

T.P.S. BULLETIN



Number Two. Volume Two. 1993

T.P.S BULLETIN

No.2. Vol.2. 1993.

ISSN 0049 - 3813

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THOMAS PAINE AND THE GIRONDINS

William Doyle

The Thomas Paine Lecture, University of East Anglia, 1992

THE radicalism of Thomas Paine, Englishman, and Thomas Paine, United States Citizen, is well established and recognised. As I look down the list of distinguished previous lecturers in this series and their subjects, I see that both these aspects of his amazing career have been authoritatively discussed and elucidated; and I do not intend, nor am I qualified, to take that discussion further. But it is useful nevertheless at the outset to remind ourselves briefly of Paine's claim to radicalism in the English-speaking world; because my main purpose today is to establish those claims in the French speaking world, too. Paine established his credentials, you will remember, in 1776 when he advised the American rebels in *Common Sense* to renounce their allegiance to George III and proclaim themselves an independent republic. By 1778, in the pamphlet series, *The Crisis*, he was advising the people of Great Britain to get rid of monarchy too. He took this theme up more memorably in Part 2 of *Rights of Man*, published in the spring of 1792, where monarchy was denounced as "the master-fraud, which shelters all others;" and where he put forward a comprehensive programme, not for *reforming* the British Constitution, but for *giving* his native country a constitution for the first time; since he believed that until then all it had was "merely a form of Government without a constitution" - a situation which obtains to this day. His prescriptions were radical indeed: redistributive taxation, an end to primogeniture, old age pensions, subsidised education, and of course a written constitution ensuring fair representation of the sovereign people and strict constraints on the abuse of power. By 1796 he was publicly castigating his old hero, George Washington, for just such abuses of power and monarchical tendencies. And just before that he had thrown down a challenge to Christians of all persuasions with *The Age of Reason*, that democratic denunciation of theology, revealed religion and those who lived well on the profits of such impostures, - the clergy. Throughout most of these writings the message of Thomas Paine is that there are better ways of conducting human affairs; that they can be achieved if men recognise their own capacities, and their own autonomy; and that, for the first time in human history, a better way has been attempted. It has been attempted in America, the example of which suffuses the *Rights of Man* as much as if not more than that of France, especially in Part 2; and of course, from 1789 it has been attempted in France, when men seized control of their own destiny, not on the edge of virgin forests, where it was relatively easy to begin afresh, but in the very corrupt heart of old

Europe, an "Augean stable of parasites and plunderers too abominably filthy to be cleansed, by anything short of a complete and universal Revolution." And apart from refuting Burke and his "horrid principles", the avowed purpose of *Rights of Man* was to offer an accessible translation into English of the founding manifesto of the French Revolution, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* of August 1798, the destined preamble (as it still was when Part 1 of Paine's book was published in the spring of 1791) of the new French constitution.

All this is well known. What is perhaps less well known is that when he wrote Part 1 of *Rights of Man* Paine scarcely knew France. He had spent three months there in 1787. He had spent most of his time there in the company of Americans, or Frenchmen like Lafayette who liked to speak English. And although we have no reason to doubt that the translation of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* is his own, it is well attested that he *spoke* no French. We all know what a world of difference there is between using and understanding the written, as opposed to the spoken word in a foreign language. Thus it was that when, in January 1793, as a member of the French national Convention, he made his only attempt to address his fellow deputies, he stood mute on the tribune while his speech was read for him. Nor had he, in France in 1787, foreseen the Revolution; much less that it would turn republican. Louis XVI at this time was in fact a king he rather approved of, for had he not come to the aid of the United States in its struggle for independence? Of *revolutionary* France he knew nothing at first hand until the end of 1789; and the account which he gives in *Rights of Man* of events there between the fall of the Bastille and the October Days is entirely second-hand, even if the source of his information was no less an observer than Thomas Jefferson. But his first sojourn in regenerated Paris, during the first three months of 1790, was at a time when the Revolution's initial enthusiasms had not yet turned sour; and when he returned to England to take up cudgels on its behalf, it was this euphoric phase that was his only direct experience of it. By the time he returned once more to Paris, in the spring of 1791, *Rights of Man* had been published, and he was now the best-known defender in the world of two Revolutions.

By that time, however, the French Revolution had moved on; and the euphoric consensus of twelve months before had not survived. The costs of comprehensive revolution were becoming apparent, and bitter divisions and resentments were beginning to open up and fester, notably over the questions of religion, and of the monarchy. Always suspected but never proven, the king's hostility to the work of the Revolution was brought to the surface by the religious question in the spring of 1791. As that year opened, all beneficed clergy in France were required to take

an oath of loyalty to the Constitution. Those who refused to do so were to lose their benefices. Louis XVI had sanctioned this law, but he knew (as the world was to know some months later) that the Pope disapproved of the oath. Accordingly the king refused to confess to or receive the sacraments from any priest who had taken it. This refusal could not be disguised, so that the spring saw mounting suspicion of the king and his intentions. This atmosphere in turn impelled the king to think of escaping the country; which he finally tried, with disastrous results, on 21 June: the ill-fated flight to Varennes. Paine was in Paris as this storm blew up, and then broke; and as in 1776 his reaction was one of common sense. The king had proved impossible to deal with, so the only solution was a republic.

