

## **Thomas Paine: The Great Philosopher Unveiled**

Thomas Paine, the man Gouverneur Morris referred to as a “mere adventurer *from England*, without fortune, without family or connexions, ignorant even of grammar”<sup>1</sup> is frequently hailed as one of the great thinkers of his time. Yet his name as such is known to relatively few. Why? By examination of the circumstances behind just two of his major works, *Common Sense*, and *Rights of Man*, of necessity brief, this paper addresses that question, and endeavours to explain the most probable reason for Paine’s lack of recognition.

### ***Common Sense***

On January 9, 1776, this momentous pamphlet hit the streets of Philadelphia. The acclaim with which it was greeted defied superlatives. Its author was unknown.

Benjamin Rush, who became acquainted with Paine soon after his arrival from England, later declared that he had already written a piece in an attempt to illustrate to loyalists the futility of remaining under British rule. (The colonists had no rights of representation; there had for some time been murmurs of discontent and skirmishes; and the king had declared the colonies to be in a state of rebellion.) Rush told that he feared to publish because he might jeopardise his medical practice and lose the friendship of his loyalist associates in Philadelphia. He also told of how he exhorted Paine to embrace the cause.<sup>2</sup> Paine did. The pamphlet went through several reprints, and in April 1776, as author of a series of articles signed “The Forester,” he also revealed himself as the author of *Common Sense*. He did not name himself, but told that he now only disclosed himself as both the writer of The Forester letters and the best-selling pamphlet, at the request of certain gentlemen who honoured him with their acquaintance<sup>3</sup>

Many people thought that Benjamin Franklin had written the piece; others ascribed it to John Adams who had been putting similar ideas before the Congress for some time. Many years later, in a letter to James Cheetham, a denigrating biographer of Paine, Benjamin Rush claimed that the drafts of *Common Sense* had been read by himself, Franklin and Samuel Adams. They all, according to Rush, reassured the author that they advocated similar opinions. Rush even took credit for the title of the work which Paine wished to name *Plain Truth*.<sup>4</sup> Questions arise: why did these radical colonists need

to read the drafts? Why did Rush name the treatise? All of these men had a vested interest in independence as their places in history have shown. Why did such men have such say in an independent work which did not bear the name, nor even a pseudonym, of the author? The facts suggest that the work was commissioned. More, just three years later, Paine himself said he made no profit on *Common Sense*,<sup>5</sup> yet, at the time of its writing, he was without work, and did not appear to be well off.<sup>6</sup>

Paine served the young nation well. However, he never allowed those in power to forget his “services.”<sup>7</sup> He wrote of having always given his writings free of charge except for costs of printing and paper, and sometimes, not that.<sup>8</sup> He was a master of words who wrote for masters of radical ideas. As their scapegoat, he delivered his manuscripts, expressive of their sentiments, to the printers.<sup>9</sup>

When Paine was appointed as Secretary to the Committee of Foreign Affairs in April 1777, he continued to write persuasive, patriotic articles of propaganda under his adopted pseudonym of “Common Sense.” His salary was set at \$70 per month, yet an entry in the *Journals of the Continental Congress* for March 6, 1778, noted that in consequence of an adjustment by the commissioners of claims, the auditor general had reported that the amount of \$700 was due to Paine for his services from April 17 of the previous year to February 17 of the current year. It was ordered that the “account” be paid to him. His salary had multiplied by 100 percent. He was in a position of seeking, and being given, reward. He sought more well beyond the end of the war with Britain. He even resorted to threats, writing to George Washington in 1784 that he had two reasons for begging for more: one was his “own interest and circumstances,” and the other his concern about not wishing to reveal, “unless they force it from me,” the selfishness with which those in power had treated him.<sup>10</sup> Paine, the prolific writer, wrote nothing at all that year.

In April of 1785 he wrote to Congress of his intention to return to Europe in about two months’ time. He had matters he wished to place before the members. Congress formed a committee to study his case which resulted in the decision that he was “entitled to a liberal gratification from the United States.”<sup>11</sup> Still in the country in September, not in receipt of his “liberal gratification,” Paine again wrote to Congress giving an estimate of his needs, at least \$6,000.<sup>12</sup> The Congressional committee recommended that he be

paid the sum of \$6,000, but the motion was defeated, and he was awarded \$4,000.<sup>13</sup> He sought more: he wrote to Congress enclosing an account of what he thought to be his due in depreciation of his salary while Secretary to the Committee for Foreign Affairs, a sum he estimated to be \$948.<sup>14</sup> A third committee report on October 3, prompted Congress to resolve “That the board of treasury take order for paying Mr. Thomas Paine the sum of three thousand dollars.”<sup>15</sup> Paine was content. He was now a man of wealth; he had money in the bank; and was able to plan a trip to Europe. He left eighteen months later, in April 1787, well reimbursed for his wartime services.

