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Edited by Robert Morrell.

r.morrell1@ntlworld.com

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THOMAS PAINE AND THE RISE OF ATHEISM

Ken Gregg

Introduction.

US President Ronald Reagan was often proclaimed as “the Great Communicator”, but there has never been a great communicator of ideas as Thomas Paine. His *Common Sense* was the torch that lit the fires of the American Revolution, and his *Crisis Papers* fanned the flames. Paine’s monumental *Rights of Man* and other essay and political efforts helped to spread the sparks of independence from tyranny to England (where it failed), to France (where it succeeded) and throughout the globe.

If one man could be said to have this process, it was Paine. The elegance and economy of his style of writing is incomparable. Phrases from his writing, such as “these are the times that try men’s souls” and “sunshine soldiers and summer patriots” remain a legacy in the American language. He generated a school of imitators, though none have duplicated his accomplishments.

All his works were best-sellers during his day and have remained in print virtually every year in the past century. To know Paine’s political writings is to know the heart of America. As LaFayette said, “America without her Thomas Paine is unthinkable”.¹

This may be well and fine, but why should we give homage to this man? He was, after all, a deist who believed in a god and immortality of the soul, principles which, contra Teddy Roosevelt (who called Paine a “filthy little atheist”), Paine maintained to his deathbed.

Herein lies and interesting story.

1. Deism

In the year before Paine’s birth (January 29m 1737), Bishop Joseph Butler’s (1692-1752) *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution of Nature* (1736),² the culmination of the Anglican divines’ attack on deism was published.

Deist writings increased in number during the late 1600s and built upon the twin structures of biblical criticism and analysis of Christianity and other religions. From the 1680s through the 1730s, deist writers such as Charles Blount, John Toland, Anthony Collins, Thomas Woolston and Matthew Tindal analyzed and critiqued the consistency of the bible, and sought a natural, rational religion based upon ideas found in all religions.

This was

the school of Deists, the core of whose creed was the superiority of the universal natural religion to the parochial traditions of revelation, and whose chief appeal was to the general religious consciousness of mankind as furnishing the few essential doctrines necessary for the conduct of man in society and the education of his soul for the future state of rewards and punishments.³

Thus, they arrived at a god of creation, who built a universe to operate on its own.

When we see a watch, we have as positive proof of the existence of a watch-maker, as if we saw him; and in like manner the creation is evidence to our reason and to our senses of the existence of a creator.⁴

Deists of this early period generally regarded themselves as Christians and were amenable to the effective criticism of Butler and other Anglican divines who followed in a similar, rationalist tradition. Butler, in his *Analogy of Religion*, argued that god revealed himself in the course of events, and that the God of the deist (who speaks through "his" natural works), and the God of the Christians (who speaks through special providences and particular miracles) are open to the same objections. If one must be rejected, the other must be rejected as well. Man's moral nature, from which he reasoned to the moral constitution of the universe, was a constitution that could only have been granted by the same "God Who is Revealed in Scriptures".

The deists essentially accepted the argument that the very objections that could be lodged against revelation could be used as well against natural religion and lost in the debates. At this time, deism was clearly an upper class interest with little influence among the middle and lower classes.

Butler overthrew freethinkers of the eighteen century type, but Paine was the nineteenth century type; and it was precisely because of his critical method that he excited more animosity than his deistical predecessors. He compelled the apologists to defend the biblical narratives in detail, and thus implicitly acknowledged the tribunal of reason and knowledge to which they were summoned.... Paine represents the turning point of the historical freethinking movement; he renounced the a priori method, refused to pronounce anything impossible outside pure mathematics, resisted everything on evidence....⁵

2. Paine, Deist

As I mentioned previously, Paine was the great communicator. His *Age of*

Reason is the most published. Most quoted and most excerpted of all freethought works. It has been reprinted more than any other work in the literature of freethought.

As one biographer says in the notes to his edition of Paine's writings:

The combined work, Parts 1 and 11, were first published by H. D. Symonds on October 25, 1795, in London. A cheap pirated edition by the printer Eaton appeared on January 1, 1796. The other editions of Parts 1 and 11 appeared in London in that year. The editions of Part 1 and 11 are as follows: five in Paris in 1794; one in Boston, one in New York, and one in Worcester in 1794; and another in New York marked "The Seventh American Edition" in 1795. Of Parts 11, three editions appeared in London in 1796. Washburne says 16,000 copies of *The Age of Reason* were sold in England during its first year and shortly after that the London Club distributed 30,000 cheap copies. There were four editions in Ireland, the second being 10,000 copies. As late as 1820 Carlile testifies that during the three years before he had sold 5,000 copies....⁶

If *Age of Reason* was not read by Christians, it was certainly excoriated and condemned by them. Paine, author of *Common Sense*, *Crisis Papers* and *Rights of Man*, internationally popular, writing in his full maturity could not be ignored. Paine brought into the old debate a fresh earnestness and a new moral impetus.

While not as popular as Paine's other major works, no other freethought is in the same order of magnitude of publication. No other freethought work has had the same impact or influence. Charles Bradlaugh's career as a militant atheist was set on its way by his reading of *Age of Reason*;⁷ and Robert G. Ingersoll was influenced by Paine, as was virtually every other American freethinker. Paine is honoured more by freethinkers than any other figure.

Paine, like the new generation of contributors to science, was caught up with the scientific revolutions of his day. These led him far from Christianity. The deism of Paine, was different from the formulation of the previous generation of deists, which proclaimed a sort of purified Christianity, a natural Christianity (founded more on biblical criticism and a study of the similar characteristics of all religions), as opposed to the more supernatural Christianity. Paine's deism was founded upon scientific discoveries.⁸

Age of Reason is a surprisingly complex work with many sub-themes. He begins with ideas then are left trailing (many of which he was to spend his twilight years devoted to expounding), and also provides insights into both science and religion.