What was Paine doing in France that spring? He was returning to where the action was; and perhaps keeping prudently out of England until the first storm over his book blew itself out. And the company he kept there was that of his old, English speaking friends. Jefferson had by now returned to America, but Lafayette was very much in the centre of things, as commander of the National Guard. Paine lodged with Condorcet, the last of the *philosophes*, was on familiar terms with Brissot, a leading journalist and enthusiast for all things American; and was closely associated with one of the leading intellectual centres of early revolutionary Paris, the *Cercle Social*. Now the *Cercle Social* has long enjoyed a special reputation among historians. Among the men of the left who dominated historiography of the French Revolution for two thirds of this century, the *Cercle Social* was identified as a centre of progressive thought and radicalism. Karl Marx himself commended it, even if he thought much of its activity utopian. But in its concern for wider democracy and social justice, and the campaign it fought in its famous newspaper, the *Bouche de Fer*, against the electoral restrictions envisaged by the National Assembly, it was seen as forward-looking and a precursor of the popular values which were to triumph, however briefly, in 1793-4. It proudly proclaimed itself committed to the ideas of the Enlightenment; and particularly those of Rousseau; and it made no secret of the inspiration it derived from Freemasonry. No wonder Paine was drawn into its circle. He was a democrat, he was a fervent disciple of the rational Enlightenment, and indeed a sympathiser with masonic ideals, on which late in life he wrote an essay (as a previous lecture in this series has noted). And when the king fled, members of the *Cercle Social* were among the first to draw the obvious conclusion that now was the time to get rid of the monarchy entirely and establish a republic. Having Paine among them at this moment seemed providential, and they turned to him, as the world's best known anti-monarchist, to put their views into words. When some of them formed themselves into a

“Society of Republicans” and launched a journal *The Republican* to propagate their cause, they had Paine write the leading articles and then translated them for him. They asked him, too, to write a republican manifesto which appeared all over Paris on 1 July, a clear attempt to re-enact the triumph of *Common Sense* in America fifteen years beforehand. But this time it did not work; or at least it did not work in the same way. There is no doubt that French republicanism, which did not exist in 1789, was born in the weeks following the flight to Varennes, and that Paine played a key roll in articulating it. But it was far from a movement that swept the nation overnight, as it had in America. In fact its immediate fate was to be crushed, when republican petitioners were shot down by the Paris National Guard on 17 July in the massacre of the *Champ de Mars*. It took another year to get rid of Louis XVI, and for a lot of that time republicanism had gone underground. Paine himself returned to England on 13 July, just before the massacre, to write Part II of *Rights of Man*, and he remained there, in the thick of controversy, for the next 14 months. Thus he played no active and direct part in the final overthrow of the French monarchy on 10 August 1792. But his republican credentials were acknowledged when he was proclaimed a French citizen and, the next month, elected by no less than three departments as a member of the Convention which was to endow France with a republican constitution.

But let me now briefly return to the *Cercle Social*. It used to be thought that it, and the *Bouche de Fer*, disappeared forever in the anti-republican repression that followed the *Champ de Mars* massacre. Historians therefore treated it as a curious but premature forerunner of more serious reform that was to come later; but with no direct connection with the Jacobin Republic of the year II, which was the real, if ill-fated, social and political experiment. Six years ago, however, the American historian Gary Kates devoted the first ever scholarly monograph to the *Cercle Social* and its history, and what he discovered were a number of remarkable surprises. He was able to show that the group behind the *Cercle* and the *Bouche de Fer* did not disperse or cease their activities after July 1791; they simply became less a club than a publishing house. As such, they remained an influential source of radicalism and republicanism. But those they supported and worked with were not, as you might expect, the Jacobins who were to triumph in 1793. The *Bouche de Fer* was in fact the mouthpiece of those who were to be the Jacobins' main opponents in 1793, and whom they and the sans-culottes of Paris were to purge from the Convention at the beginning of June that year - the Girondins. People like Brissot, Condorcet, Roland; and of course Paine. Clearly this poses a major problem of interpretation and understanding. How could people who had been so radical in 1791 have become so

moderate in 1792 and 3 ? Historians of the Girondins have always wrestled to some extent with such difficulties, but Kates' research has made them even more acute. In their early days we now know their leaders were a lot more radical than we thought, so the contrast is even more glaring. And this in turn highlights what has always been something of a problem in the interpretation of Thomas Paine. How was it that the great radical republican, once he was elected to the Convention and became an honorary French citizen, sat and voted with the Girondin moderates and - irony of ironies - even tried to spare Louis XVI's life? For the famous occasion I mentioned earlier when he had a long speech read to the Convention was in fact during the voting on what penalty to impose on the now convicted king. Paine's solution was that he should not be executed, but kept in prison until the end of the war, and then banished to the United States, where he should pass the rest of his life learning from the everyday example of a free and republican people what liberty really meant: "There, ... far removed from the miseries and crimes of royalty, he may learn, from the constant aspect of public prosperity, that the true system of government consists not in kings, but in fair, equal and honourable representation."

Paine's stated grounds for preferring this elaborate form of penalty were twofold. One was, if you like, sentimental: that Louis XVI, though a despot, had been a patron of liberty at the time of the American Revolution, and in helping the Americans to free themselves, had performed "a good, a great action". The other more principled: Paine was opposed to the death penalty. "This cause", he declared, "must find its advocates in every corner where enlightened politicians and lovers of humanity exist." And, in a pointed though in no way rancorous reference to one of the leading advocates of killing the king, he noted that at an earlier stage in the Revolution Robespierre had actually moved, unsuccessfully, the abolition of capital punishment. What Paine is saying here, in effect, is that Robespierre has changed his principles but I have not changed mine. As far as he was concerned, principles were what the Age of Revolution were all about. "I have no personal interest in any of these matters" he said to Danton some months later, just before the downfall of the Girondins, "nor in party disputes. I attend only to general principles."

