

THOMAS PAINE

Social and political thought

Gregory Claeys

*Associate Professor of History,
Washington University, St Louis*

Boston

UNWIN HYMAN

London Sydney Wellington

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INTRODUCTION

THE AGE OF PAINE

I know not whether any Man in the World has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine. There can be no severer Satyr on the Age. For such a mongrel between Pigg and Puppy, begotten by a wild Boar on a Bitch Wolf, never before in any Age of the World was suffered by the Poltroonery of mankind, to run through such a career of mischief. Call it then the Age of Paine. (John Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse)¹

The problem of Thomas Paine

Two crises at the end of the eighteenth century destroyed the vision of politics which had dominated all previous human history. From the shots fired at Lexington to the storming of the Bastille, a chain of events unfolded which inexorably convinced millions that rule by hereditary monarchies and aristocracies at the expense of the majority was illegitimate in principle. The claim of the majority to political power, though it gained ground slowly in the nineteenth century and is still far from universally granted in practice, is none the less today nearly everywhere conceded in theory, and defines the politics of modernity. Its achievement, not merely industrialization, is commonly said to mark the passage of nations to civility. We nearly all agree that we should be ‘democrats’, no matter how much we dispute what the term means.

In the first decades of revolution one man more than any other – ‘probably the most useful man that ever existed upon the face of the earth’, one of his friends said – epitomized the new democratic ideal. Having done much to foment independence in America, Thomas Paine sowed the seeds of revolution in Britain in the early 1790s and went on, though now with a smaller role on a wider political stage, narrowly to escape the guillotine for his efforts in France shortly thereafter. During his life, his writings were read by more men and women than any other political author in history. His interests were wider than the political arena, however. He was among the first to advocate freeing all slaves. He was a pioneer in the field of international

arbitration, the inheritor of a solid Quaker tradition in this area. He opposed British colonial policies in India and Africa.

None the less, Paine's reputation rests chiefly upon his great political works, *Common Sense*, which did much to spark the American revolution, and the *Rights of Man*, whose popularity was even greater and set off a much more extensive political debate. Paradoxically, however, Paine's very success also underlies his relative neglect as a thinker today. He was not a trained political philosopher, but a common man with an uncommonly sharp mind who was profoundly angered by the oppression and arrogance of Britain's upper classes as well as by hereditary rule generally. Paine's uncanny ability to give voice to similar resentments in millions of others was an essential component in his popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. But consequently it is often assumed that Paine spoke the unsophisticated thoughts of the multitude, and then moreover as an enthusiast and demagogue pandering to the crowd, 'a mere Hyde Park orator' and vulgarizer of Locke, whose chief work does not constitute 'even a minor' contribution to political theory, and who therefore has no proper place beside the great political thinkers. For decades American historians, as Alfred Young has remarked, thus relegated Paine to the sidelines of their revolution 'as a person of marginal influence' if not dubious moral character. A typical account from the 1930s devotes one paragraph of an 800-page study of the events of 1776 to Paine, dismisses *Common Sense* as 'a useless study of the monarchy' and an 'unpractical attempt at laying down a system of government', and concludes only grudgingly that 'whatever Paine's lack of personal merit, it must be admitted that he did a great service to his times'. In Britain, despite the pioneering work of E. P. Thompson, Albert Goodwin and others, many aspects of Paine's impact remain unstudied, particularly the massive debate which concentrated so singularly upon the *Rights of Man*.²

For similar reasons, Paine has achieved little official respectability on either side of the Atlantic. There is no place for him among the pantheon of heroes whose monuments dominate Washington DC, and the American labour movement only distantly recalls his achievements. His birthday is no cause for celebration in Downing Street, though the Thomas Paine Society does much to keep his memory alive. Paris, where he was least successful, has erected a statue of him pleading for the life of Louis XVI. But in Britain (Michael Foot and Tony Benn notwithstanding) and America the few politicians who know any history would rather forget than recall his contribution to modern democracy. Moreover, a surprising proportion of the American public continues to find Paineite theology threatening.

Paine has not suffered from complete neglect, of course. He has had many biographers and has been figured in several plays and works of fiction. But in

scholarly circles he has only slowly begun to receive his due. His role in the American revolution is now much clearer after recent careful studies by Eric Foner and A. O. Aldridge. But his European writings and their impact remain less well scrutinized and these accordingly receive greater attention here. We recognize the paradigmatic quality of the ‘Burke–Paine debate’ (we will later see that this is a considerable misnomer when applied to the controversy as a whole). For it was here first established that the battleground of politics would long be dominated by the siege of aristocratic ‘tradition’ by plebeian ‘democracy’. We might even concede Paine’s virtually single-handed creation of a mass reading public conscious for the first time of its right to participate in politics. Yet when we study the British debate over the French revolution it is often Edmund Burke who receives greater attention. Paine is merely one of his respondents, albeit the most important. But Paine’s brand of popular radicalism is rarely construed as part of the ‘great tradition’ of political thought upon which we often suppose western civilization is built.

This is curious given the fact that it is Paine’s vision, rather than Burke’s, which predominates in the modern world. It would be inexplicable except that the revival of Burke has had more to do with the Russian than the French revolution and has consequently resulted in the frequent conservative confusion of the principles of the latter revolution (or indeed any other) with those of Jacobinism. Such an imbalance clearly requires rectification, and by examining Paine’s ideas in their context we will find that he was indeed a revolutionary, but not a Bolshevik or a Jacobin. Moreover, there are other weaknesses in the current view of Paine. As Jack Greene has emphasized, it is rare that scholars have been interested in both Paine’s American and his European careers, and in both the European sources of his ideas and the bearing of his American experiences on his later thought.³ This bifurcation in Paine studies, it is hoped, is also partially remedied by this book, by integrating debates about Paine’s American and European works.

But reconsidering Paine is necessary not only to temper the political and intellectual preferences of earlier historians and political theorists. A fairer and more detailed treatment of his ideas also affects our assessment of the central arguments of the French revolution debate and their British development during the 1790s. For to take not Paine but Burke as the centre of this controversy is to fail to see how much more this debate centred on the *Rights of Man* than the *Reflections*. Burke’s vindication of the *ancien régime* sold some 30,000 copies and generated about fifty responses, ranging from brief pamphlets to William Godwin’s three-volume *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. Paine sold hundreds of thousands of copies of the *Rights of Man*, and provoked perhaps four to five hundred replies ranging from broadsheets to 700-page tomes. Burke did much to incite the British reaction to the

French revolution, but he was much less responsible for its success in eradicating the reform movement, often even going unmentioned in the subsequent pamphlet war. But Paine's name epitomized the principles of the new reformers. The *Rights of Man* redefined the terms in which politics was to be understood and could be countered only by pamphleteers willing to address the people directly. Thousands, too, did not deny the name of 'Painite' when it was thrust upon them, while few termed themselves 'Burkians'. As importantly, Paine's arguments, though often misunderstood, were and remain intellectually as powerful as Burke's. His defence of his own version of modernity is no less reasonable than Burke's championing of its historical predecessor. Nor did Paine marshal his arguments with less care; indeed, contrary to popular assumption, some even of Burke's sympathizers found his account the more hysterical.