It is worth mentioning that no complete manuscript of *Common Sense* exists. There are however, at the American Philosophical Society, some few fragments of paper on which Paine wrote notes for the piece - just notes.

### ***Rights of Man***

On November 4, 1789, to celebrate the anniversary of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the London Revolution Society held a dinner.<sup>16</sup> Richard Price, a Unitarian minister, was invited to give the customary morning sermon prior to the meal. His address told of how the Revolution had reinforced the rights of Englishmen under their Constitution. Those rights entitled individuals to liberty of conscience, liberty to challenge abuse of power, and the right to choose their own rulers. In light of recent events in France, Price suggested that the Society should send a message of congratulation to the French National Assembly. He and the London Revolution Society were looking to reform in Britain.

On reading Price’s sermon, Edmund Burke, the Anglo-Irish statesman, was horrified. Having been a friend to the American cause, he seemed to have changed his mind on revolution, possibly in favour of a more conservative approach than a radical remaking of the establishment. Price’s sermon confirmed his fears that the British radicals might emulate the French. Burke’s response came in the form of a pamphlet, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, an eloquent defence of the *status quo*, and an upholding of the Constitution in its historic context against the possibilities of its being cast aside by the “swinish multitude.”<sup>17</sup>

As *Common Sense* had burst upon the American colonies in 1776, Paine’s *Rights*

*of Man* was published in England in February 1791, with similar effect. Written as a reply to Burke's *Reflections*, it has frequently been described as the most vigorous and lucid exposition of fundamental human rights ever written. More than he had in *Common Sense*, Paine criticised monarchy and the traditions so strongly defended by Burke. *Rights of Man* was dedicated to George Washington, and the title page named Paine as the author.

It is known that William Godwin, writer and member of the Revolution Society, had attended the dinner at the London Tavern and heard Price's sermon. He wrote of having dined with members Paine, Horne Tooke, Joseph Priestley, Thomas Brand Hollis, and others.<sup>18</sup> On the following day, Godwin again dined "with the Revolutionists," and noted in his diary to meet with others including Hollis.<sup>19</sup> It was Godwin who sent the congratulatory message, as suggested by Price, to the French revolutionaries.<sup>20</sup> The answer to Burke's *Reflections* was probably already conceived by members of the Revolution Society who jointly provided the mastery of the subject, as it gestated, to the writer who put his name to it.

When *Rights of Man* was published, Paine expected to be prosecuted,<sup>21</sup> which might explain his being in Paris on the day of publication. It was first printed in February by Joseph Johnson, a radical bookseller and publisher, but confusion has surrounded the reasons for his refusing to publish further editions. In March, J.S. Jordan published the work. One of the Revolution Society members, Thomas Holcroft, quickly obtained a copy and made a comparison of the Johnson and Jordan editions. He wrote to Godwin:

I have got it - If this do not cure my cough it is a damned perverse mule of a cough - The pamphlet - From the row - But mum - *We* don't sell it - Oh, no - Ears and Eggs - Verbatim, except the addition of a short preface, which, as you have not seen, I send you my copy - Not a single castration (Laud be unto God and J.S. Jordan!) can I discover - Hey for the New Jerusalem! The Millennium! and peace and eternal beatitude be unto the soul of Thomas Paine!<sup>22</sup>

Holcroft's excessive excitement suggests personal rather than general interest. In his *Reflections*, Burke had written of the Revolution Society, or the Society for Constitutional Information, being the "subject" of his "observations," so it is reasonable to assume that certain members replied as a body. It is also reasonable to assume that the first publisher, Johnson, had refused to republish without "castration" of parts of the

work.

As early as 1783, when John Adams first took up his appointment as Minister Plenipotentiary representing the United States at the Court of St. James, he noted that when living in the house of a publisher, he had the opportunity to learn the current state of literature in England. He found it “in the hands of hirelings.”<sup>23</sup> He quoted the situation as told to him by an eminent printer and bookseller:

There are in this city at least one hundred men of the best education, the best classical students, the most accomplished writers, any one of whom I can hire for one guinea a day to go into my closet and write for me whatever I please, for or against any man or any cause. It is indifferent to them whether they write *pro* or *con*.<sup>24</sup>

Thomas Paine was one such “accomplished writer.”