But so, it seems to me, did the Girondins. This is surely the key to the difficulties of interpretation thrown up by Kates' conclusions on the *Cercle Social*. For too long the Girondins have been depicted as social conservatives whose domination of the Convention had to be broken if the progressive and popular programme of the Jacobins and Sans-culottes was to triumph. But in 1972, in what seems to me the most important book ever written about the politics of the Convention, the

Australian historian Alison Patrick demonstrated conclusively that those called Girondins were far from the dominant or leading group in the Convention; and she noted, what detached observers ought surely to have remarked on long before, that they were on the losing side in most of the crucial votes. While accepting that none of the groups could be legitimately described, or would have been content to be described, as political parties, she was able to demonstrate clear voting patterns, which could only be made sense of by postulating that it was the Jacobins, not the Girondins, who were running the country in the winter of 1792-3. She also showed that those whose voting patterns could be described as a Jacobin one tended to be older and more politically experienced than their opponents. They were practical men; and they saw that there was a war on, and that it was going badly, and that every effort had to be made to win it, or the Revolution would not survive. That was why the Convention had to co-operate with the *sans-culottes*, the people of Paris who had overthrown the monarchy. It was true that the *sans-culottes* had perpetrated the horrifying September massacres a few weeks later, but with the Convention sitting in Paris there was no alternative but to go along with what these people wanted, even if that went against many of the things that the revolution of 1789 had been all about. And so what came about in 1792-4, the period of the so-called Jacobin Republic, was the complete reversal of what the National Assembly had tried to establish in 1789 and 1790. Government was centralised, when the aim of the Revolution of 1789 was *decentralisation*. Power at the centre was unified, when the aim in 1789 had been a separation of powers. Elections were suspended, when regular accountability had been the initial aspiration. Justice was politicised, when a dream of 89 had been to make it independent. A controlled economy was introduced, when educated opinion had been unanimous that free trade was the natural economic order. I am not saying that the Jacobins necessarily believed in any of this, any more than they believed in some of the more utopian declarations made during their period of power but - significantly - never implemented. What they did believe was that, like it or not, it had to be done. Just as most of them plainly did not believe in the purging of the Convention in June 1793, and agonised for weeks before acquiescing in the forcible removal of elected deputies from the national representation. Their reluctance to see this happen strikes me as perfectly genuine; but in the end they concluded it was necessary in order to remove a major obstacle in the way of saving France and its revolution from destruction.

And what was that obstacle? In a word, Girondin intransigence. The Girondins did not believe that the republic should conduct its affairs according to the desires and dictates of the people of Paris; and they

did not believe, either, that the issues could be postponed. That was perhaps the essential difference between them and the Jacobins, a difference between idealists and pragmatists; or if you like, between first principles and forced principles. Because, argued the Girondins (and you can distil this from their innumerable speeches), the Parisian issue goes right to the heart of what the Revolution is all about. If the *sans-culottes* can dictate to the Convention, they do so by force and intimidation, rather than by law. They have shown in the September massacres what they are prepared to do to their opponents - massacre them in cold blood without trial or any semblance of legality. In 1789, the people of France set out to establish the rule of law and to guarantee the civil rights of all citizens. How can one run the country by taking orders from those who have shown nothing but contempt for those principles? Besides, the Convention is the representative body of the entire Nation, and not just Paris. The deputies of the capital, the core of the Jacobins, number only two dozen, and yet they are trying to force the priorities of their constituents down the throats of the representatives of the rest of the Nation, and not just Paris. The deputies of the capital, the core of the Jacobins, number only two dozen, and yet they are trying to force the priorities of their constituents down the throats of the rest of the Nation, much of which plainly does not want to be dictated to in this way. The power wielded by Paris is an affront to the electoral principle, an attempt to confiscate National sovereignty by a small section of the Nation, and because of that yet another clear contravention of the Revolution's original principles. It was not even as if the *sans-culottes* spoke for the whole of Paris. Sensible, educated, enlightened people had gone to ground: the ignorant mob had taken over, the sort of people men of education had always thought should not be entrusted with power, and whom they tried to deprive of the vote in 1790. What would happen if such people got their way was seen in the case of the grain trade, on which the *sans-culottes* wanted strict controls, just as there had been during most of the old regime. Towards the end the royal ministers had toyed timidly with a freer market, and this was not the least of the reasons why ministers were so unpopular in 1789; but almost unanimously the men elected to the National Assembly in that year believed that the Revolution offered an opportunity to establish an enlightened freedom once and for all - the first unequivocal triumph for free market economics. The *sans-culottes* wanted to reverse that, and in 1793 they succeeded in doing so by forcing the Convention to decree the law of the Maximum, in the teeth of Girondin opposition initially, and then only finally and fully after they had been purged. In Girondin eyes this was the triumph of sheer ignorance and prejudice over Enlightened principles - again the very antithesis of what the French Revolution was supposed to be. Ever since

the days of the *Cercle Social* the Girondins had made plain their belief that the Revolution was the fruit of the Enlightenment, and an opportunity to put into practice Enlightened principles in a way that would have been impossible under the old order. These opportunities would be lost if the ignorant were allowed to override with their prejudices the benevolent convictions of educated men.