Age of Reason was not written against religion, as such, but against *atheism* although this is less clear in the later sections than in Part 1. Paine felt that the atheism of the more radical French leaders would prove the death of the French Revolution and conceived his task as taking a moderate path between atheism and orthodox Christianity.

Paine is noted for two features in his religious writings: rational analysis and biblical criticism. His biblical criticism and methodology of biblical criticism has been adopted by nearly all freethinkers.

modern theologians confirm Paine's importance. Even a Methodist bishop was willing to admit that

there can be no doubt either that the modern study of the Scriptures willingly concedes to Paine, and to other far abler than Paine, all that was true in what he said....⁹

His defence of deism has not weathered the times as well. Why was Paine a deist in the first place? In order to examine this question, two criteria must be examined: (1) The meaning Paine ascribes to the term god (i.e., his definition of god, hopefully non-contradictory; and, (2) some relation between Paine's god and reality (i.e., why his god is necessary to the universe, or what aspect of reality is necessarily explained by the existence of god).

[God] is a being whose power is equal to his will. Observe the nature of the will of man. It is of an infinite quality. We cannot conceive the possibility of limits to the will. Observe, on the other hand, how exceedingly limited is his power of acting compared with the nature of his will. Suppose the power, equal to the will, and man would be a God. He would will himself eternal, and be so. He could will a creation and make it.¹⁰

Since then everything we can see below us shows a progression of power, where is the difficulty in supposing that there is, at the *summit of all things*, a Being in whom an infinity of power unites with the infinity of the will? When this simple idea presents itself to our mind, we have the idea of a perfect being that man calls God.¹¹

This supreme being is consistent with Paine's belief (discussed later) in an infinity of intelligent races inhabiting an infinity of worlds. This belief poses several problems, however. The first that comes to mind is his own belief in one god? Why only one god? Why not a race of gods? Why not many races of gods? If only one god created the universe, was there some god who created the Creator God? However this may be, we have no evidence of a multiplicity of gods, for we know we have only one universe as Paine would have been

quick to point out.¹²

In a significant section in *Age of Reason*, he explained his foundation for the existence of god:

The only idea man can affix to the name of God is that of a *first cause*, the cause of all things. And incomprehensible and difficult to as it is for a man to conceive what a first cause is, he arrives at the belief of it from the tenfold greater difficulty of disbelieving it.¹³

This may, in fact, be difficult, but not incomprehensible. Causality is understood as a series of connected events in a chain, not as an event outside the chain of events, which is somehow connected with it as would be the case if a god created the universe. Indeed, as Paine continues, he asserts that

It is difficult beyond description to conceive that space can have no end; but it is more difficult to conceive an end. It is difficult beyond the power of man to conceive an eternal duration of what we call time; but it is more impossible to conceive a time when there shall be no time.¹⁴

Thus common sense tells us the universe is endless and of internal duration. How can a god be outside space and time? Common sense does not tell us that, nor can it.

Evolution is the process by which we have come to understand how living things grow and change over time. If Paine were to have lived in our post-Darwinian scientific world, would he have arrived at these same conclusions? Modern evidence would have necessarily rejected his "creationism".

Paine then characterized his god as a transcendental god who lays down the principles, or properties, of the universe and is the manufacturer of motion:

All the properties of a triangle exist independently of the figure, and existed before any triangle was drawn or thought of by man. Man had no more to do with the formation of these properties or principles, than had he had to do in making the laws by which the heavenly bodies move; and therefore the one must have the same Divine origin as the other.¹⁵

Certainly since the rise of thermodynamics as a science, motion has been clearly regarded as a property of matter. The presence of regular laws of motion result from the constituent properties of the atoms (and sub-atomic particles) which compose matter, organized in ever higher, more complex systems. Quantum mechanics defines motion as an *integral* part of any

description of the material universe (or any part thereof), and no supreme being is needed to explain this phenomenon. If anything, I would take Paine's argument more seriously were it to find a place wherein there was no motion; for it would require nothing less than a god to freeze motion, rather than to cause it.¹⁶

The problem of the existence of other worlds was one which led Paine, like Bruno generations before,¹⁷ to loosen the bonds of his Christian convictions:

After I had... conceived an idea of the infinity of space, and the eternal divisibility of matter,... I began to... confront the eternal evidence those things afford with the Christian system of faith.

Though it is not a direct article of the Christian system that this world that we inhabit is the whole of the habitable creation, yet it is so worked up therewith, ... that to believe otherwise, ... renders the Christian system of faith at once little and ridiculous... the two beliefs cannot be held together in the same mind, and he who thinks that he believes both, has thought but little of either.¹⁸

From whence, then, could arise the solitary and strange conceit that the Almighty, who had millions of worlds equally dependent on his protection, should quit the care of all the rest, and come to die in our world, because, they say, on man and one woman had eaten an apple? And, on the other hand, are we to suppose that every world in the boundless creation had an Eve, an apple, a serpent, and a redeemer? In this case, the person who is irreverently called the Son of God, and sometimes God himself, would have nothing else to do than to travel from world to world, in an endless succession of deaths, with scarcely a momentary interval of life?¹⁹

Can a Christian, in piety and observing his beliefs, contrast Christian apologetics with the infinite beauty of the universe? Can he not feel, as Paine did, that Christianity is in comparison with a vision of the splendour of an infinity of worlds and races, a "wild and whimsical"²⁰ system of faith.