This book is not therefore a new biography of Paine. His life is summarized in the next chapter, but those interested in the minutiae of Paineana are directed to several good studies. But no previous account investigates Paine's social and political thought in both its British and American moments, details its eighteenth-century context, examines the ways in which Paine's ideas were actually understood, and further attempts to restore him to the position his contemporaries (at least his supporters) accorded him, that of an important writer on politics and society. Paine's biographers have done great service to his life, but an adventurous career has overshadowed Paine's role in the forging of modern political debate.⁴

This is especially true for the more neglected British side of Paine's thought and thus for the *Rights of Man*, *The Age of Reason* and *Agrarian Justice*. Accordingly, while *Common Sense* and Paine's role in the American revolution are treated in one chapter here and their relation to recent debates in American historiography is summarized, my concentration is upon Paine's most influential as well as intellectually interesting work, the *Rights of Man*, and its British reception and connection to working-class radicalism. This is further narrowed by a focus upon England and Scotland, though detailed work on Ireland and Wales is still needed. While the arguments of all of Paine's major works are assessed here, two chapters detail the reception of the *Rights of Man* and attempt for the first time to scrutinize carefully the enormous pamphlet literature on both the radical and loyalist sides as a means of excavating the contextual meaning of Paine's ideas. Examining the relationship between text and audience, between political debate and popular political movement, alone reveals both the appeal of Paine's ideas and also why efforts to refute them met with some success. For revolution in Britain was not prevented by repression alone. Moreover, we will also see that reading the political thought of this period in terms of this extensive debate, rather than Paine and Burke

alone, gives us quite a different view of its contours and relation to both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political thought. In particular, we will see that much of the controversy did not concentrate solely on natural rights, or the defence or rejection of the new French government, but rather upon the wider question of whether egalitarian republicanism was compatible with a commercial society, or whether, in short, America could be imitated in Europe. Many of the arguments on both sides of this struggle owed something to Burke or Paine, but its centre of gravity, as it will here be termed, was defined by neither, but instead emerged spontaneously as the debate intensified.

With reference to more specific problems which have plagued Paine's previous interpreters, I have attempted to offer a balanced view of the respective weight which should be given to the main sources of Paine's thought: the Whig radical and republican traditions of eighteenth-century Britain, natural law (whose contribution to Paine's thinking has been gravely neglected) and Dissenting Protestantism, particularly deism and Quakerism. Only by understanding the confluence of these streams can we determine Paine's distinctive contribution to political thought. In some instances plausible solutions are proposed to problems where wholly conclusive evidence is lacking. In other areas, new problems are revealed which have been overlooked previously. The existence of a substantial conflict between Paine's religious and political principles, particularly in relation to his later works and his theory of property, is, for example, examined here for the first time.

If one thread runs throughout my interpretation of Paine, it is the attempt to place both his ideas and their reception in the context of the recrafting of republican ideals by political reformers in light of their increasing acceptance of commercial society. During the last twenty years historians of Anglo-American radicalism have divided sharply over whether a neo-classical or 'Harringtonian' republican emphasis upon public virtue and its corruption, or a Lockean and later Smithian liberalism more concerned with rights and their preservation, predominated during the reshaping of late eighteenth-century Whiggism.⁵ Like many such debates, the historical truth is far more complex than a thumbnail sketch of seemingly irreconcilable positions may imply. Reformers were not notoriously concerned with paradigmatic purity and freely mixed any arguments which seemed useful. Paine, we will see, contributed much to creating a new ideal of commercial society whose faith in the market (though qualified by Paine's very important welfare proposals) did involve rejecting a republican reliance upon agrarian virtue as the basis of political stability. None the less Paine also sought to retain essential elements of the republican inheritance which have been overlooked in previous interpretations. More than any other political writer, he contested the central Whig preference for a mixed constitution

and the political predominance of landed wealth and sought to replace it by a new theory of commercial republicanism based upon popular representative institutions without any hereditary monarchy. But in this ‘American’ wedding of trade and democracy Paine was also strikingly concerned with maintaining public virtue, and understood this both in terms of classical republican devotion to the common good (applied to a much larger population and thus in many respects intensified) and true Christian brotherhood. To appreciate the novelty of Paine’s achievement, however, we must first briefly consider the various strands of eighteenth-century radicalism from which these ideals were to be woven.

British radical traditions, 1688–1789

The parliamentary reform movement began to gather steam only after 1760, and became widely popular only at the French revolution. Beforehand the ruling Whig oligarchy was obliged to pay lip service to the principles of 1688 by which the Protestant succession and a limited monarchy had been secured. But 1688 was construed largely as a conservative defence of ‘popular’ liberty against an encroaching Catholic monarch, not as a novel effort at revolution seeking greater popular sovereignty or the reform of parliament. Against this oligarchy a few dissident Whig aristocrats and their followers battled, occasionally joined by ‘country party’ Tories (though their patriarchal model of ideal polity and the cult of Charles the Martyr were anathema to Whigs) advocating some extension of the franchise, a redistribution of Commons’ seats to favour the counties and larger boroughs, the enfranchisement of towns, shorter parliaments, reduced governmental expenditures and a diminished influence of the Crown and the government in the Commons.⁶

By mid-century, and among the Nonconformists in particular, the emergence of a new commercial middle order with its own distinctive ideology, social identity and cultural institutions had begun to add momentum to the reformers’ cause. Resentful of both the economic dominance of the aristocracy and the Anglican religious monopoly, Dissenting merchants and manufacturers like Josiah Wedgwood tended to be radical in both religion and politics. Moreover, they shared an identity based upon their social and economic position and assumed that the virtues which had brought them success rendered them superior to the uneducated lower as well as the profligate upper classes. Class consciousness and conflict played only a minimal role prior to 1790, however, being strongest among London merchants and

tradesmen, but nowhere so narrowly defined that ‘the middling orders’ did not usually include farmers and gentry as well as merchants and manufacturers. The modern language of class had thus not yet formed.⁷ But considering their economic position the middle classes felt their political exclusion keenly. Only 5 per cent of a total population of 8 million in 1790 could vote in England and Wales. In the 1780s 6,000 electors, or a majority of the voters of 129 boroughs, returned 257 MPs, or a majority of the Commons. Fifty MPs were elected by a mere 340 voters. In the early 1790s, 162 people (71 peers and 91 commoners) secured the election of 306 MPs. Moreover, 43,000 electors selected 52 MPs for 23 cities and two universities, while 41,000 chose 369 MPs for 192 towns and boroughs.⁸ The boroughs and a few towns were thus grossly overrepresented, and the commercial cities correspondingly neglected. Old Sarum was uninhabited but returned two members, as did the thriving port of Bristol. Cornwall had as many MPs as Scotland. Patronage and corruption were expensive, however: elections could cost upwards of £30,000. But at seven years the life of parliaments gave some opportunity to recoup these expenses.

In arguing against these abuses the reformers relied heavily upon a few key texts which represented divergent but interpenetrating parts of the Whig tradition, notably John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), Algernon Sidney’s *Discourses Concerning Government* (1698), the writings of the seventeenth century republican James Harrington and his disciples, such as Walter Moyle and Henry Neville, and those of later radicals like John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Amongst these writers Locke was the most important, though he did not dominate as absolutely as was once thought. His *Second Treatise* defended the natural equality of mankind and the possession of rights to life, liberty and property as a consequence of God’s creation of the world. It argued centrally that political power was limited by the possession of rights to freedom held by all in a pre-political state of nature, which were to be maintained by law in civil society. Natural society had been abandoned only because of the inconvenience of individuals judging the justice of their own claims. The power lodged in a sovereign was accordingly limited by popular consent and a right of rebellion was justified if life, liberty and property were tyrannically infringed upon. Taxation was permitted only by the consent of the majority. These views were popularized widely in both Britain and the colonies by writers like Thomas Pownall and Joseph Towers. For most, the Lockean inheritance was a moderate one. In *A Vindication of the Political Principles of Mr. Locke* (1782), for example, Towers insisted that Locke’s followers thought the English constitution was ‘so excellently constructed’ and its laws ‘so well adapted for securing the liberty of the subject’ that it was ‘preferable to any republic which had yet been constituted’.