All this, it seems to me, suggests that the conventional label of *moderates* so often attached to the Girondins is in fact profoundly inappropriate. Moderates make and live by compromises, steer a middle course, avoid extremes. Only the political overlay resulting from generations of left-wing adulation of Jacobin populism as the ancestor of later socialisms, only this has prevented historians from seeing that the moderates, in the sense of the compromisers, the realists, the deal-makers, were the Jacobins. And the real revolutionaries, in the sense of the men who put principles before practicalities, were the Girondins. It was they who were the starry-eyed idealists, who believed that you could not defend the principles of the French Revolution by compromising them; and that if the Rights of Man were a universal code they could only be defended by being observed. Those who had written about them in our own time have all agreed that there was no sense in which they constituted a party, or anything like one, and that, indeed, they often indignantly rejected charges that they were one. But this is entirely what one would expect if they were idealists of the sort I am suggesting. Deputies were not there to pursue prearranged programmes or to make deals. They were there to vote according to their conscience and their principles about the public welfare. The party, if there was one, was the Parisian delegation with its regular block-voting and its outside headquarters at the Jacobin club, its systematic conciliation of the *sans-culottes* and compromising of the principles of 1789. There mere fact that only something like party organisations makes representative assemblies remotely manageable was of no consequence. What was right would be obvious, and opinion should not need to be dragooned in order that right triumphed.

This faith in the conquering power of true principles is also shown in the Girondins' attitude to foreign powers. It was they who launched the movement towards war in the Autumn of 1791, not because they wanted the vast generation-long upheaval that resulted, but because they thought the conflict was bound to be short, sharp - and victorious. And that was because the French cause was so self-evidently right that subject peoples groaning to follow the French example would rise up at the approach of French arms and overthrow their despotic rulers; and because the enthusiasm and faith in liberty of the regenerated French Nation would overthrow the paper tiger armies of those same despots.

After initial uncertainties, in the Autumn of 1792 that is exactly what seemed to happen, and it was in these circumstances that Brissot declared that France must set all Europe alight, and that the Girondins induced the Convention to offer French fraternity and help to all nations seeking to recover their liberty. This was certainly no moderate policy; and it so alarmed the supposedly extreme Jacobins that in April 1793 they carried a vote rescinding the fraternity and help decree. They were right, of course. Such an open-ended offer was totally reckless and utopian. But what it is evidence of, once again, is the proposition that I have been arguing, that the true French revolutionaries were not the pragmatic, practical, compromising Jacobins, but the principled, *impractical*, intransigent Girondins. This conclusion makes their ancestry in the utopian *Cercle Social* no longer surprising, but on the contrary entirely consistent and to be expected. It also makes them obvious soulmates for Thomas Paine.

At last, then, we come back to the figure who is, as he should be, the real subject of this lecture. But I hope that this lengthy detour about the nature of the Girondins will not seem irrelevant. It ought no longer to seem the least surprising that during his time as a deputy to the Convention he should have been identified as a Girondin. All his previous links with France (with the exception of Lafayette, who had by then defected to the Austrians) were with those who now constituted the Girondin leadership. All his radical, republican instincts were also with men who believed that, even in wartime, the French Nation could be governed in accordance with the rights of man and the rule of law rather than the demands of metropolitan pressure groups and threats of force. The true revolutionaries were those who wanted to make the Revolution and its principles *work*, rather than postpone their implementation until emergencies were over. If the principles of 1789 were sound, and valid, they should be workable, and proof against transient circumstances. Paine's writings, too, are steeped in the conviction that rational, radical republicanism works. In *Revolutions* that aim at positive good, he wrote in Part II of *Rights of Man*, "Reason and discussion, persuasion and conviction, become the weapons in the contest, and it is only when those are attempted to be suppressed that recourse is had to violence. When men unite in agreeing that a *thing is good*, could it be obtained ... the object is more than half accomplished. What they approve as the end they will promote in the means".

Now we may say that such an approach to public affairs is impossibly naïve and utopian, and doomed to disappointment. In Paine's case it certainly was. In June 1793 his Girondin friends were expelled from the Convention and arrested; in October, under pressure from their *sans-culotte* enemies, they were executed; at the end of the year Paine

himself was arrested, and remained in prison for nine months, seven of them under real threat of being guillotined. And when he turned to his beloved United States to secure his release, as one of their most eminent citizens, they made no great efforts on his behalf. And although the second-rank Girondins who remained alive were restored, like him, to their seats in the Convention in the Autumn of 1794, and were influential in producing the directorial constitution of the Year III, that attempt to get back to the first principles of 1789 was no more successful than the first revolutionary constitution, and within four years had been overthrown by a military coup, just as Burke had predicted would happen, much to Paine's scorn, in 1790. Despairing of France, Paine returned in 1802 to America, only to find that his popularity had vanished there too as a result of the anti-Christian polemics of *The Age of Reason*. At the time of the French Revolution's bicentenary two years ago, it was fashionable to sneer at the attempt made two hundred years ago to build a new, better, more humane and more rational world. Weighty volumes were written to prove that the whole enterprise was doomed from the start to end in blood, destruction and terror. And as regimes collapsed across Europe the lesson was drawn that the only wise approach is to be practical, and sensible, and to accept things as they are rather than trying to build a better world. Thomas Paine and the Girondins thought otherwise, and though they failed to bring the world of their dreams into being there is a genuine tragic heroism in their naïveté, - which the Girondins who were executed carried through to the end, singing the *Marseillaise* as they went to the guillotine. This was not empty swagger. Between the inertia and absurdities of the old order, and the butchery perpetrated by the practical, reality - facing Jacobins, these true revolutionaries offered not a moderate middle course, but an extreme commitment to the improvement of human affairs by reason, argument and example. We can surely applaud their ambition, and lament their failures, even as we shake our heads at their sad overconfidence that these pure ends could be achieved by means just as pure.

