrote in *An Atheists's Values*⁵: "We need to create and spread symbols and procedures that will confirm our intentions without involving us in intellectual dishonesty. The need is urgent today. For we have as yet no strong ceremonies to confirm our resolve except religious ceremonies., and most of us cannot join in religious ceremonies with a good conscience. When the Titanic went down, people sang 'Nearer my God, to thee'. When the Gloucester's were in prison in North Korea they strengthened themselves with religious ceremonies. At present we know no other way to strengthen ourselves in our most testing and tragic times. Yet this way has become dishonest. That is why it is urgent for us to create new ceremonies, through which to find strength in these terrible situations. It is not enough to formulate honest and high ideals. We must also create the ceremonies and the atmosphere that will hold them before us at all times. I have no conception how to do this; but I believe it will be done if we try". That is the challenge.

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Denis Cobell

THE CONTRARIAN

Paine in the arse

Criticising Tom Paine in Lewes is clearly foolhardy. Akin to suggesting to the citizens of Stratford-on-Avon that Shakespeare's plays are rubbish. For here, in a town noted for its scepticism and its habit of burning over-praised heroes in effigy - this long-nosed, quarrelsome, barrack-room lawyer is worshipped as little less than a God.

Since Paine spent much of his inglorious career attempting to dethrone the Deity, it is ironic that this apostle of atheism is revered as some sort of secular saint whose icons litter the town he quit after just seven years.

There are plaques on houses and hotels associated with him. A wall painting of the great man by a member of the Bloomsbury dynasty. A 'liberty tree' in the castle precincts with yet another plaque. A festival in his name. A Tom Paine walk. Even a Harveys Tom Paine Ale. (Appropriately, since Paine was a notorious lush).

Had Paine possessed a sense of humour - (which his writings prove he did not) - or if his turbulent spirit survived death, (which he fervently believed it would not) - it would be nice to think of his shade grinning a sardonic smile at the sight of all this Tom-foolery, since in his lifetime, Paine was far from an object of hero worship. In fact he was widely hated - not least by the 'common people' he championed. Significantly, those who despised him the most were those who had once adored him. For, to be plain, Paine was a bit of a shit.

You can tell this from the bare bones of his biography. The discarded women (including Elizabeth Ollive, his Lewes wife); the friends betrayed - George Washington, Ben Franklin and Edmund Burke among many who helped Paine when he was down, only to be viciously mauled in return. For Paine was a great biter of every hand that fed him.



Illustration by Nigel Jones

It is no wonder that the American revolutionaries he espoused, then attacked, ended by washing their hands of him. Only six people bothered to attend the funeral of this 'friend of humanity'. Like many radicals, Paine loved humanity in the abstract - actual people were his problem.

Apart from his personal failings, the crucial fact about Paine that you would never learn from a casual stroll around Lewes, is that he was politically incorrect too. The French Revolution he famously defended almost killed him (he was only saved from the guillotine by Robespierre's fall); but it did kill 10,000 other innocents, and spawned later and greater revolutions that in the 20th century brought not Paine's new world, but totalitarian mass murder that took 100 million lives. Burke predicted that Paine's vaunted liberty would end in a tyranny 1,000 times worse than poor old George III, and in their great debate he was right and Paine was wrong.

If Lewes really is the unorthodox, rebel town it likes to think it is, it is high time that it abandoned its cultural cringe to this hypocritical old fraud.

Nigel Jones

The article above appeared in the September 2012 issue of the monthly magazine *Viva Lewes*.

UNKNOWN (TO US) ALLEGED PAINE
PORTRAIT



The portrait reproduced above, which was said to be of Paine was sent to the Journal recently.

We have never come across this illustrated before and it would be of interest if any reader could provide us with information as to who painted it, when and where it is presently held.

Credits: The article from *Viva Lewes* was sent to us by Bill McIlroy of Hove. The illustration of the Paine portrait came from by Syd Henley of Nottingham. The editor sincerely thanks these two valued TPS members. We always welcome cuttings of Paine interest. We also welcome articles, book reviews and such like for publication in the journal or our newsletters.