3. Paine and Christianity

While essentially agreeing with Butler (on his critique of the earlier deists) on the possible validity of revelation, Paine attempting a middle ground disagreed with the deists' evaluation and Butler's acceptance of biblical revelation. As Ingersoll wrote on his essay on Paine:

He contended that it is a contradiction in terms to call anything a revelation that comes to us second-hand, either verbally or in writing. He asserted that revelation is necessarily limited to the first communication, and that after that it is only an account of something which another person says was a revelation to him. We have only his word for it, as it was never made to us.²¹

Paine's conclusions on religion had been proclaimed by the earlier generation of deists. The important difference lay in the unusually clear and simple language in which Paine expressed these ideas, and that Paine had placed these ideas in the context of modern science (in his day) and structured them within the cosmology of the leading astronomers. By using a method and style which any person with unaided reason could understand and enjoy reading, Paine

...took deism out of the sphere of academic discussion and made it a living creed for the average man. By doing so, of course, he threatened the hold of the clergy upon the people. As long as deism confined to intellectuals in the upper middle class and liberal sections of the nobility there was no danger to the vested interests of the priesthood ... he transformed deism from an aristocratic into a popular movement.²²

The whig Richard Watson (1737-1816), latitudinarian Bishop of Llandaff was the author of the most noted and least vitriolic of attacks on Paine's *Age of Reason*. Watson, formerly a professor of chemistry at Cambridge, was a professional apologist for the Anglican church, and obtained the see of Llandaff (in impoverished South Wales) as, in effect, payment for his efforts in behalf of the Church and State of England. He was regarded as a "useful partisan,"²³ although he was known for being one of the bishops "who rarely ever visited his diocese."²⁴ His two major apologetics were *Apology for Christianity* (1776), which was written in response to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and *Apology for the Bible* (1796), written in response to *Age of Reason*.

Paine believed that there was a direct relationship between Watson's apologetic and the persecution of the publishers of *Age of Reason* (interestingly enough, prosecuted by the former defender of Paine, Erskine, who later became Lord Erskine):

The bishop of Llandaff undertook to write an answer to the second part; and it was not until after it was known that the author of the *Age of Reason* would reply to the bishop, and the prosecution against the book was set on foot, and which is said to be carried on by some of the clergy of the English church. If the bishop is one of them, and the object is to prevent an exposure of the numerous and gross errors he has committed in this work (and which he wrote when report said that Thomas Paine was dead), it is a confession that he feels the weakness of his cause, and finds himself unable to maintain it. In this case, he has given me a triumph I did not seek ...²⁵

Paine's criticisms of Christian theology was directed toward a literal interpretation of the bible, which Watson, a liberal theologian not on the mainstream of his church, did not support.

... It does not seem to me to be a matter of any great consequence to Christianity, whether the accounts can in every minute particular be harmonized or not, since there is no discordance in them as to render the fact of the resurrection doubtful to any impartial mind.²⁶

In courts of law and in history in general, testimony tends to be inaccurate. What Watson, and Butler before him, argued, was that seeking absolutely accurate testimony is impossible. What must be sought is the probability of the testimony. If more than one person can attest to the same general occurrence, with but few particular contradictions, then a strong case can be made that the testimony, in the general line of occurrences, is true. Hence the truth of the bible rest upon a probability and not an absolute proposition.

History has not treated Watson's *Apology* well.

For example, Age of Reason ventured to doubt whether God really commanded that all males and married women among the Midianites should be slaughtered, while the maidens should be preserved. The Bishop indignantly retorted that the maidens were not preserved for immoral purposes, as Paine had wickedly suggested, but as slaves, to which there could be no ethical objection. The orthodox of our day have forgotten what orthodoxy were like a hundred and forty years ago. They have forgotten still more completely that it was men like Paine, who in the face of persecution, caused the softening of dogma by which our age profits.²⁷

As a biographer of Paine said:

Watson's defence was actually a capitulation. He first of all praised Paine's astronomical rhapsodies, setting forth evidence for the existence of God. He virtually admitted the textual argument although he held out for more accuracy in the Scriptures than Paine granted, and attempted to explain certain discrepancies. Only in regard to moral argument did Watson put up a determined fight. Here he revived the reasoning which Bishop Joseph Butler had used in his *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (1736) to confute the deists. Butler contended that all the objections raised against a Christian God for allowing evil in the universe apply with equal force to the God of the deists... Watson's *Apology*, filled with quotations from Paine, circulated among all orders of society in England at the behest of pious Christians. Those who read Watson came into direct contact with Paine as a result many accepted his principles.²⁸

Moncure D. Conway, Paine's principal biographer, had this to say on this subject:

Next to the *Age of Reason*, the book that did most to advance Paine's principles in England was, as I believe, Dr. Watson's *Apology for the Bible*. Dean Swift had warned the clergy that if they began to reason with objectors to the creeds they would awaken scepticism. Dr. Watson fulfilled this prediction... Davis Dale, the great manufacturer at Paisley, distributed thousands of copies of the *Apology* among his workmen. The books carried among them extracts from

Paine and the Bishop's admissions. Robert Owen married Dale's daughter, and presently found the Paisley workmen a ripe harvest for his [atheistic] rationalism and radicalism.²⁹

4. Paine and Atheism

The generation of freethinkers who were to reply to Paine's attackers *Paine's reply to Watson³⁰ was not to survive in a complete form following his demise) discarded many of his weaker position. Samuel Francis, M.D. in his *Watson Refuted* (1796), one of the more noted of the freethought responses, made the "first explicit avowal of atheism in English controversy."³¹

During the 1800s, Bishop Butler's *Anthology of Religion...* gained a wide resurgence of interest in England (partly, I suspect, because of the growing interest in rationalism and deism promulgated by Paine and other freethinkers). This time, the effect of Butler's work became the reverse of its original intent. By eliminating the middle ground (between religious enthusiasm and atheism) of deism, the choice of intellectuals now leaned toward atheism.