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PAINE IN AFRICA

John Smith

THOMAS PAINE went with me to Africa in a quite a roundabout way. I was one of those young impressionables in 1959 who thought Fidel Castro was going to save the world. Today, we thought it would be Cuba, with the dreaded Batista routed; tomorrow it would be the world.

Still now, thirty-three or more years later, I feel Fidel let me down just like he let Cuba down.

And still the world needs saving.

I had been too young for Gandhi and India's independence to have any influence on me. But I remember Nkruma leading his people to freedom and adding the new name of Ghana to my atlas. And I remember Ho Chi Min erasing an old name: French Indo China.

For a time it seemed as if the movement towards self-determination and away from imperialism was unstoppable. Leaders emerged demanding to be heard, from Makarios to Kenyatta, from Dom Mintoff to Gough Whitlam, they came and they went. And still the world needs saving.

Later, no longer so impressionable, I had begun to discern feet of clay in my heroes. What to do about it? Each of us had, I concluded, to be our own revolution, our own heroes. That was our only responsibility. The only thing we could hope to change was ourselves.

I can't remember exactly how I came to Thomas Paine. Or when, but it seems long ago. It isn't like remembering where I was when I heard about Kennedy's assassination or Armstrong's giant step for mankind or Thatcher's resignation.

Sometimes it occurs to me I came to Paine negatively, through my 'antis'. I was anti-Tory, anti-religion, anti-monarchy, anti-establishment, anti-imperialism, anti-privilege, anti-oppression. I still am.

However I came to him, Paine showed me how to be positive about my 'antis'. It was a vital lesson in personal revolution. A voice that spoke to me across two centuries taught me common sense. It taught me to be myself. It taught me how to be free to live in the present. It reassured me, in ringing terms, that I was not alone, that someone else had had the same thoughts, the same 'antis'.

Paine though had the added genius of communication. "The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave," he said, "is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies." Then he added the most radical and liberating words which took my thoughts to an altogether higher plane. He said, simply, "Man has no property in man; neither

has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow.”

Like the hero in the old Victorian adventure story, in one bound I was free. It was wonderful to know no-one owned me. It was even more wonderful to know that I didn't own my children. I didn't own anybody. Now I could start living. Now it didn't matter that heroes had feet of clay.

I share many frailties with Paine, among them a sort of idealized romanticism, a utopianism which is the inevitable side-effect of knowing there's a better way of doing things.

April 9th 1992 was election day. It was wonderful, warm and sunny. I voted early then sat in my garden. I watched a pair of greenfinches taking the peanuts I'd hung in the tree. The radio in the kitchen was playing Beethoven's third symphony, the Eroica. I thought about the election and about the future. It was a perfect English spring and everything was possible.

Later, of course, with the results, nothing was possible. The people had voted as they'd been told. They'd been persuaded by a talentless and incompetent government that they should lock their doors and trust to the market and pray the next redundancy wasn't theirs. There was no such thing as society. There was no public good. There was only private good. There were only shiny private teeth in rotten public gums in a land too mean to save itself.

Sadly I thought about what Paine had had to say about party politicians in general and the Tories in particular: "...men who went no further with any principle than as it suited their purpose as a party; the nation was always left out of the question; and this has been the character of every party from that day to this."

I wondered about the power of the British establishment to survive and perpetuate itself and I recalled the words of one of Paine's biographers: "The monarchy and the aristocracy seem to him such absurdities that he simply overlooked the fact that they enjoyed a very considerable, grudging respect. He overrated (the people's) readiness to militate for their rights because he underrated their habit of subordination" (A.J.Ayer. *Thomas Paine* p.111).

I used to have to travel to visit a one party state. Now I live in one.

Whenever I travel I take a copy of *Rights of Man* with me in the hope I can give it away. The irony is that the very first one I took to Africa I gave to an Englishman who returned home before I did (I also, incidentally, in Paris earlier this year, gave the TPS badge I was wearing to a young French student who was working his vacation as a ticket collector at the top of the Eiffel Tower. He said he was studying the

Girondins and claimed to know 'all about' Paine.

The work I am currently involved in is part - a very small part - of this country's aid to Nigeria. I am an independent contractor. My contribution is in the areas of management information systems and strategic planning. It's very rewarding work and a great privilege to have the opportunity to influence people and businesses.

It's also a great feeling to deliver *Rights of Man* and *Common Sense* on airline tickets paid for by the British government.

The problems facing Nigeria are a microcosm of the problems facing the world - corruption, religious wars, xenophobia, over population, depletion of resources, poverty, starvation, civil unrest - the list is as endless as the future is uncertain. The world has never needed common sense more than it does today. Despite the problems, Nigeria still has a lot going for it. It has a dynamic and lively free press with so many titles I seem to find a new one every day. They are, almost without exception, unequivocal defenders of democracy and republicanism.

The land has immense natural resources - oil, gas, minerals, forests and people.