He also offered an excellent summary of how eighteenth-century reformers read Locke:

It is the doctrine of Mr. Locke, that all legitimate government is derived from the consent of the people; that men are naturally equal, and that no one has a right to injure another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions; and that no man in civil society, ought to be subject to the arbitrary will of others, but only to known and established laws, made by general consent for the common benefit; that no taxes are to be levied on the people, without the consent of the majority, given by themselves or by their deputies. That the ruling power ought to govern by declared and received laws, and not by extemporary dictates, and undetermined resolutions. That kings and princes, magistrates and rulers of every class, have no just authority but what is delegated to them by the people; and which, when not employed for their benefit, the people have always a right to resume, in whatever hands it may be placed.⁹

Also widely read by Whigs were the writings of Algernon Sidney, a republican martyr executed for his beliefs in 1683. Sidney also rejected the divine right theory of monarchy and saw the sole purpose of government as being the good of the governed. Though liberty alone was the basis of virtue, order and stability in governments and was especially associated with the ancient Roman republic, the best form of government was not purely republican, but a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. Its aims, ‘to increase the number, strength, and riches of the people’, could be met only through conquest, which in turn required both adept commanders and a strong, patriotic people loving liberty and uncorrupted by luxury and private interest. Preserving liberty also required maintaining rights. While man was born naturally free, liberty being ‘exemption from the domination of any other’, all governments required surrendering some natural liberty. But the right of dominion was based on consent, and kings who exceeded their authority could be resisted, this having been established in Britain prior to the Norman conquest. Such rights were most frequently lost, in turn, as a result of the corruption of manners and a decline in public virtue.¹⁰

Such themes were echoed in the early eighteenth century by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, whose *Independent Whig* and *Cato’s Letters* (1720–1) upheld religious liberty and the rights of Dissenters, the right to resist tyranny, the right of freedom of speech and opposition to standing armies, and warned of the dangers of commercial speculation and of the dependency of liberty on public virtue.¹¹ Trenchard, Gordon and others were especially indebted to the mid-seventeenth

century republican, James Harrington, whose own master was Machiavelli. But while the so-called neo-Machiavellian republicans or True Whigs aimed to emulate ancient Greece and Rome, virtually none sought to abolish the monarchy, instead preferring a ‘mixed government’ where substantial power rested with the Commons, and warning of monarchical and aristocratic encroachments upon it, which upset the balance of the constitution. Far less were they democrats wishing majority rule rather than government by the virtuous, landowning few assumed to represent the genuine interests of all. Some True Whigs, however, were willing to counsel agrarian laws to limit landed estates so that inequality did not threaten liberty. Many also warned of the increasing power of fundholders who held stock in the swiftly growing national debt, and of the economic instability of the movable property of merchants and speculators by comparison with land. And other dangers for public virtue and liberty existed. Standing armies easily became organs of monarchical tyranny. Religious establishments often proved capricious (some Harringtonians were free-thinkers). For the republicans or True Whigs, then, preserving liberty required eternal vigilance, and a Whig oligarchy as much as an arbitrary monarch could upset Britain’s delicate constitutional balance.

Despite the varying concerns of Locke and Harrington in particular, too much has been made of the supposed divergences between later ‘Lockean’ and ‘republican’ radicals. Reformers held differing views on, for example, the value of increased commerce or wider political participation. But by 1750 such disagreements no longer corresponded with late seventeenth-century Whig positions and most reformers did not see themselves as narrowly ‘Lockean’ or ‘republican’. Thomas Pownall, for example, happily quoted Locke on the origins of the social contract and Harrington on the need to balance property in the commonwealth.¹² None the less as a means of emphasis these labels retain some utility. Broadly speaking, ‘republicans’ were more alarmed at the spread of luxury and commerce, more often urged the primacy of public virtue, and saw the landed gentry as its best repository. More ‘Lockean’ reformers concentrated on the right of representation as a means of ensuring consent, sought the extension of the franchise to middle-class merchants and manufacturers (many of whom were also Dissenters) in order to protect ‘property’ generally, and not only landed wealth, and were more concerned with corruption through arbitrary power than commerce. All agreed that the right to resist tyranny was derived from the ‘executive power’ all possessed in the state of nature and belonged to ‘the people’. These were chiefly understood as men of property, government having been founded to preserve property generally, though the ‘people’ could also be construed in a wider sense. All defined the English constitution as a limited monarchy whose powers were balanced by both the

aristocracy and the commonalty. In practice this meant parliamentary supremacy and the ‘independence’ of the Commons, with the king naming his own ministers but governing only with parliamentary approval. Rule ‘by the consent of the governed’ summarized many of these positions.

Natural rights and natural law

Ideas of natural rights were also crucial to the language of reform and merit some further introduction here given their centrality to Paine. Whig reformers did not aim to create a new form of polity, but rather, as the former Cambridge MP Soame Jenyns put it, ‘to bring back society to its original state, and to restore mankind to the full enjoyment of their natural rights’, an ideal of purification much indebted to Machiavellian republicanism. Three models of rights were particularly important to such arguments: the state of nature ideal often associated with Locke, where political sovereignty derived from a mutual compact between governors and governed which secured rights granted by God and originally defined in the Bible, but inhering in all as psychological properties; the Anglo-Saxon or ancient constitution, which identified annual parliaments and universal male suffrage with pre-Norman Britain and was prominently identified with the Yorkshire True Whig Obadiah Hulme’s *Essay on the English Constitution* (1771); and the revolutionary settlement of 1688, a central assumption in the Whig interpretation of which concerned the triumph of popular sovereignty over monarchical tyranny.¹³

These ideal types overlapped to a considerable degree and were accordingly invoked both in isolation and in various mixtures. The scholar and anti-slavery agitator Granville Sharp, for example, alleged that the Saxon leader Alfred’s chief inspiration had been Moses. Hulme thought the ancient Greek republics had first properly wielded natural rights, followed by the Saxons, while the great Nottinghamshire reformer Major John Cartwright thought the English constitution perfectly harmonized with that ‘great constitution of moral government, called the law of nature’. But there were also tensions between these ideals; Hulme, for example, disparaged the settlement of 1688 as having failed to reinstitute annual parliaments and instead instigated a great neglect of natural rights founded in the ancient constitution. None the less all Whigs agreed that basic or natural rights were divine in origin and unalterable compared to secondary or prescriptive rights, which were historically rooted and mutable. It was widely asserted that the chief end of government (as the Cambridge Constitutional Society, for example, stressed) was securing rather than suppressing natural rights. In particular this meant that .the

divine, the primitive and later forms of rights were thought of as flowing into and amalgamated in a uniquely British constitution whose restoration was the reformers' chief aim. Rights were 'natural' in that they were ordained by God and inhered in each individual, but also because they were historically part of the British constitution. Thus the Society for Constitutional Information's first address in 1780 took the 'basis and vital principle' of the 'venerable Constitution handed down to us ... from our Saxon and British ancestors' to be that 'LAW, TO BIND ALL, MUST BE ASSENTED TO BY ALL', which required equal representation.¹⁴

Radical discussions of natural rights were also much indebted to the natural jurisprudence teachings of medieval Christianity which, reformulated in the seventeenth century, remained a dominant intellectual model throughout Europe for another 200 years. Though they attained a degree of independence by the early eighteenth century, natural rights discussions were originally only one segment of the natural law, which systematically addressed the entire range of psychological, moral and political experience in order to determine the meaning of the natural law, or system of rules imposed by God upon man to attain to happiness and knowable through reason. Unfortunately eighteenth-century British natural jurisprudence has been much neglected and its relation to natural rights consequently remains largely unexplored. Usually it is assumed that the central doctrines of natural law were devastated by both the sceptics, led by Hume, who doubted inferences from divine intention or any 'original contract' or state of nature on evidential grounds, and thought the passions predominated over reason in human affairs, and the utilitarians, chiefly Bentham, Paley and Priestley, who provided a new hedonistic foundation for morals. One way around some of these objections had already been suggested by Pufendorf: the necessity for sociable co-operation became the chief source of natural obligation rather than conscious obedience to the demands of virtue.¹⁵ But all that remained in Britain after these assaults, it is usually thought, were the natural law teachings regarding international relations and the regulation of war, which became modern international law, and a few natural rights ideas associated with Locke which, once their systematic context had been removed, limped into the nineteenth century and then expired.