As John Stuart Mill said in his *Autobiography*:

I was brought up from the first without any religious belief in the ordinary acceptance of the term. My father, educated in the creed of Scotch Presbyterians, had by his own studies and reflections been early led to reject not only the belief in Revelation but the foundation of what is commonly called Natural Religion. I have heard him say that the turning point of his mind on the subject was reading Butler's *Analogy*. That work, of which he always continued to speak with respect, kept him as he said for some considerable time a believer in the divine authority of Christianity by proving to him that whatever are the difficulties in believing that the Old and New Testaments proceed from or record the acts of a perfectly wise and good Being, the same and still greater difficulties standing in the way of the belief that a Being of such a character can have been the Maker of the universe. He considered Butler's argument as conclusive against only opponents for who it was intended. Those who admit an omnipotent as well as perfectly just and benevolent Maker and Ruler of such a place as this, can say little against Christianity but what can with at least equal force be retorted against themselves. Finding therefore no halting place in Deism, he remained in a state of perplexity until, doubtless after many struggles, he yielded to the conviction that concerning the origin of things nothing whatever can be known.³²

As a biographer of Butler said:

The consistent non-Deistical rationalist finds the negatively formed argument of the *Analogy* only too persuasive that the objections against Revelations and

Natural Religion render both unacceptable.

Who won the Deistic controversy? It may now be evident that the controversy was won actually by neither of the apologists nor by the Deists, but by the skeptics.³³

During the mid-1700s, the effect of the Anglican divine's efforts brought the deists back to embrace (albeit tenuously) the Christian fold: during the 1800s, the effect was the opposite. The radical Painites of the 1800s, unlike the upper class deists of the 1700s, had no vested interest in supporting the existing political and economic system. Quite the contrary, the Painites were the revolutionaries. Mostly from middle class backgrounds, they sought to destroy monarchy and its theological underpinnings.

Clearly, the evolution of ideas among freethinkers was inevitable. Conway correctly pointed out that:

when Richard Carlile entered prison (1819) it was as a captive deist; when he came out [three years later] the freethinkers of England were generally atheists.³⁴

This was the period of the growth of atheist literature in English freethought circles, and the rise of d'Holbach's works, particularly the *System of Nature*, was clearly important at this time. It was first translated into English in 1795. Priestly, Bentham, Godwin, Shelley, Home Tooke and many other English radicals were influenced by d'Holbach. Baron d'Holbach's writings were now being published in English translations. This

made d'Holbach's influence a serious rival to that of Paine, while others of his works, less definitely atheistic in tone, were brought out by Paine's leading disciple - a man who nevertheless enjoyed the support of Place and Bentham and the Mills - Richard Carlile.³⁵

Atheists are the intellectual heirs of Paine who take his rationalist and scientific analysis the necessary, logical step inevitable - to atheism. If one adopts rational analysis as a guiding principle in religious affairs, atheism is inevitable.

Paine laid the foundation for later generations of freethinkers. He popularised his methodology and demonstrated his analysis. For Paine,

before the mind can have faith in anything, it must either know it as a fact, or see cause to believe it on the probability of that kind of evidence that is cognizable by reason.³⁶

That is all that atheists ask. That is what is due humanity.

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7. As Elbert Hubbard argues in his biographical essay on Bradlaugh in *Little Journeys to the Homes of Great Reformers: Bradlaugh*. New York, The Roycrofters, 1907.
8. *Ibid.* see pp35-57.
9. Francis J. McConnell. *Evangelicals, Revolutionaries and Idealists*. New York, Kennikat Press, 1972. p128.
10. *Ibid.* pp306-307. An interesting popular variation on this theme was written by the French scientist, Pierre Lecomte du Nouy, See *Human Destiny*. New York, Longmans, Green & Co., 1947.
11. Many Christian Gnostics believed this. In the *Gnostic Hypostasis of the Archons*, the creator god said: "It is I who am God: there is none [other apart from me]. When he said this, he sinned against [the entirety]. And a voice came forth from above... saying, "You are mistaken Samael..."
12. Elaine Pagel. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York, Vintage Books, 1981. p34.
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14. *Ibid.* p31.
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This article was originally published in the American Rationalist (Vol. 31. No. 5.), and is reprinted, albeit at a rather long interval, at the suggestion of the late Dr. Gordon Stein the journal's editor who was a member of the Thomas Paine Society

THOMAS PAINE, THOMAS MUIR, AND THE RADICALS OF THE 1790s

Murray Armstrong

“Louis XVI, considered as an individual, is an object beneath the notice of the republic, Tom Paine told the French National Convention as they debated whether to execute the king for treason in January 1793.

Paine, who represented Pas de Calais in the Convention, argued against the death penalty on the grounds that such an act would inflame other European monarchs and lead to a reaction that could endanger the reform and revolutionary movements throughout the continent. It would also undermine support for France in the other new republic of the United States. He recommended that the Capet family be exiled to America but he lost the argument.

It is probable that, from the public gallery, Thomas Muir got his first sight of Paine during that debate. Muir was leader of the widespread reform movement in Scotland that had burst into life in the summer and autumn of 1792. Similar movements had grown in England and Ireland, all of them boosted by the publication of Paine’s *Rights of Man*. By the end of 1793 the book had sold more than 200,000 cheap copies.