Paine travelled between England and France frequently. He had been approached by the Marquis du Chastellet who persuaded him to “offer his services” to the publishers of a new republican journal. He did, but let the publishers know that he was obliged to spend part of that summer in England.<sup>25</sup> It was in France that he began work on the sequel to *Rights of Man* which was to be named *Kingship*, but it is obvious that he was constrained to consult with his English masters.

In response to the king’s flight from Paris on June 21, 1791, Paine wrote a manifesto, born of his association with the Marquis de Condorcet, a supporter of revolution who was one of the editors of the new republican journal, the radical Abbé Emmanuel Sieyès, and the young Achille François du Chastellet who had sought his services. The manifesto, which advocated the proclaiming of a republic, and had been plastered by Paine and Chastellet on the walls of Paris, was published the following day. On the same day, a leading article by Paine was published in the new journal of the Republican Society for which he was writing. Paine admitted to being the author of the manifesto which evoked the ire of the National Assembly. He returned to England, leaving behind a line-up of writings ready for publication in France.

Paine’s arrival in England on July 13, 1791, was noted in the press. On July 26, *The Times* featured the first of four parts of a satirical article on the death of a metaphorical, “holy hypocritical Old Maid” named “Miss Presbytere Democracy.” She had expired at a dinner she gave to celebrate the first anniversary of the French

Revolution. Her “body” had been conveyed to the house of Dr. Priestley where it was “laid out in the Library on some corrected proofs of *The Rights of Man*,” before being conveyed to lie in state at a public house. It is obvious that the writer was aware of the interest that members of the Revolution Society took in Paine’s *Rights of Man*, and was suggesting that they edited the work. The fourth instalment, on July 30, concluded with the burial of “the deceased” at Runnymede, where King John had sealed *Magna Carta*, known as the great charter of liberties, in 1215. Paine was publicly exposed as a hired pen.

In London, Paine continued with his writing of *Kingship* and was visited “by a select few,” mainly members of the Revolution Society.<sup>26</sup> He intended his new book “to go further” than *Rights of Man* because he saw “that *great rogues* escape by the excess of their crimes, and, perhaps, it may be the same in honest cases.”<sup>27</sup> It is possible to suggest that Paine conceived of himself as a “rogue” and the Crown of England as an “honest case” because, just three years earlier, in a letter to an acquaintance, he had written in glowing terms of the position of the king as the true representative of commoners.<sup>28</sup> Paine, in private correspondence oblivious to the fact that such writing would, ultimately, be available to those who wrote about him, defended popularly based “kingship.” Extraordinarily, his stance has been simply, and unquestioningly, described as “remarkable.”<sup>29</sup> It appears clear that Paine’s opinion on kingship then was not as it appeared to be in his published writing. He had once maintained that his pen and his soul had “ever gone together,” but that was a published statement under his pseudonym of “Common Sense.”<sup>30</sup>

At the annual dinner of the Revolution Society on November 4, 1791, Paine, who was an honorary member,<sup>31</sup> was one of the 250 guests. A toast was proposed thanking him for his defence of the rights of man. As his work neared completion, he was working quietly in various locations unknown to any but Horne Tooke, who corrected Paine’s inaccuracies, and the proposed printer, Mr. Chapman.<sup>32</sup> The work was now named *Rights of Man*, Part II. (It will be recalled that Paine’s *Plain Truth* was renamed *Common Sense* by Benjamin Rush.) Chapman backed out, and the manuscript was sent to J.S. Jordan who had taken over publication of *Rights of Man*, Part I. On the day of publication, February 16, 1792, Paine wrote two letters to Jordan. It seems probable that Jordan

requested the second, or that Paine had been instructed, and recompensed, by one or more of the reform societies for making the claim therein. The first letter, a cover note, for both Jordan's and Paine's own "satisfaction," directed Jordan that if he had need of the enclosure, he was to send for Paine immediately. He was also to send for Horne Tooke.<sup>33</sup>

The enclosure read:

Sir, - Should any person, under the sanction of any kind of authority, inquire of you respecting the author and publisher of the Rights of Man, you will please to mention me as the author and publisher of that work, and show to such person this letter. I will, as soon as I am acquainted with it, appear and answer for the work personally.<sup>34</sup>

Paine was expecting trouble, and the fact that he involved Tooke suggests that he was to witness Paine's claim.