But if the natural law framework of natural rights had in fact been destroyed by 1790 we would have a hard time explaining many aspects of the natural rights debate during the revolution, and certainly the popularity of Paine's political thought and the association of natural rights doctrines with ideas of reason, sociability, reciprocal duties and mutual interdependence. In fact the writings of many jurists circulated widely in late eighteenth-century Britain, among them works by Pufendorf, Burlamaqui, Hutcheson, Vattel and others. Several prominent Whig radicals wrote

specifically on natural law, for instance Granville Sharp (*A Tract on the Law of Nature*, 1777). Locke was also deeply indebted to the same tradition, which poses problems for the idea of a separate natural rights discourse and indeed implies that natural rights arguments were only a special branch of natural law teaching. But while the longevity of more systematic natural law teachings is now recognized in relation to the later Scottish Enlightenment, it needs to be stressed for England too, for Paine and others were also much indebted to such views. Texts like Burlamaqui's extremely popular *The Principles of Natural and Politic Law* (1763) examined such questions as the origins of civil society and property, the nature of sociability, the sources of political authority and the definition of rights. To such writers sociability, 'that disposition which inclines us to benevolence towards our fellow creatures', was central to balancing the self-love which ensured self-preservation. From this God-given inclination, right reason derived principles upon which all social laws and moral duties were founded, such as that the public good ought to be the supreme rule and that sociability ought to guide all human affairs, dictating benevolence even towards our enemies.¹⁶

From such works the radicals derived much, though natural law writers were usually politically more conservative than the natural rights theorists of the 1770s and later. Pufendorf and other opponents of Hobbes emphasized a contractualist and voluntary foundation for political authority. But this was still insufficient for many radicals. Granville Sharp, for example, defended the American colonists by dismissing Pufendorf's argument that it was only a 'notion', not part of the law of nature, that for law to bind all required the consent of all. Instead an 'equitable form of a *reciprocal Covenant*' was the basis for relations between man and God as well as sovereign and subject. The right of all to consent to laws, and therefore to a vote, was thus based in the law of nature.¹⁷

More acceptable were natural law accounts of the origins of society and of natural rights. To Burlamaqui, for example, God had given the earth to all 'to a common use of whatever the earth produces for their several wants'. Early society was 'a state of equality and liberty' where 'all men enjoy the same prerogatives, and an entire independence on any other power but God. For every man is master of himself, and equally to his fellow-creatures, so long as he does not subject himself to another person's authority by a particular convention.' But a romanticization of this condition was uncommon among British radicals, most of whom believed that natural society was characterized by indigence and want and that the struggles resulting therefrom had led civil government to be founded. None the less the notion of a 'natural' state of man ambiguously meant not only the earliest social state, but also, as Burlamaqui put it, any other 'into which man enters by his own act and

agreement ... conformable in the main to his nature' and 'the end for which he was formed'. Correspondingly natural rights were rooted not only in the origins of society, but in man's nature, and 'right' meant 'whatever reason certainly acknowledges as a sure and concise means of attaining happiness'. Consequently this stipulation confined the notion of a right, which was not a simple power to perform an action but one limited by the requirement of seeking the happiness of others. Possessing a right meant anyone could 'make use of his liberty and natural strength in a peculiar manner' as long as this was 'approved by reason'. Thus parents had a right to bring up their own children, but not to harm them, and a sovereign could levy troops for the defence of the state, but not if their families were left unprovided for. A 'right' was thus a moral claim which entailed an obligation, 'a restriction of natural liberty produced by reason', both not to restrict the rights of others, and to assist them in exercising their rights. This emphasis on reason, which was to be central to Paine's definition of rights and his retention of a theory of social obligation, Hume and other critics of natural law found particularly objectionable. But Burlamaqui, for example, was not worried by the problem of weak or deficient reason. Reason approved 'a particular exercise of our strength and liberty' because 'the difference of those judgements arises from the very nature of things and their effects'. Whatever tended 'to the perfection and happiness of man, meets with the approbation of reason, which condemns whatever leads to a contrary end'. If reason did not rule human actions, 'all the rights it grants to man would become useless and of no effect'.¹⁸

The emergence of the reform movement

So far we have considered only the intellectual bases of eighteenth-century radicalism. Before turning to Paine, however, we need some sense of how the reform movement itself developed. John Brewer has shown that many True Whigs were uninvolved in institutional politics and began to organize only after the accession of George III in 1760. The practical revival of parliamentary reform activities from mid-century onwards was dominated by three movements which will be characterized briefly here: the 'Wilkes and Liberty' agitation of the 1760s, which occasioned an unprecedented popular political participation; support for the American revolution; and the revival of provincial radicalism which followed.¹⁹ These renewed an enthusiasm for parliamentary reform in the early 1780s which retained some momentum even in 1790.

(1) *'Wilkes and Liberty'*

John Wilkes, libertine, spendthrift and occasional reformer, provoked one of the most important outbursts of popular radicalism in the middle years of the century.²⁰ Allied to the elder Pitt, his satirical *North Briton* (which Paine supposedly read) lambasted the policies of Lord Bute's government in 1762–3. When no. 45 of the journal seemingly impugned the king, Wilkes was prosecuted for seditious libel. Since he sat in the Commons, his arrest raised two key issues: the immunity of an MP and, more importantly, the nature of the General Warrant served upon him. Wilkes proclaimed that 'the liberty of the subject at large' was threatened and fervent crowds of supporters took up the slogan, 'Wilkes and Liberty'. Released, Wilkes was re-elected to Parliament in March 1768 with tremendous demonstrations of popular support, his picture appearing in every public house in London, the great symbolic number, '45', on every wall. Having fled a charge of obscene libel for printing a ribald essay, Wilkes surrendered to the King's Bench prison the following month to settle the issue of his outlawry. Eleven were killed in riots on this occasion.

Sentenced to 22 months' imprisonment, Wilkes encouraged the formation of the Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights in February 1769 to take up the cause of increased representation and annual elections. Expelled from Parliament in April, Wilkes won re-election, but unprecedentedly Parliament chose to seat his defeated opponent. A vast number of petitions from throughout the nation objected, while prominent MPs like Edmund Burke took up the cause. Support came even from the American colonies, whose disillusionment with the Crown can be dated from this point (at least two town names, Wilkesbarre in Pennsylvania and Wilkesboro in Wilkes County, North Carolina, commemorate this enthusiasm).²¹ For the first time something like a modern political campaign emerged. Popular meetings of a type never before witnessed drew thousands in protest. Wilkites gained important posts in London elections. Striking weavers in Spitalfields linked Wilkes's cause to their own. After several attempts, Wilkes became Lord Mayor of London in 1774, serving honourably and respectably. Later re-elected to Parliament until 1790, he ended his days as an undistinguished MP with scant interest in reform.

Wilkes was clearly no republican and spoke, for example, of 'rights coeval with the *English* constitution, that perfection of human wisdom, that noblest work of man'. But his cause instigated the involvement in charges of corruption against the government not only of numbers of merchants and tradesmen, but also of the labouring classes. Support for Wilkes has been correlated with rising food prices, and no doubt many artisans and journeymen in the Wilkite 'mob' had known unemployment and hunger. But others, especially Wilkes's supporters among the more middling trades of jewellers, saddlers, ironmongers, brewers and timber

merchants, clearly resented their exclusion from politics and identified parliamentary corruption with a restricted franchise. In their eyes ‘independence’ ought no longer to be associated only with landownership, but should be understood more generally, at least as encompassing all male householders. Wilkes’s association with such goals was long-remembered; his last follower died in 1834, having when drunk commonly paraded through the streets of Aylesbury in an overcoat given him by his hero, shouting ‘Wilkes and Liberty’.²²

(2) *The impact of the American revolution*

The American revolution gave an enormous boost to the reform movement. After the colonies assisted Wilkes, his followers in the Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights in turn sent money as the American conflict worsened, and upheld the right to be represented if taxed, some even venturing the view that ‘the fate of Wilkes and America must stand or fall together’. Other Wilkite organizations subscribed funds to the victims of Concord and Lexington in June 1775, as did radicals in debating and convivial clubs like the Robinhood, which comprised mainly tradesmen by the 1770s. Like the Napoleonic threat twenty years later, the coming of war divided the British reformers, bringing upon them what J. H. Plumb has termed ‘the stigma of disloyalty’.²³ But parallels were evident from the outset between the colonists’ cause and that of domestic radicals. Both rejected the notion of virtual representation, or the view that MPs in the Commons maintained the interests of the entire nation rather than only their constituents. Both insisted that the foundation of government was voluntary consent, that taxation without representation was unjust and that abrogating any contract between governors and governed invoked a right of resistance.