We have circumstantial evidence that Muir reached Paris in time for the debate on the fate of Louis, and would have been present in the rowdy public gallery when Paine spoke. What is more certain is that the two met and became friends at the British Club, a collection of supporters of the French Revolution that gathered in White’s Hotel in the rue de Petits Peres, where Paine had been living since he arrived in Paris the previous September. There were at least 40,000 foreigners in the city at the time and the British contingent was the biggest.

After *Rights of Man* was published, Paine had to flee to France to

avoid prosecution for sedition, but was convicted in his absence.

Muir's fate was more serious. He was arrested in Scotland on the same charge of sedition, convicted by a highly improper political bench of judges and a picked and packed jury, and transported to the new penal colony of New South Wales for 14 years. With him were four other leaders of the Radical movements for popular democracy in Scotland and England. They were William Skirving, national secretary of the Friends of the People, the reform organisation in Scotland; Thomas Palmer, a Unitarian minister, previously a Fellow of All Souls in Oxford, who preached in Dundee; Maurice Margarot, son of a continental wine merchant, educated in Geneva, and chairman of the main English reform club, the London Corresponding Society; and Joseph Gerrald, son of a West Indies plantation owner who trained as a lawyer in Pennsylvania and was also from the London Corresponding Society.

The Scottish reformers had, by the end of 1792, felt strong enough to organise a convention in Edinburgh to coordinate a series of petitions to parliament (all rejected) seeking universal manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, and annual parliaments. There were 80-100 branches of the Friends of the People in Scotland at the time, the same number as the reform societies in England, which had a population five times greater. There were three Scottish conventions held in 1792 and 1793 and the fourth was a British convention, which received delegates from English societies.

Muir was arrested after the first convention and accused of reading and address from the United Society of Irishmen, which the authorities thought was seditious, if not treasonable, and for 'wickedly and feloniously' distributing Paine's *Rights of Man*. Palmer was arrested shortly after, and the three others were charged with sedition after the authorities broke up the final British convention in November 1793. They were collectively called the 'Scottish Martyrs' and were the first political prisoners to set foot in Sydney Cove.

However, Muir escaped in February 1796 and by December 1797 had rejoined Paine in Paris, after a world-wide adventure, near the end of

which he was seriously wounded in a sea battle and lost his left eye and part of his cheekbone. His wounds were so serious that he only survived for another 13 months, but in that time Muir and Paine worked together with the Irish revolutionaries Wolfe Tone and Napper Tandy, advising the French Government on support for the independence movement in Ireland and the democratic movement in Scotland. Muir died in January 1799, aged just 33 years.

Thom Paine is well known, though not as recognised as he should be. There is a statue of Paine in his home town of Thetford in Norfolk. It was the gift from the Thomas Paine Foundation in New York in 1964 but was not accepted with open arms. A Conservative town councillor called it "an insult to the town" and tried to prevent it being erected. When that failed a number of councillors attempted to have the word "traitor" inscribed on the plinth. They did not succeed. Paine is also remembered in Lewes, where he worked as an excise man before travelling to America and playing a prominent part in the revolution there. There are several plaques to him in the town and a statue outside the public library. A small obelisk remembering Paine was erected in 1991 near the site of the Angel Inn, Islington, where Paine at one time stayed, to mark the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Rights of Man*.

Thomas Muir is less well known, although a 90ft obelisk stands in Edinburgh dedicated to him and the four other 'Scottish Martyrs' transported with him. It has been prominent on Edinburgh's skyline since it was erected by Radicals and Chartists in 1845 but very few people are now aware of its meaning. There is no memorial to him in his home town of Glasgow.

However, that is changing. The work of the Friends of Thomas Muir, a small campaign group in Bishopbriggs, outside Glasgow, has since 2011 organised an annual Thomas Muir festival of arts, music and literature. Bishopbriggs was the home of the Muir family estate, Huntershill, and the family house still stands there. But the sea change in Scottish politics since the two-year long referendum awoke a sleeping electorate and involved thousands of young people in discussion, has led to greater interest in Muir and the Radicals of the

1790s.

Monday 24 August marked the 250th anniversary of Muir's birth and the inaugural Thomas Muir Memorial Lecture was delivered in St. Mary's cathedral in Edinburgh by the former Scottish First Minister, Alec Salmond MP. Salmond proposed a campaign for a posthumous pardon for Muir and the Radicals and to be taught in Scottish schools as part of the Curriculum for Excellence, a government building in Edinburgh to be renamed Thomas Muir House, and the old Calton burial which hosts to memorial to the five who were transported, to be taken over by Historic Scotland and transformed into a major tourist attraction. It is hoped the memorial lecture will become an annual, non-party event where a public figure will talk about some aspect of democracy or the constitution.

The artist Ken Currie has recently unveiled a new, powerful and sombre portrait, *The Trials of Thomas Muir*; there is an exhibition of the life of Muir in the Scottish parliament and a reception in his memory will be held there later this month [September 2015]; the Faculty of Advocates, from which Muir was expelled, restaged parts of his trial in the Court of Session in Edinburgh during the festival; there will be a 'Democracy Walk' from the Calton monument to the parliament in October; and I have had the privilege of speaking all over Scotland since the publication last October of *The Liberty Tree*, my book on Muir.

Tom Paine was the revolutionary theorist of popular democracy in the late 18th century and an active participant in its difficult birth. Thomas Muir is slowly being recognised as the father of Scottish democracy. Both suffered for their beliefs and were, until recently, shamefully forgotten. Together they deserve greater recognition as pioneers of liberty, freedom of thought, self-determination and citizenship.