Best of all Nigeria has education - between 60 and 70 percent of children of primary school age go to school.

As J.K.Galbraith, a great liberal thinker in the Paine tradition has pointed out - 'We must remind ourselves that in this world there is no literate population that is poor and no illiterate population that is anything but poor'.

Nigerians I've spoken to about this thank the colonialist British for their country's education policies.

The colonialists took their lead from the early Scottish Presbyterian missionaries who came to Calabar in the far east of the country with the slave trade.

Before Paine made his first Atlantic crossing, the notorious 'slave triangle' - from Liverpool to Calabar to the Caribbean and back to Liverpool - was one of the world's major trade routes. Paine's writing led the world towards the movement to abolish slavery. But I'm sure he would have had mixed feelings about the missionaries - what a freer place Nigeria would have been if it had their educational legacy without their religious legacy. Religion was at the heart of the civil war which saw 'Christian' Biafra trying to free itself from the western and northern parts of the country which are predominantly Muslim areas.

Like the US, which in many respects is something of a role-model for Nigeria, the wounds of the civil war have largely healed. Thus the

country has compressed an awful history into its thirty-two year independence.

Calabar can trace its beginnings back to 15th century Portuguese traders. It is a pleasant place, renowned throughout Africa for its beautiful food and its wonderful women. Many of its streets are named after British missionaries and colonial rulers; Mary Slessor is buried there; it has a fine museum and one of the oldest institutes of learning in West Africa - and almost certainly the one with the most spectacular view - its original buildings were replaced in 1892 and are still in use on a promontory high above a huge sweeping bend in the Calabar River.

Slavery, like defeat in the Biafran war, seems little more than part of history and certainly no cause for resentment. So much so that the biggest statue in the city is of an 18th century king - a contemporary of Paine's - who sold four hundred and ninety-five thousand of his countrymen as slaves. This is King Basseyduke.

Lagos, at the other end of the country is an altogether wilder place. It is a huge, sprawling capital city built on islands in lagoons linked by mile after mile of concrete dual carriageway causeways. It has a 'downtown' skyline, similar to that of a small US city, huge cathedrals, mosques and palaces. It has pockets of safe, rich exclusivity surrounded by the direst poverty. It has a huge underclass who live outside the law. Large areas of the city are unsafe after dark. Some are unsafe all the time. It is hot and rainy. Life is cheap in Lagos and the water is soft as silk.

These are two extremes. Both are coastal cities.

Inland, to the north, the Muslim power brokers have their strongholds. The President, who took power in a military coup, is just completing the building of a shiny new capital city near his tribal home, at a place called Abuja. This is in readiness for his declared intention to hand over power to a democratically elected civilian president on January 2nd. 1993.

No poverty is allowed in Ajuba and no untidiness. Nothing is allowed that might make the President uneasy in his last six months in office. In many ways he is a good man, strong enough to lead and brave enough to know when its time to go* (unlike Fidel).

Paine, I am sure would be sensitive to his, and the country's problems and to the solutions that he has proposed. I'm also sure Paine would be a constant thorn in his side to make sure he kept his part of the bargain, and didn't entertain ideas of making a comeback if the future's not to his liking.

Democracies have to make their own mistakes.

Paine would. I'm equally sure, be sensitive to the culture in which his message is being delivered, after all, isn't that what common sense is about?

It is fashionable in the US, for black history to be more and more portrayed as a stand-alone culture, independent of, and separate from, what it calls 'DWEM' culture - Dead White European Males.

I am always aware, in Africa, of Paine's undeniable 'DWEM-ness' in terms of that argument. So potentially, one runs the risk of being at best patronising and at worst guilty of the very cultural imperialism the DWEMs themselves are perceived to be guilty of.

Paine's genius though, transcends continents and races just as it does centuries. Man whose rights he champions is undifferentiated. The message is as relevant and pressing today in Africa as it was in 1791 in Europe and America.

That is truly heroic.

After all, as I never tire of telling anyone who'll listen, Paine summed up the problems of the world for me when he said, in introducing his *Common Sense*, "...a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom".

*The president remains, having, it seems, postponed handing over power - Ed.

NOTE:

The following is an extract from a letter sent by Godwin Effiong, Nigerian friend to John Smith, dated 16-6-92:

I want to say a really big thanks for the books you gave me. I have read, swallowed and literally digested every word of Thomas Paine.

I now feel like Robert Bage's hero when he said, "In my youth I (also) read tragedies, romances, divinity....Now I read *Common Sense*." I have read *Rights of Man* twice over, and I believe I am still going to read it again. Thomas Paine, with his simple but stirring words rouses my inspiration.

Yours sincerely,

Godwin.

THE FIRST CANADIAN EDITION OF *THE AGE OF REASON?*

R.W.Morrell

QUITE recently I acquired from an antiquarian bookseller a 19th century edition of Paine's, *The Age of Reason*. Although described as being in poor condition, the fact of it having been published in Canada intrigued me, for while I have seen many editions of this famous work originating from many lands, I had never seen a Canadian edition.

In the event when the book eventually reached me I found the condition to be far better than I had anticipated from the bookseller's description. The binding of limp cloth was clearly not original as traces of a printed cover were evident, so presumably it had been published in wrappers. However, the fact of these having been removed suggested these had been discarded by a previous owner because due to their presumably poor condition.