Few connected these issues more successfully than Major John Cartwright, who sacrificed a potential military career by refusing to serve against the colonists. Not only did Cartwright lend much assistance in his *American Independence, the Interest and Glory of Great Britain* (1774), which advocated separate independence for each colony under the Crown, though not a federation of all. His *Take Your Choice!* (1776) established the radical platform of the next several generations in its demands for annual elections, manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, a secret ballot and payment of MPs. He also insisted that the right of representation could be based only in personality, and not in property. No republican, Cartwright none the less had scant respect for the existing monarchy. Like Hulme and the Dissenting schoolmaster James Burgh, Cartwright also proposed a national convention to begin reforming a Parliament too corrupt to reform itself, a plan suggested at Middlesex in 1769 by the Anglican physician and political writer John Jebb. But while this might involve, as

Burgh suggested, acting against existing representatives, its aim was to pressure Parliament, not to replace it.²⁴

Though Anglicans like Granville Sharp took up their cause, the American colonists found their main champions in the leading Dissenting radicals. The philosopher and minister Richard Price, for example, wrote extensively on the revolution, seeing its central issue as the equal right of all to share in legislation, legitimate government consisting only in equal laws framed by common consent. Wholeheartedly adopting the demand for independence after 1776, Price cheered the colonists' success as perhaps the most important step ever taken in human improvement. As importantly, he upset conservative Whigs by arguing the colonists' case from a natural rights basis rather than in terms of precedents like 1688 or the ancient constitution.²⁵

As John Derry has written, the battle lines which defined the French revolution debate were thus already beginning to form in the mid-1770s. The American conflict revealed increasingly divergent interpretations of the settlement of 1688, and correspondingly of the character of the constitution itself. Everyone knew that this comprised the king, who after 1689 retained considerable powers in his capacity to name ministers, veto legislation and influence foreign policy; the Lords, who shared in legislation and had some judicial functions; and the Commons, who were pre-eminent and held financial power. All conceded that each of these should prevent the others from dominating. But what powers each branch should correspondingly have over the others to accomplish this was more debated. British and colonial radicals agreed that the American cause exemplified the principle of consensual government against the usurpations of an unrepresentative and corrupt parliament as well as the designs of a tyrannical monarch. All Whigs commended the ascendancy of the Commons, but the more radical thought it all too subservient and condemned the government and Crown's corrupt use of patronage and ministerial placemen as a means of extending their powers. Thus the revolution helped to redefine British radical notions of constitutionalism, republicanism and popular sovereignty, making these more popular in imitation of what was thought to be American practice.²⁶

(3) Provincial radicalism: the Yorkshire revival in the 1780s

The expense of the American wars ensured that radical enthusiasm did not flag at the end of the 1770s. The 'Associated Counties' movement began in 1779–80 when a number of Yorkshire nobles and gentlemen petitioned Parliament about high taxes and the burgeoning system of sinecures and pensions.²⁷ Soon delegates from various county organizations met in London to demand annual parliaments, with their chief

spokesman, the Anglican clergyman Christopher Wyvill, also seeking to extend the suffrage further into the middle orders. In early 1780, a group of Westminster electors presided over by the Whig leader Charles James Fox more daringly demanded Cartwright's programme of 'universal male suffrage' (meaning men of some property but not the labouring poor), annual elections, equal electoral districts, vote by ballot and the payment of MPs. At this time Cartwright and others also founded the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI), whose members remained active until 1794 and accepted Paine as an honorary member in 1787 on the basis of *Common Sense*. But further reforms were derailed by a week-long, anti-Catholic riot in 1780, which strengthened the government's hand by making any substantial popular political participation suspicious (and which was remembered as proving the dangers of popular enthusiasm in 1792). When the Rockingham Whigs formed a new government in 1782 after the British defeat in America, the reformers' hopes were again raised. But various reform bills were introduced and suffered defeat, the last being Pitt's effort in 1785, which was supported by 174 MPs. Thereafter apathy set in once again, though the SCI continued to be occupied with the anti-slavery cause, prison reform and other issues. Only the coming of the French revolution markedly revived enthusiasm for political change.

By the late 1780s a spectrum of radical opinion had thus developed which exhibited both a common programme and a variety of disagreements. Reformers shared a concern about the inadequacy of the electoral system, the corruption of the Commons by patronage, and the overly long duration of parliaments. They were divided as to how short parliaments should be, usually opting for triennial or annual elections, and who should vote, with most favouring the exclusion of the labouring poor. Some felt universal suffrage and annual elections were, as Jenyns put it, 'totally impracticable'. Wyvill thought universal suffrage acceptable where public safety was not threatened, but proposed a more restricted suffrage anyway. No reformers doubted the need for greater independence of the Commons. But virtually none considered abolishing the monarchy, an independent House of Commons being, as Jenyns put it, 'no part of the English constitution, the excellence of which consists in being composed of three powers, mutually dependent on each other', and the republic established in Britain in the mid-seventeenth century being 'the worst kind of democracy that ever existed'. Finally, reformers were also divided over the growth of cities and luxury. By the 1770s many radicals had forsaken the chief puritan and classical republican objections to commerce and instead saw trade as beneficial and the manners of commercial society as even superior to classical virtue. None the less there remained substantial divisions about the merits of modernity well into the nineteenth century. Prior to the French revolution, for example, the leading

Dissenting reformers Joseph Priestley and Richard Price found themselves on opposite sides of this question. Priestley championed commercial development, while Price thought the ideal society lay between savagery and luxury (a point in 1784 he thought best represented by the new state of Connecticut) and warned against the corrupting effects of banks, paper money, the national debt and foreign trade.²⁸ This debate was to remain important through the 1790s. But long before another powerful voice had also begun to sway public opinion on such issues: that of Thomas Paine.

Notes to Introduction: the age of Paine

- 1 Quoted in D. Hawke (1961), p. 111.
- 2 C. Cone (1968), p. 102; R. Fennessy (1963), p. 244; A. Young (1976), p. x; A. French (1934), p. 705.
- 3 J. Greene (1978), p. 73. A. Ayer (1988) is an important step in redressing these deficiencies, though it is much less concerned with reconstructing political debates than this book.
- 4 A. Aldridge (1974) reviews the secondary literature on Paine from 1945 to 73. Highly useful on Paineana is R. Gimbel (1959).
- 5 The republican view is best represented by J. Pocock (most recently, 1985, pp. 215–310), the liberal on the American side by J. Appleby (1976) and the British by I. Kramnick (1977b and 1982). Also essential are C. Robbins (1959) and H. Dickinson (1977). See also J. Reid (1988).
- 6 L. Colley (1981), p. 15. On convergences between Whig and Tory reformers see Colley (1982), pp. 85–117, H. Dickinson (1977), pp. 14–56, 91–118.
- 7 On radicalism and the language of class in this period see in particular I. Kramnick (1977b, 1980, 1982).
- 8 Wyvill's statistics, in E. Black (1963), p. 59.
- 9 J. Locke (1970), pp. 287–95, 301–5, 343–5, 380–1, 385, 421; J. Towers (1788), pp. 26–7; T. Pownall (1752), pp. 16–17; J. Towers (1782), p. 84, 36–7. On Locke's reception see J. Dunn (1969).
- 10 A. Sidney (1750), Vol. 1, pp. 102, 186–210, 296–308, 37–9, 441–8, Vol. 2, pp. 38–44, 73, 288, 309–14.
- 11 D. Jacobson (1965) gives a selection of Trenchard and Gordon's writings.
- 12 T. Pownall (1752), pp. 16–17, 28–30, 69.
- 13 [S. Jenyns] (1785) p. 9; [O. Hulme] (1771), pp. 3–33. On the 'Norman yoke' see C. Hill (1954).
- 14 G. Sharp (1784), p. 3; [O. Hulme] (1771), pp. 2, 127, 149; J. Cartwright (1776), p. 9; T. Northcote (1781), p. 8; C. Wyvill (1794), Vol. 2, p. 465, Vol. 1, pp. 135–6.
- 15 See especially I. Hont (1987).