Book Reviews

The Liberty Tree, The Stirring Story of Thomas Muir and Scotland's Fight for Democracy. Murray Armstrong. Edinburgh, Word Power Books. xi & 552pp. Paperback. ISBN 978 0 992739 22 5.

£12.99

The trial of Thomas Muir 'Is one of the cases, the memory whereof never perisheth' observed the Scottish judge Henry Cockburn in 1853. 'History cannot let its injustice alone'. Its memory has been kept alive, particularly by Scottish scholars, Murray Armstrong adds to their efforts with this lively narrative of the life of Muir and other radicals who fought for democracy not only in Scotland but throughout the British Isles during the turbulent 1790s. They were resisted by a formidable establishment determined to maintain its hereditary hegemony and to suppress efforts to undermine it in the name of the people. It now seems incredible that to agitate for manhood suffrage should be construed as sedition in Scotland and treason in England. Yet the aims of the so-called 'Scottish martyrs' were regarded as seditious, though two of them, David Downie and Robert Watt, were tried for high treason, as were Thomas Hardy and his co-defendants in England. Some historians tend to deny that the regime was unduly repressive, decrying claims that Pitt was guilty of a 'reign of terror'. Yet it is sobering to reflect that had Hardy, John Thelwall and John Horne Tooke been found guilty of treason they would have been hanged, as indeed Robert Watt was, and decapitated into the bargain.

It is true that the cases in Edinburgh and London were hugely effected by what was happening in Paris at the time. Radicalism was all too readily perceived as revolutionary, particularly when the radicals sang the praises of Thomas Paine, who argued not just for reform but for revolution in Britain. Yet the Scottish martyrs and their English counterparts were not Painites in the sense of being revolutionaries. On the contrary they eschewed violence and sought peaceful reform. Nevertheless, they were tarred with the same brush by the authorities. Lord Braxfield, the 'Scottish Jeffreys', sentenced Muir to fourteen year transportation to Australia.

After an engrossing account of his career up to his trial, Armstrong follows Muir to Botany Bay, recounts the situation he faced in the penal settlement there, then follows him back to Europe on the amazing journey that took him across the Pacific Ocean to Vancouver Island, down the west coast of North America to Mexico, from there to Spain via Cuba, and finally to France, where he died in

1798 at the age of thirty three. The story is recounted with panache, reading more like a novel than a biography.

And that raises a methodological query. One of the problems facing the biographer of Muir is that the direct evidence for it is exiguous. There is a tantalising hint that that some of his papers might have survived, as Thomas Hardy was offered a box of them in 1821. But there is no trace of them today. Consequently the narrative of his life has to be reconstructed from fragmentary sources that leave many gaps in the record. Although Armstrong carried out exhaustive research into the available evidence, as his 70 pages of reference demonstrate, there remains vast areas of Muir's life for which the record is silent. He has filled the silences with imaginative reconstructions of encounters with contemporaries. The reader needs to keep referring to the endnotes as events are frequently described in them as 'fictitious'. Thus alleged meetings with Tom Paine in Paris are described in the notes as 'fictional'. It is legitimate to infer that Muir met Paine since we know that he became acquainted with him from a letter he wrote on 14 August, 1797 preserved in the Scottish National Archives. Armstrong quotes from it, documenting that Muir anticipated having 'an opportunity of cultivating that friendship which I value so highly'. It is more debatable when he recounts actual conversations for which there is no documentary evidence. But then Armstrong freely admits that as a journalist he does not feel constrained by the scholarly conventions of academic historians. He even invents characters. On page 513 we learn that 'the character Ann Loftus and her companion Jane Simmons ... are composite characters based on four women'!

The result is not so much a biography of Muir, or a history of the radical movement in the 1790s, as a work of what has been called 'faction' - a mixture of fact and fiction. There is a place for the imaginative reconstruction of famous lives, as the success of Hilary Mantel's novels based on the life of Thomas Cromwell amply demonstrates. Armstrong displays impressive abilities as a creative writer when he gets inside the head of Robert Watt at his trial and imagines his changing emotions as he slowly realises that, so far from being acquitted as he confidently anticipated, he will in fact face execution. It is hoped that Mr Armstrong has reserved the TV rights for *The Liberty Tree*.

W. A. Speck.

Thomas Paine and the Idea of Human Rights. Robert Lamb. Cambridge University Press, 1915. xii & 217pp. Hardbound. ISBN 978-1-10652-9. £64.99

Time was when the academic discipline of Political Science was largely confined to the study of a canon of texts from Plato's *Republic* to the *Thoughts of Chairman Mao* via Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*. The canonical writings were selected on the basis of that they were said to have addressed issues in Politics that transcended Time to become of eternal interest, such as political obligation, sovereignty and property rights. Thomas Paine was left out of the canon as his writings were allegedly unoriginal and polemical.

Several decades ago an attack was launched on this approach spearheaded by Quentin Skinner. He and other political philosophers mainly associated with Cambridge University maintained that it was anachronistic. It assumed that the issues addressed by the canonical authors were eternal when in fact they were ephemeral, rooted in the circumstances in which they found themselves. Thus Hobbes' thought was profoundly influenced by the English civil war while Locke's was in response to the Exclusion Crisis and the Glorious Revolution. In order to understand them it was necessary to place them in the historical context in which they were written.