On the title page the book's name is printed in capital letters on two lines with the initial letters 'A' and 'R' being set in larger sized type. The author's name appears as a single line in the centre of the page with the word 'By' immediately above. These are enclosed above and below with a single line each measuring 23cm., again two sizes of capital letters are used. At the bottom of the page, once more in capitals, is a single line reading: W.B.Cook... (&?) M.Scott. This part of the page is damaged, the section with the dots being rubbed away, though the trace of another letter appears after the 'k' in Cook which might be an 'e'. I also suspect Scott had another initial, but what, if any, I cannot say. No place or year of publication is given.

Following the title page comes an historically interesting three page preface, headed in capital letters, 'Preface/to the Canadian edition', the first word being in larger letters. The preface is signed below its final paragraph with the initials, W.B.C. on the right, while at the left margin lower down than the initials, and inset as though to commence a paragraph, are the words: Toronto, September, 1887, thus providing an indication of the date of publication and the place of origin. It is perhaps not without significance that the earliest known freethought organisation in Canada, the Toronto Freethought Association, was founded here in 1873.

The preface is followed by an unrecorded life of Paine occupying 23pp., or at least one unfamiliar to me, and I thought I knew all English language lives of Paine. The author of this is not given; perhaps W.B.C. compiled it, though something about the style suggests to me it may have been written by Charles Watts, the British freethought publisher

and writer, who resided in Toronto from 1882 until 1891.t. As the final paragraph of the life occupies only about a third of p.28, the publishers, after having had a decorative printer's device (the printer is not identified) used to divide the two, filled the rest of the page with a twelve line poem headed, 'Dr. Ladd's Tribute to Thomas Paine.' I assume Dr.Ladd to have been the American poet, Joseph Brown Ladd (1764-1786), as in a short paragraph prefacing the poem he is referred to as 'a co-temporary of Thomas Paine'. On page 29 (unnumbered) the text proper commences, though Paine's note putting his essay under the protection of his 'fellow citizens of the United States of America' is excluded. Both parts of the work are present as is the so-called third part, *An Essay on Dreams*.

In none of the reference works currently available to me can I find reference to this edition of *The Age of Reason*. It is not listed by Brown & Stein (1978), or mentioned in his article on Canadian freethought by McKillop (1985), who also fails to say anything about the publishers. They are also ignored by McCabe (1948), although there is nothing unusual in this as he fails to mention several important freethinkers, most of the biographical entries relating to them in his *Rationalist Encyclopedia* having been lifted directly from his *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Rationalists*, published in 1920. It is clear from observations made in the preface by W.B.C., along with references to other freethought literature, that he was involved in the Canadian freethought movement.

The preface reveals that for more than five years prior to publication of this edition, the importation into Canada of copies of *The Age of Reason* had been prevented by the customs, acting on a complaint by 'a single religious zealot in the Toronto Customs' and 'the mistaken piety of the Minister of Customs'. As he knew of no Canadian law under which anyone publishing Paine's book could be prosecuted, more so as the authorities appear 'indifferent to all other forms of heresy and infidelity', it becomes evident that W.B.C. and his colleague published their edition of Paine in order not only to make the book available by circumventing the customs ban, but also to test whether there was actually a law under which it could be suppressed.

Although speculative, I strongly suspect this to have been a limited edition and thus scarce, if not rare, which would explain why it has been missed by Paine's bibliographers and students of Freethought history. Speculation apart, there is no doubt as to the book's considerable historical value in so far as the history of freethought, not to mention the fight against censorship. Although I cannot be absolutely certain of the fact, it may well be that this is the first Canadian edition of *The Age of Reason*. It would be interesting to hear if

others can provide additional information about the book along with some information about W.B.C. and his associate.

References:

Brown, Marshall G. & Stein, Gordon. (1978). *Freethought in the United States, A Descriptive Bibliography*. Greenwood Press.

McCabe, Joseph. (1948). *A Rationalist Encyclopedia*. Watts.

McKillop, A. Brian. (1985). "Unbelief in English Speaking Canada". Article in *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*. Vol.1. Ed. by Gordon Stein. Prometheus Books.



The first public memorial to Thomas Paine in England, the bust outside the Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate, Leicester. The hall, the only remaining Secular Hall in use as such, is well worth a visit if you are in the city.

NOTES ON THOMAS MUIR, 1765-1799

Eric Paine

THOMAS MUIR was one of the seven Scottish martyrs sentenced to Botany Bay in 1793 for sedition. The charges included circulating *Rights of Man*. He met Thomas Paine in Paris and the seven martyrs are commemorated by an obelisk erected in 1851 at Nunhead cemetery, Rye Hill Estate, London.

After being arrested in January 1793 for his so-called seditious activities, Muir was released on bail and then he went to France to warn the French that the execution of the monarch would be counterproductive to the reform movement. He came back via Ireland and was arrested again at Stranraer. Being a barrister he defended himself at his trial.

This intrepid character escaped captivity en route to Botany Bay in the Friendly Isles and after many adventures, including being badly wounded when the Spanish ship he was on was attacked by a British warship, he got back to France, where he was feted on his arrival in Bordeaux and Paris. He eventually died at Chantilly, a suburb of Paris, having succumbed to the wounds he had received coupled with the effect of his other ordeals.

The Thomas Paine Society hope to be associated with the friends of Nunhead Cemetery in commemorating the 200th anniversary of the sentencing of the Scottish martyrs.