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- 16 J. Burlamaqui (1763), Vol. 1, pp. 169–70.
- 17 G. Sharp (1774), pp. v, xiv.
- 18 J. Burlamaqui (1763), Vol. 1, p. 41; (1794), Vol. 1, pp. 38, 42–3, 68–75. See my (1989), chapter 1.
- 19 J. Brewer (1980a), p. 343. On the emergence of radicalism see also Brewer (1976). Surveys of the reform movement include G. Veitch (1913), S. Maccoby (1955a), I. Christie (1962), E. Black (1963), A. Goodwin (1979), pp. 32–98, E. Royle and J. Walvin (1982).
- 20 On the Wilkites see G. Rudé (1962).
- 21 See R. Postgate (1956), pp. 162–72 and P. Maier (1963) on Wilkes's impact in America.
- 22 C. Wyvill (1794), Vol. 1, p. xli; G. Rudé (1962), p. 180; J. Brewer (1980a), p. 345; R. Postgate (1956), pp. 148–9.
- 23 J. Plumb (1973), p. 86. Recent treatments of this theme include G. Guttridge (1966), J. Derry (1976) (very helpful; see especially chapter 4), C. Bonwick (1977), R. Toohey (1978), J. Bradley (1986). A good unpublished study is A. Sheps (1973).
- 24 J. Cartwright (1776), p. 89; [O. Hulme] (1771), p. 161; J. Burgh (1764), Vol. 3, pp. 428–60, Vol. 1, p. 6. On Cartwright see F. Cartwright (1826) and J. Osborne (1972) (and on his originality, pp. 22–3). On the development of ideas of a convention or 'anti-parliament' see T. Parsinnen (1973).
- 25 R. Price (1777), pp. ix, 20–24. On Dissent and the revolution see C. Bonwick (1976).
- 26 J. Deny (1976), pp. 170, 4; A. Sheps (1975a).
- 27 See H. Butterfield (1947), E. Black (1963), pp. 31–173, I. Christie (1960) and (1962), pp. 68–120 and J. Dinwiddy (1971). On the origins of the SCI see E. Black (1963), pp. 174–212.
- 28 [S. Jenyns] (1784), pp. 1–2, 5–6, 21–2; C. Wyvill (1794), Vol. 3, p. 63; R. Price (1785), pp. 66–80.

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‘Apostle of liberty’: the life of Thomas Paine

Like nearly everything else associated with him, the retailing of Paine’s life has been contentious. After the *Rights of Man* appeared, the British government for £500 commissioned a slanderous ‘biography’ of Paine from one ‘Francis Oldys’, a Tory refugee from Maryland and clerk at the Board of Trade and Plantations named George Chalmers. This reached eleven editions within two years, in the process growing (ever more fictionally) from 25 to over 150 pages, and was abstracted, embellished and widely reprinted.¹ In the late 1790s similarly hostile works appeared by, among others, William Cobbett, then a leading anti-Jacobin but soon to convert to radicalism himself. Early in the new century an apostate radical headed in the opposite direction, James Cheetham (‘Cheat ‘Em’ to Paine’s disciples), added another vituperative account. But the Painites retaliated as early as 1793 with brief *Impartial Memoirs* of Paine and after 1815 several more substantial biographies appeared. Since then Paine’s character has been assailed and defended many times, his vices greatly exaggerated by his enemies, his virtues trumpeted loudly by his friends. Settling the true facts about several events in Paine’s life (his own autobiography having disappeared) remained important until many decades after his death, the last great point of contention being Paine’s supposed death-bed reversion to orthodox Christianity.²

Thomas Paine was born in the small Suffolk market town of Thetford (which today honours him with a statue and the Rights of Man public house) on 29 January 1737, the son of a small Quaker farmer and stay- (or corset-support) maker. Politically the town was in the pocket of a prominent Whig magnate, the Duke of Grafton, who nominated the two local MPs. The Lent Assizes for the Eastern Circuit were also held there and Paine doubtless witnessed the barbarous penalties meted out to those who defied the law. Raised as a Quaker on his father’s side, indeed, Paine was particularly aware of the cruelty of many punishments and frequent use of the death penalty, for the sect was in the forefront of opposition to both and, while later

comments reveal that he found the Quaker life dull and colourless, he remained fond of the 'exceedingly good moral education' it demanded. At his mother's instructions Paine was confirmed in the Church of England. But he was puzzled by a sermon on redemption read to him by a relative, doubting that God would allow his own son to be killed when 'a man would be hanged who did such a thing' and remaining convinced of God's greater benevolence.³

Despite an aptitude for science and mathematics, Paine was withdrawn from school by his father at the age of 13 to learn the stay-making business, and remained at this task for some five years. Having already conceived a desire to see America, however, he doubtless found the trade constricting. More attractive, too, was the naval life a schoolmaster had regaled him with, and at 17 Paine slipped away to join the *Terrible* (its captain's name was Death), a privateer engaged against French traders.⁴ His father rescued him before the vessel sailed, however, and in its next engagement it lost nearly nine-tenths of its crew. It was not the first time fortune would smile upon Paine. Though in 1756 he apparently joined another privateer, the *King of Prussia*, Paine returned to stay-manufacturing first in London, then Dover, and finally at Sandwich in Kent, where he married in the autumn of 1759, and possibly also acted briefly as a Methodist lay preacher. But his business was unsuccessful and in the following year his wife died. Soon after Paine decided to become an exciseman. For a time he examined brewers' casks at Grantham and in mid-1764 was appointed to observe smugglers at Alford. Ill-paid, and probably also immersed in his own scientific studies, Paine like many of his colleagues neglected to examine fully all of the goods brought into local warehouses. For passing some without inspection he was discharged in August 1765.

Paine now travelled for a time and, though he sued successfully and was reinstated as an exciseman, no suitable post was available for him. He taught English briefly in London, again apparently preaching, and may even have considered becoming an Anglican minister. He also attended scientific lectures at the Royal Society (later telling a friend that he had 'seldom passed five minutes of my life, however circumstanced, in which I did not acquire some knowledge'). Finally an excise post came open and after a brief period in Cornwall Paine went to Lewes, Sussex in early 1768, where he boarded with a Quaker tobacconist. This was an extremely important period in his life. He seems to have been involved in local charitable work. He began to be interested in politics, composing an election song for a local Whig candidate for the respectable sum of three guineas. Soon, too, by one account, he began to move away from Whiggism, prompted in the first instance by the none too seditious comment by a friend, over a glass of punch after a game of bowls, that Frederick,

King of Prussia was ‘the right sort of man for a king, for he has a deal of the devil in him’, which led Paine to wonder ‘if a system of government did not exist that did not require a devil’. He also began his career as a pamphleteer here. His first work, *The Case of the Officers of the Excise* (1772), detailed the low wages and arduous duties of excisemen, the temptations to dishonesty this incited and the consequent dangers for revenue collection. Paine’s talents as a writer were already evident: The rich, in ease and affluence, may think I have drawn an unnatural portrait’, he proclaimed, adding, ‘but could they descend to the cold regions of want, the circle of polar poverty, they would find their opinions changing with the climate.’ Paine was also active in a local debating society, the White Hart Evening Club, where he became known as a convivial conversationalist with a taste for oysters and wine. Here, Paine’s comrades elected him ‘General of the Headstrong War’ for his ‘perseverance in a good cause and obstinacy in a bad one’, as a radical Quaker friend, Thomas ‘Clio’ Rickman later put it.⁵ His only pronounced vice, in fact, seems to have been a predilection towards vanity.