In this crucial contribution to the political thought of Thomas Paine Robert Lamb demonstrates that he was unjustly omitted from the canon.. He also challenges the claims of the Cambridge school that it must be contextualised. He calls it 'the concept of anachronism' and explains 'how not to worry about it'. Political thinkers might not be addressing eternal issues but they are engaged in solving perennial problems. Quentin Skinner had dismissed the canonical concept by claiming that one might as well ask such questions as what was Locke's solution to the problem of the peaceful uses of atomic energy? Lamb makes no bones of what light Paine throws on the current concern that climate change is a moral issue as it inflicts harm on generations yet unborn. Paine was emphatic that no generation could legislate for another as each was free to make laws for itself. This seems to support the view that there is no obligation to consider the needs of the unborn. But Lamb unpacks - as he would put it - Paine's conclusion, pointing out that he included a future generation in his calculations as those too young to be citizens were nevertheless part of the moral universe of the living. Consequently Paine is recruited into the ranks of those who urge the preservation of the environment as a moral obligation to posterity.

Yet Lamb does not dispel all the worries raised by the contextual method. On the contrary the very title of his book is anachronistic in the sense that Paine himself never used the expression 'human rights'. As John Barrell observed in a review of Christopher Hitchens *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man: a Biography*, a book incidentally not cited by Lamb, Paine "would surely have been puzzled by the notion of human rights as something *beyond* something different from, not "limited to natural civil or political rights". (*London Review of Books*, 30 November, 2006). Some discussion of this historical problem would have been appropriate here. Lamb is aware that Paine's religious beliefs raise question about his central thesis that places his political philosophy in a secular liberal tradition. Indeed he devotes a whole chapter to it, leading to the conclusion that Paine's Deism committed him to the idea of human equality, a concept central to liberalism.

That Paine's political philosophy was based on the concept of rights is vigorously and, despite its 'anachronism', persuasively argued. It is refreshing to have Paine's works treated as a major contribution to political thought, even though Lamb is not quite as pioneering as he occasionally claims. Among several omissions from his bibliography is the major work by Carine Lounissi, *La Pensee Politique de Thomas Paine en context* (Reviewed in this journal, Vol. 11. No. 4). Nevertheless, despite its academic style placing demands on the lay readers, this is an essential read for anybody interested in Thomas Paine.

W. A. Speck.

THOMAS PAINE'S ASTRONOMY

R. G. Daniels

In the first part of *The Age of Reason*, written during the French Revolution and completed we are told only a matter of hours before his arrest, Paine devotes some pages to a general account of astronomy as an introduction to his ideas on Christian theology. It is worth looking at this account in the light of knowledge as it was then and as it is now, and also to consider the sources of Paine's information.

He begins with a comment on the 'plurality of worlds', an idea from the ancient philosophers gaining acceptance in scientific circles in the eighteenth century by virtue of the work of Halley and Herschell, indicating the vastness of space and the lack of uniqueness in the existence of the earth.

He then describes the solar system - the sun and its six satellites or worlds, all in annual motion around the sun, some satellites having their own satellites or moons in attendance, each world keeping its own track (the ecliptic) around the sun. Each world spins around itself (rotates on its own axis) and this causes day and night. Most worlds, in their self-rotation, are tilted against their line of movement around the sun (the obliquity of the ecliptic) and Paine quotes the correct figure for earth of $23\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$. It is this tilt that is responsible for the changing seasons and for the variation in the length of day and night over the world and throughout the seasons. Earth make 365 rotations in one year's orbit of the sun.

The six planets are then described with their distances from the sun. These figures are incorrect now but the figures Paine gives for the earth's distance, 88 million miles, agrees with the eighteenth century figure derived from Kepler's Laws of about 1620. In 1772 Bode formulated his empirical law of planetary distances giving the measurements more accurately than hitherto, but this information would not have permeated the circles in which Paine moved after his departure for America.

As proof that it is possible for man to know these distances he cites the fact that for centuries the precise date and time of eclipses and also the passage of a planet like Venus across the face of the sun (a transit) have been calculated and forecast.

Beyond the solar system, 'far beyond all power of calculation' (until Bessel calculated the distance of 61 Cygni in 1838) are the 'fixed' stars, and these

fixed stars 'continue always at the same distance from each other, and always in the same place, so does the sun in the centre of the system'. William Herschell communicated to the Royal Society in 1783 that this was not in fact so, and that all stars were moving but at rates indiscernible as yet to man. Paine repeats a current idea that these 'fixed' stars and suns probably all have their own planets in attendance upon them. Thus the immensity of space.

'All our knowledge of science is derived from the revolutions of those several planets or worlds of which our system is composed make in their circuit round the sun'. He regards this multiplicity as a benefit bestowed by the Creator - otherwise, all that matter in one globe with no revolutionary motion (there are echoes of Newton here) would have deprived our senses and our scientific knowledge, - it is from the sciences that all the mechanical are that contribute so much to our earthly felicity and comfort are derived'. Paine even suggests that the devotional gratitude of man is due to the Creator for this plurality.

The same opportunities of knowledge are available to the inhabitants of neighbouring planets and to the inhabitants of planets of other suns in the universe. The idea of a society of worlds Paine finds cheerful - a happy contrivance of the almighty for the instruction of mankind. What then of the Christian faith and the 'solitary and strange conceit that the Almighty, with millions of worlds equally dependent on his protection, should devote all his care to this world and come to die in it? Has every world an Eve, an apple, a serpent and a redeemer?' An so to the rest of *The Age of Reason*.