A recent copy of a Norfolk paper reveals a fitting coincidence in that a Thomas Muir is now manager of the Thomas Paine Hotel in Thetford, which stands on the traditional site of Paine's birthplace.

NEW EDITOR - NEW FORMAT

BILL McILROY has retired from the post of editor of *The Freethinker*, his replacement being Peter Brearey. Bill, a member of the Thomas Paine Society, did a splendid job in keeping *The Freethinker's* flag flying. Founded by G.W.Foote in 1881, the paper, a weekly for many years but now a monthly, has long championed Paine and his ideas, particularly as expressed in *The Age of Reason*, and hopefully this will continue under its new editor. The first issue put out by Peter Brearey is radically revamped in style, the paper now looking 'news-paperish', but with an excellent range of articles. T.P.S. members who have not seen a copy should send for a sample issue from: G.W.Foote & Co., 702, Holloway Road, London, N19 3NL

A MEMOIR OF THOMAS PAINE

Abraham Raimbach*

IN 1843, the *Memoirs of Abraham Raimbach* the engraver (1776-1843) were published by his son. Raimbach was a friend of David Wilkie the painter, and highly regarded in his profession. In 1802, during the Peace of Amiens, like many more British artists, he crossed the Channel to France to see the great assemblage of works of art collected by Napoleon from all over Europe, and stayed there two months, meeting many French artists, and drawing in the Louvre. He timed his journey to arrive in Paris in time for the Bastille celebrations, travelling from London to Brighton on Thursday July 8th, crossing to Dieppe, and arriving in Paris by the evening of the 12th. In the course of his extremely interesting account of these two months there, he includes this passage (pp.78-80):

'Few men have had greater influence in their time for good or evil than Thomas Paine. As the able and active disseminator of these democratic and irreligious principles which, though apparently crushed and extinguished,

"Still in their ashes burn their wonted fires!"

and threaten from time to time to set the world again in a revolutionary blaze, this extraordinary man was a subject of interest and curiosity both in what he had been and in what he had become. He was now a fallen meteor - poor, friendless, and almost dependent for his daily bread upon the casual bounty of some of his compassionate fellow-countrymen. He was at this time constantly to be seen at an obscure *cabaret* in an obscure street in the Fauxbourg St. Germain (Cafe Jacob, Rue Jacob). The scene, as we entered the room from the street - it was on the groundfloor - was, under the circumstances, somewhat impressive. It was on a summer's evening, and several of the tables were occupied by men, apparently tradesmen and mechanics, some playing at the then universal game of dominoes, others drinking their bottles of light, frothy, but pleasant beer, or their little glass of liqueur, while in a retired part of the room sat the once dreaded demagogue, the supposed conspirator against thrones and altars, the renowned Thomas Paine! He was in conversation with several well-dressed Irishmen, who soon afterwards took their leave, and we placed ourselves at his table. His general appearance was mean and poverty-stricken. The portrait of him engraved by Sharp from Romney's picture of him is a good likeness; but he was now much withered and care-worn, though his dark eye still retained its sparkling vigour. He was fluent in speech, of mild and gentle demeanour, clear and distinct in enunciation, and his voice exceedingly soft and agreeable. The subject of his talk being of course

political, resembled very much his printed opinions; and the dogmatic form in which he delivered them seemed to evince his own perfect self-conviction of their truth. Among many predictions that subsequent events have not verified, he expressed himself quite confident that the Bank of England would never resume cash payments. Paine had been a member of the National Convention; and it is pleasant to know, as an Englishman, that on the trial of Louis XVI, he voted for the King's being pardoned. He was imprisoned during the time of terror, and narrowly escaped with his life. I understood afterwards that Colonel Cosville, of Yorkshire, had shewn him great kindness, and enabled him to return to America, where he dragged out the few remaining years of his life in neglect and poverty."

Note on Bosville (*Dictionary of National Biography*). Bosville, William (1745-1813) bon vivant. Lieutenant, 1769; served in American war; retired from army, 1777; travelled in France, Italy and Morocco, and subsequently settled in Welbeck St., London, where he became renowned for his hospitality.

*Contributed by Ray Watkinson.

REVIEWS

THE EXTENDED CIRCLE. Jon Wynne-Tyson. Sphere, 1990. £6.99

THIS is a most formidable collection of the thoughts of eminent people on the underlying unity of life and the obligation we have to extend the boundary of our compassion to the natural world. It runs to over six hundred pages, and requires no index as the contributions are in alphabetical order.

The book took Wynne-Tyson six years to compile and a life-time of appalled observation of our unremitting cruelty towards non-human species, being motivated by the conviction that our treatment to each other will not improve until we have learned to behave more compassionately towards all sentient life.

The book is not just a catalogue of man's particular cruelties to animals such as vivisection, zoos, rodeos, factory farming, bull fighting, blood sports, etc., but has the positive purpose of stressing the need for a beneficial love of all creatures as an ante-dote to the chilling inhumanity of societies which have inherited the life denying values of an existence deifying growth above all humane, holistic and long term considerations. The book makes for good soul searching and the

church comes in for condemnation for being almost totally indifferent towards the suffering of animals.

This paperback is good value and should prompt many to re-think their attitudes towards weaker non-human species generally.

It is fitting to conclude with a quotation from Paine's, *The Age of Reason*:

'The moral duty of man consists in imitating the moral goodness of God, manifested in the creation towards all his creatures. Everything of persecution and revenge between man and man and everything of cruelty to animals is a violation of moral duty.'

Eric Paine.

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