In May, finding it incumbent upon himself and due to their "patronage," Paine wrote to the Revolution Society telling of numerous letters he had received from all over England begging that the first and second parts of *Rights of Man* be printed in a cheap edition that would make it more affordable. He informed the Society that he had taken means to comply with the requests, and was proceeding with the work as he had been informed that the Ministry intended to prosecute him.<sup>35</sup> Unless members had an interest, Paine had no need of keeping the Society informed because *Rights of Man* and its author were the talk of Europe. At a meeting on May 18, with Paine present, the Society "resolved to give him thanks, and to support him."<sup>36</sup> It is obvious that they paid the costs of the cheap editions. The vast profits from the book were "donated" to the Revolution Society to use as members saw fit.<sup>37</sup> Again questions must be raised: Why did this body of men have so much influence upon an independent author? And why were the profits donated to the Society? Obviously the profits were not Paine's for the keeping; he had been well paid.

Jordan, the printer, was prosecuted for publishing *Rights of Man* well before Paine was issued with a summons for seditious libel, because, according to the Attorney General, his name on the title page would not stand up in court as proof of authorship. However, the summons he had been expecting was delivered to his lodgings on May 21, the day that the government issued a proclamation against seditious writings, a proclamation designed specifically to contest the effects of *Rights of Man*. It was also the

day upon which Jordan pleaded guilty. Paine wrote to the Home Secretary on June 6, answering arguments that had been put before the House of Commons and, in effect, preempting his own defence. The trial was postponed until December, but Paine had fled to France, and was tried *in absentia*. There, as has been shown, he had already taken up a cause which was to lead to his writing of *The Age of Reason*. The circumstances behind its writing also suggest that it was a commissioned work, but the complications of that story are such that they must remain the subject of a further paper.<sup>38</sup>

Thomas Paine may have been a great thinker, but it is fair to say that the accepted philosophy of Paine through his writings was merely the combined thoughts, or philosophies, of bodies of men who sought change. This is not to say that he disagreed with their aspirations; he might or might not have done. Paine's contemporaries knew him as a man with a pen for hire - a brilliant, useful scribe with a need to earn a living. He has no real place in the history of ideas, and it is only as the result of his resurrection by hagiographic biographers that some few afford him one. Those eulogists have done both Paine and history a disservice. Beyond study of his use of language as a literary device, always suited to the causes his works embraced, it is doubtful whether he is of any relevance to common sense for the modern era. He was a man of his own time, employed in working for reforms of that time. Each era is a period unto itself occasioning the need for meeting and dealing with its own exigencies. There is, and always will be, an ongoing demand for writers of persuasive, simply written "truths." Propaganda is ever present. Forcefully produced, its power can be tremendous. It was the strength of Paine's arguments that carried him, as "Common Sense" on the crest of a wave in the newly United States of America, and the same that led to his being outlawed in Britain.

## NOTES

1. Gouverneur Morris's speech to the Continental Congress during the second day of a debate on Paine's authorship of a piece printed in the *Pennsylvania Packet* of 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 1779, under the title of "Common Sense to the Public," 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1779. Quoted from the papers of Morris in Jared Sparks, *The Life of Gouverneur Morris*, 3 vols., Boston, 1832, vol. 1, pp. 200-04. Paine never forgot nor forgave the speech which was not recorded in the *Journals of the Continental Congress*. In 1808, in a letter to the Committee of Claims, he referred to his enemy, at the time of the Deane Affair, as "prating Gouverneur Morris." James Cheetham, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, New York, 1809, p. 332.

2. Benjamin Rush to James Cheetham, 17<sup>th</sup> July, 1809, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
3. Thomas Paine, "Reply to Cato's Eighth Letter," in Eric Foner, ed., *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, Library of America, 1995, pp. 84-5.
4. Benjamin Rush to James Cheetham, 17<sup>th</sup> July, 1809, in Cheetham, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-8.
5. Thomas Paine to Henry Laurens, 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1779, in Daniel Edwin Wheeler, ed., *Life and Writings of Thomas Paine*, 10 vols., New York, 1915, vol. 8, p. 55.
6. Paine's employment at *The Pennsylvania Magazine* ended in June 1775. Lyon Richardson suggested that Paine might have terminated his employment with Aitken about September as his last contribution to the magazine appeared in the August issue (*A History of Early American Magazines: 1741-1789*, New York, 1931, p. 177). That contribution would have been "An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex" which Frank Smith proved to have been the work of Antoine Léonard ("The Authorship of An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex," *American Literature*, vol. 2, 1930-1931, pp. 278-80.). Paine is said to have paid for his journey to America with £35 received from his wife on their separation, and to have been ill on arrival.
7. See Paine to Laurens, 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1779, in Wheeler, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-8.
8. Thomas Paine, "The American Crisis: No. II," in *The Complete Works of Thomas Paine, Political and Miscellaneous, Including a Complete Report of His Trial in the Court of King's Bench, Dec. 18, 1792, with the Eloquent Speech of His Counsel (Erskine) in His Defence*, London, n.d., p. 55.
9. Paine to Laurens, 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1779, in Wheeler, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-4.
10. Thomas Paine to George Washington, April 1784, in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols., New York, 1969, vol. 2, p. 1248.
11. Worthington C. Ford *et al.*, eds., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774 - 1789*, Washington, D.C., 1904 -37, 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1784, vol. 29, pp. 662-63. Available from <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwjc.html>.
12. Thomas Paine, "To the Congress of the United States," in Foner, *Complete Writings*, vol. 2, p. 1252.
13. Thomas Paine to Henry Laurens, 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1779, in Wheeler, *op. cit.*, vol. 8, p. 58.
14. Thomas Paine, "To the Congress of the United States" and "To a Committee of