Paine married again in 1771, this time a young Quaker girl, and spent much of the next few years preparing petitions favouring higher excisemen’s salaries, a task his colleagues had deputed him for. He also operated a tobacco mill and small grocery shop for a time, but was hard hit when he lost his excise post again in April 1774 (though Chalmers’s later accusation that he had been selling smuggled tobacco was groundless). Forced to sell his possessions in order to meet his creditors’ claims, Paine separated from his wife (whom he later helped to support) a few months later and never remarried.⁶ Returning to London, he followed the ‘Wilkes and Liberty’ campaign with great interest. He now became acquainted with the writer Oliver Goldsmith and also Benjamin Franklin, whose electrical experiments he admired and to whom he made the famous retort, when Franklin stated, ‘Where liberty is, there is my country,’ ‘Where liberty is not, there is my country.’ Franklin saw much promise in Paine and encouraged him to leave for the American colonies, where there was greater scope for his talents.

Soon taking this fateful advice, Paine reached Philadelphia in December 1774 after nine weeks’ voyage, having barely survived an outbreak of shipboard typhus. Originally seeking to open a girls’ school, he instead with Franklin’s assistance became editor of a small paper, the *Pennsylvania Magazine, or American Museum*. To this and other Philadelphia journals he contributed, among other pieces, a defence of modern authors and institutions against the ancient, an important anti-slavery essay at a time (March 1775) when such views were uncommon, and articles condemning duelling, British policy in India, the use of titles and cruelty to animals. He also helped to draft a bill incorporating the American Philosophical Society. As

colonial independence neared, he had already begun to establish that vigorous and independent style of radicalism which would become his trademark. But this was not sufficient to earn a living and poor pay soon forced him to leave the paper.⁷

Paine did not initially favour the violent separation of the colonies from Britain. But when the British fired upon a demonstration at Lexington in April 1775, and certainly by late 1775, or barely a year after his arrival, he concluded that independence was inevitable. The cause of separation became soon and long associated with his name and the force of his arguments. The pattern of Paine’s political career, as we will see, was already laid: what others hesitantly and often reluctantly felt, he stated unequivocally and in a language all could comprehend.

Much of the autumn of 1775 was devoted to writing *Common Sense*, which ‘burst from the press with an effect which has rarely been produced by types and paper in any age or country’, as his friend Dr Benjamin Rush put it. None the less Paine’s authorship remained unknown at first, partly because he had resided only briefly in the colonies and did not want this to prejudice his readers. Franklin, in fact, was widely believed to have written the piece, though when a loyalist lady denounced him for using the phrase ‘the royal brute of Britain’ to describe George III, Franklin denied that he would have so dishonoured the animal world. Despite the success of *Common Sense*, Paine gained nothing from it, since he paid the costs of publication (about £40) himself, and further donated the copyright to the colonists’ struggle. It was to set a pattern for his entire career, for Paine was usually too proud and too idealistic to accept money for doing what he did best, and was consequently rarely well off.⁸

As the cause of independence gathered steam, Paine assailed vacillating public opinion in Pennsylvania and New York, and warned against accepting prospective English peace proposals. Closely associated with Jefferson for a time, he endeavoured to have an anti-slavery clause inserted into the Declaration of Independence, but it was withdrawn after objections by Georgia, South Carolina and various northern slave suppliers. Meanwhile Paine joined the army. By September he was an aide-de-camp to General Nathaniel Greene with the rank of brigade major and accompanied the Continental Army during its retreat to Newark. Here he began to compose the first of his *Crisis* articles, which did much to raise the colonists’ flagging spirits in the face of an apparently hopeless plight.

In early 1777 Paine served as part of a delegation to secure neutrality from some Pennsylvania Indians and in April became secretary to the newly created Committee of Foreign Affairs of the Congress. Philadelphia fell to the British in September and Paine again returned to the field, following Washington to Valley Forge and seeing action on several occasions. He was rarely far from political controversy, however.

First he defended at length the Pennsylvania constitution framed by Franklin, which was under assault by opponents of popular government. In late 1778 Paine became involved in a major scandal which made him many political adversaries when he denounced an American envoy to France, Silas Deane, for purportedly defrauding Congress by charging for supplies which Paine felt were a gift. Paine inadvertently undermined his own position, however, by indiscreetly disclosing secret information about France's aid to America at a time of its supposed neutrality. The French envoy was compelled to protest and Paine to defend himself. A fierce debate occupied nearly a week of congressional business in early 1779 and one of Paine's enemies, with whom he would have much to do in the future, Gouverneur Morris, even urged his dismissal on the grounds of his humble social origins alone.⁹ Congress refused to discharge him, but Paine resigned his post anyway in the belief that his case would not be fairly heard. Refusing a large bribe from the French ambassador, who hoped to gain the services of his pen for France, he instead became a clerk in the offices of a local lawyer, and in September 1779 complained that he could not even afford to hire, much less to buy, his own horse.

To raise funds Paine now proposed to bring out a collected edition of his writings as well as to commence a history of the revolution which, unlike accounts of ancient wars he knew, would provoke 'moral reflection'. Lacking support for such projects, Paine reminded the government of Pennsylvania of its debts to him. Its assembly accordingly elected him Clerk in November 1779, and in his first day of office Paine probably assisted in introducing an anti-slavery act which passed the following March. But his attention remained focused on the war. The Continental Army was again sinking fast in the winter of 1780 and the new republic was in desperate financial straits. Paine began a subscription fund with \$500 of his own money and eventually £300,000 was raised. With two new pamphlets in the spring of 1780, Paine also found his popularity returning, and on 4 July 1780 he was granted the degree of Master of Arts by the newly reconstituted University of Pennsylvania. Later that year he proposed that Congress send him on a secret mission to England to further the American cause by appearing to be an Englishman returning from the colonies certain of American victory.

Resolved to write his history, none the less, and still hoping for congressional support, Paine resigned his clerkship to the Pennsylvania Assembly in November 1780. Before he could commence work, however, one Colonel John Laurens, who had been appointed by Congress to sail for France in search of loans, persuaded Paine to accompany him as his secretary. Paine found himself widely known and respected in France, and their mission was highly successful, 6 million livres being secured with Franklin's help. Returning to Boston in late summer, Paine found he would

receive no recompense for the expenses of his trip. In the autumn he appealed to Washington to aid his straitened circumstances. The general, basking in his victory over Cornwallis at Yorktown, agreed that Paine's services to the cause had been essential and arranged for \$800 annually to be granted him in return for writing on behalf of the nation, particularly in support of higher state contributions to the national government and an extension of the powers of Congress. A similar sum was to be paid him by the Secretary of Foreign Affairs. By late 1783 Paine had also accepted money from France in gratitude for his militantly anti-British attitude, though these were of course causes which he supported himself. In the coming months Paine wrote warning of overconfidence as negotiations continued and he restrained Washington from hanging a British officer in reprisal for the unwarranted British execution of an American officer. He also tried again to persuade some recalcitrant states to fund the army even as its victory seemed certain. But such efforts had little effect beyond making Paine himself seem a mere agent of the Congress.

Soon after this, Paine moved to Bordentown, New Jersey to be near a Quaker friend, Colonel Joseph Kirkbride. Virtually impoverished after sinking his money into a small house, he continued to hope for congressional relief. Washington recommended that Paine be appointed historiographer to the new nation. But Paine's views favouring a strong national sovereignty over the states evidently deflected congressional sympathy for this proposal. In 1784, however, the State of New York granted him a 277-acre farm with a large house at New Rochelle which had been confiscated from an exiled loyalist. The Virginia legislature attempted a similar grant, but it failed to pass. Pennsylvania granted him £500. Finally Congress, trying to avoid resuscitating the Deane affair again, granted him \$3,000, reduced from an original proposal of \$6,000. This did not cover Paine's expenses in France, but at least he now enjoyed considerable independence.