Where did Paine obtain his astronomical information and instruction? It is unlikely he had any books with him, he certainly did not have a bible. Paris, seething with the Revolution, had the astronomer Jean-Sylvain Bailly as mayor until his execution in 1793. Condorcet (author of *Progress of the Human Spirit*) and Lavoisier (the 'father of modern chemistry) were deeply involved and died in the Revolution. Laplace ('the French Newton') and the astronomer Joseph Jérôme Lefrançois de Lalande were also in and around Paris at this time. But all these scientists, like Paine, would have been too busy to teach or discuss astronomy. So Paine would have had to recall the lectures and practical demonstrations he attended in London before he went to America. They were given by Benjamin Martin, James Ferguson and Dr. John Bevis. It is worthwhile looking at the careers of these three men, mentioned only by surname early in *The Age of Reason*, because the facts, derived from the *Dictionary of National Biography*, afford some light on Paine's life in London.

Benjamin Martin (1704-1782). A ploughboy to begin with, he began to teach the 'three Rs' at Guildford while studying to become a mathematician, instrument-maker, and general compiler of information! He read Newton's *Opticks* (1705)

and became an ardent follower of his ideas. He used a £500 legacy to buy instruments and books in order to become an itinerant lecturer. He had over thirty major publications to his name as well as a number of inventions. He perfected the Orrery (not named after its inventor, as Paine states, but after the patron of the copier of the invention!), and used his own version in his lectures. He lived in London at Hadley's Quadrant in Fleet Street, from 1740 onwards. He died following attempted suicide in 1782.

James Ferguson (1710-1776). A shepherd-boy in Banffshire at the age of ten. He took up medicine at Edinburgh but gave up to sketch embroidery patterns and then to paint portraits and continue his interest in astronomy. He used the income from his painting to enable him to begin as a teacher and lecturer in London in 1748, where he had arrived five years before. His book, *Astronomy explained on Sir Isaac Newton's Principles* (1756), went to at least thirteen editions and was used by William Herschell for his own study of astronomy. George III called on Ferguson for tuition in mechanics, and he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1763. He became a busy lecturer in and around London, sometime also travelling to Newcastle, Derby, Bath and Bristol for speaking engagements. He occasionally had public disagreements with his wife - even in the middle of lectures!

Dr. John Bevis (1693-1771). He studied medicine at Oxford and travelled widely in France and Italy before settling in London prior to 1730. Newton's *Opticks* was his favourite reading matter, and in 1738 he gave up his practice and moved to Stoke Newington where he built his own observatory. Here, and at Greenwich, assisting Edmund Halley (who died in 1742) he did much astronomical work, and made a unique star-atlas, the *Uranographia Britannica*, the plates of which, however, were sequestered in chancery when the printer, John Neale, became bankrupt, and earned a reputation (internationally) as an astronomer. When Nevil Maskelyne became Astronomer Royal following the death of the Rev. Nathaniel Bliss in 1764, Bevis, who had hoped for the appointment himself, returned to his medical practice, setting up at the Temple [London]. He was made a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1765. But astronomy got him in the end, for, continuing his studies, he was quickly from his telescope one day he fell, sustaining injuries from which he died. It could only have been at this period in his life, at the Temple, as a FRS, that Paine knew him. 'As soon as I was able I purchased a pair of globes, and attended the philosophical lectures of Martin and Ferguson, and afterward acquainted with Dr. Bevis of the society called the Royal Society, then living in the Temple, and an excellent astronomer'.

Moncure Conway in his *Life of Paine* mentions that [Thomas 'Clio'] Rickman assigns the period of instruction in astronomy to the year 1767, but that he

himself preferred the earlier time of 1757, when Paine would have been twenty years of age. Moreover, he suggests that Paine would have been too poor to afford globes in 1766-7. A study of the lives of his mentors shows clearly that he met Martin and Fergusson fairly certainly at the earlier time, but Dr. Bevis only at the later period, having bought his globes, terrestrial and celestial, ten years previously. On the first occasion he was a staymaker with Mr. Morris of Hanover Street; on his second he was teaching at Mr. Goodman's and then in Kensington.

There were some important events taking place in astronomy at this time but they seem to have escaped Paine's notice. William Herschell discovered the seventh, telescopic, planet in 1781. He wanted to call it 'George's Star', but it is now called Uranus. The scientists in Paris would have known all about this important discovery but one supposes that there would have been no occasion to discuss it with Paine; in any case he did not speak French fluently. There had been transits of Venus across the sun in 1761 and 1769 (the only occasions that century) and Paine mentions them in a footnote to prove how man can know sufficient to predict these and similar events. There must have been occasions of much general public comment - especially when scientists were trying to calculate accurately the distance of the sun from earth at these events. And then in 1789, Herschell made his great forty foot telescope, the envy of astronomers everywhere, indeed, the National Assembly was later to promote a prize for such an undertaking. However, time, scarcity of the necessary metals and shortage of money prevented any such project succeeding in stricken France.

Thomas Paine had minimal experience at the eyepiece of a telescope and he showed no inclination later in his life to pursue astronomical studies. But in these brief pages of *The Age of Reason* he shows he has gained a very clear understanding of the solar system from those early days in London.

THOMAS PAINE SOCIETY

President: Norman Baker.

Secretary: David Ward.

The Thomas Paine Society was founded in 1963, its first president being Michael Foot. The aims of the society are:

To promote the recognition of Thomas Paine's contribution to the cause of freedom, and to spread a knowledge of his work and activities with a view to encouraging the growth of a similar spirit of constructive criticism in every aspect of public life.

For further details and membership information please contact the secretary as 73, St. Johns Way, Thetford, IP42 3NP.

E-mail: postmaster@thomasPainesocietyuk.org.uk

Society website: www.thomaspainesociety.org.uk