- Congress,” in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine*, New York, 1945, vol. 2, pp. 1252-253.
15. Ford, et al., eds., vol. 29, pp. 779, 796.
  16. Fear of Roman Catholic tyranny during the short reign of James II (1685-88), had then united both the Church of England and nonconformists, an event which brought about the deposition of James and put his daughter, Mary, and her husband William, on the throne.
  17. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien, Penguin Books, n.d., p. 76.
  18. Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Man of Reason: The Life of Thomas Paine*, J.B. Lippincott Company, 1959, p. 135.
  19. C. Kegan Paul, *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries*, 2 vols., London, 1876, vol. 1, p. 231.
  20. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 62.
  21. Thomas Paine, “Letter Addressed to the Addressers on the Late Proclamation,” in *Complete Works of Thomas Paine, Political and Miscellaneous*, p. 437.
  22. Paul, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 69.
  23. John Adams to his wife, in Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author*, 10 vols., Boston, 1856, vol 1, p. 404.
  24. *Loc. cit.*
  25. Thomas Paine to Messieurs Condorcet, Nicolas de Bonneville and Lanthenas, June 1791, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, vol. 2, p. 1315.
  26. Thomas Clio Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine, Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers, &c. &c.*, London, 1819, p. 100.
  27. Thomas Paine to William Short, 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 1791, in Foner, *Complete Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 1320-321. Paine’s emphasis.
  28. Thomas Paine to Thomas Walker, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1789, in Moncure Daniel Conway, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4 vols., New York, 1967 [1894-96], vol. 4, pp. vi -vii. Both Conway and Foner (*Complete Writings*, vol. 2, p. 1278)

- gave the date of Paine's letter as 26<sup>th</sup> February, but W.H.G. Armytage ("Thomas Paine and the Walkers: An Early Episode in Anglo-American Co-operation," *Pennsylvania History*, vol. 18, January 1951, p. 20) dated it at 24<sup>th</sup> February, while Sidney Kramer, who probably had access to the piece at the Library of Congress, dated it at 26<sup>th</sup> January of the same year ("My Much Loved America ...," *Library of Congress, Quarterly Journal of Acquisitions*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1943, p. 18.)
29. See Conway, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. vii.
  30. Thomas Paine, "The American Crisis: No. II," in *The Complete Works of Thomas Paine, Political and Miscellaneous ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
  31. Paine is recorded as having attended seven meetings of the Society in 1791 and 1792. "Trial of John Horne Tooke," in Thomas Jones Howell, comp., *A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason and Other Crimes and Misdemeanors from the Earliest Period to the Year 1783, with Notes and Other Illustrations*, London, 1818, vol. 25, pp. 102, 114, 137, 139, 147, 152, 154, 161. Aldridge (*op. cit.*, p. 332) noted: "A statement that Paine was not a member of the Revolution Society appears in *The Correspondence of the Revolution Society ... with the National Assembly ...* (London, 1792), p. 217." The original source proved unprocurable. Paine appears to have been an honorary member only to the extent of having attended some meetings.
  32. Peter Porcupine [William Cobbett], *The Life of Thomas Paine, Interspersed with Remarks and Reflections*, by Peter Porcupine, London, 1797, p. 41.
  33. "The Whole Proceedings on the Trial of An Information Exhibited ex-Officio by the King's Attorney-General Against Thomas Paine," in Truelove, *op. cit.*, appendix, p. 758.
  34. Loc. cit.
  35. Thomas Paine to the Chairman of the Society for Constitutional Information, 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1792, in Truelove, *op. cit.*, p. 637.
  36. Howell, *op. cit.*, vol. 25, pp. 103-04, 152.
  37. Thomas Paine to the Society for Constitutional Information, 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1792, printed at his request in the *Philadelphia Aurora*, 11<sup>th</sup> December, 1802.
  38. Hazel Burgess, forthcoming.

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