During the next several years Paine worked on his favourite scientific project, the construction of the first large single-arch iron bridge.¹⁰ The Pennsylvania Assembly expressed interest in the design, but Paine decided first to visit his mother in England, with a stop in France to seek support for his project as well as for the cause of peace with England. At Paris in the summer of 1787 he was widely fêted, and much attention was bestowed upon his bridge model. At Thetford he found his mother in comfort, stayed with her for several months, perhaps attending a local Quaker meeting house, and settling upon her a respectable allowance. While in Britain he also wrote against the prospect of a new war with Holland and continued his scientific explorations, which included plans for a smokeless candle and for using gunpowder as a motor force.

Paine was now a celebrity here, too, and attracted the attention of engineers and inventors, some of whom set up a workshop for him at Rotherham in Yorkshire. In the summer of 1788 he enjoyed the hospitality of his future nemesis, Edmund Burke, for a week at the country seat of the Duke of Portland, as well as the company of other Whig leaders like Charles James Fox. (Burke was pleased to meet ‘the great American’ and wrote to the elder Pitt that this was perhaps even better than meeting Washington, since Paine was ‘more of a philosopher than his chief’.)¹¹ In England Paine pressed the cause of friendly relations with France, and carried on a lengthy correspondence with Jefferson and others, partly hoping to convince them of his diplomatic importance in Europe.

But Paine was to become neither diplomat nor inventor. The outbreak of revolution in France proved irresistibly attractive, and when he arrived in Paris in the late autumn of 1789 Paine was welcomed as an American hero, his portrait being seen even in country inns, and Lafayette giving him the key to the Bastille for presentation to Washington. Returning to England in early 1790 to complete his bridge, Paine saw his scientific prospects disappear entirely when his partner, an American merchant, went bankrupt shortly after the model was exhibited in London. But politics loomed ever larger anyway and in the summer of 1790 Paine began writing about the new revolution. He was still engaged at the task when Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* on 1 November. With many others, Paine was taken aback by the ferocity of Burke’s assault, which had commenced with a parliamentary speech on 9 February. He had continued to correspond with Burke until early 1790 on the assumption that any friend of the American revolution must welcome the French, and by agreeing not to discuss France they continued to meet socially later in the year.¹² But Paine could hardly ignore the *Reflections*. His famous defence of the revolution, the *Rights of Man*, appeared in early 1791, just as Paine returned to Paris. It was immediately taken up by the Society for Constitutional Information in London, which Paine had recently joined, and quickly helped to inspire other political organizations.

In Paris Paine followed events closely. He was delighted with Robespierre’s efforts to abolish the death penalty and did not lament Louis’s flight in June, sure that ‘the vices of kings’ had been the root of France’s misfortunes.¹³ He was less happy when the king was arrested and to boot was himself nearly lynched by a mob when he accidentally neglected to decorate his hat with the red, white and blue cockade symbolizing liberty and equality. In July he and Condorcet (whose wife helped to translate Paine’s works), Brissot and a few others founded the Republican Society, whose manifesto shortly went up on walls throughout Paris at a time when few revolutionaries were republicans. Its appearance caused a considerable outcry.

Assailed by conservative royalists, Paine also found the Jacobins unhappy at such competition. But he pressed home his attack none the less, a day later publishing a refutation of Montesquieu’s view that republics suited only small territories. In July he returned to London to celebrate the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille and to publicize the intimate relationship between French liberty and the cause of freedom and justice in Britain. Staying with Rickman, now a bookseller, Paine spent his time in London writing (including an anonymous anti-slavery tract)¹⁴ and visiting acquaintances like Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, John Horne Tooke, Joel Barlow and Joseph Priestley. In London his activities were closely monitored for a time by a disgruntled customs official and friend of Rickman’s named Charles Ross who, unable to support his wife and five children on a meagre salary – the parallel with Paine’s own early life is ironic – volunteered to spy on Paine (though calling it a ‘disagreeable task’) in the hopes of a better post in London. With many of his fellow radicals Paine met at the London Tavern on 4 November 1791 with the Revolution Society, whose focus was now more upon 1789 than 1688. It was here that he proposed the memorable toast, ‘The Revolution of the World’.¹⁵

Amidst growing excitement Paine brought out the second part of the *Rights of Man* in February 1792. When its sales soon vastly surpassed the first part, especially amongst the working classes, the government took the offensive. Paine’s publisher was given a summons in mid-May and another arrived at Rickman’s house on 21 May, closely followed by a royal edict against seditious publications. Paine immediately addressed an open letter to the Attorney General and appeared in court on 8 June, only to have his trial postponed to December.

Meanwhile events were proceeding quickly in France. Though Paine considered going to Dublin in July after he was elected a member of the radical United Irishmen, French citizenship was conferred upon him in late August 1792 for ‘having prepared the enfranchisement of peoples’. Two translations of the *Rights of Man* appeared, and Paine was subsequently elected by no less than four *départements* to the Convention which was to replace the National Assembly. Such acclaim was convenient, for Paine’s arrest in London was daily threatened. A warrant reached Dover only twenty minutes after his departure for France on 14 September and only Rickman’s quick thinking, by emphasizing that letters of Washington’s were among Paine’s affairs, prevented him from being further delayed in the Customs House.¹⁶ In his *Letter Addressed to the Addressers*, not published until after his escape, Paine now broke openly from his previous strategy as well as his moderate associates, and argued that a British convention should assemble to abolish the monarchy.

Paine would never return to England. Landing at Calais, the first *département* to nominate him and whose deputyship he accepted, he was greeted with a salute from

the harbour cannons and a reception at the town hall. The following evening a box at the theatre was decorated with a banner inscribed to ‘the Author of the *Rights of Man*’. At Paris in mid-October Paine joined a committee to form a constitution. Opposing Danton, and indeed much of public opinion, he argued against removing qualifications for judges. Paine applauded the abolition of the monarchy a short time later. But he resisted calls for Louis’s life, and a month later found himself virtually alone in his defence of the king.¹⁷

Meanwhile Paine’s reputation in England gathered momentum rapidly. Cheap editions of the *Rights of Man* were soon widely available and Paine’s trial for having ‘wickedly, falsely, maliciously, scandalously, and seditiously’ published his work took place in mid-December. Protesting the ‘accumulated mischief arising from the book, the Attorney General duly secured its proscription; Paine would later frequently offer the toast, The best way of advertising good books – by prosecution’. His conviction was a foregone conclusion. None the less Paine’s lawyer, Erskine, offered a spirited defence of liberty of the press and had his carriage drawn through the streets by Paine’s supporters, though his own advocacy of the cause was motivated as much by ambition as principle.¹⁸

Now outlawed in England, Paine’s defence of Louis in face of fierce opposition made life difficult in Paris. Marat tried to disqualify him from voting on the king’s death because of his supposed Quakerism. Paine did agree that the king should be tried, though arguing against his own friends the Girondins that this should be by the Convention rather than direct appeal to the people. But he urged both humanity and prudence: America was now France’s sole ally and regarded Louis highly. His execution would only be grist to the mill of counter-revolution. Banishment was preferable, and Paine suggested that the United States might accept Louis.

But the Mountain, the more extreme Jacobins dominated by Robespierre, prevailed, and Louis was guillotined. The Girondins, who represented a more provincial, conservative, federal viewpoint, had failed, but none the less temporarily remained more influential. After war broke out between Britain and France in early 1793, Paine lent his assistance to the Irish revolutionaries gathered in Paris and intrigued with them about the prospects of a French invasion of Ireland. One of their leaders, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, wrote to his mother of Paine: ‘I cannot express how kind he is to me; there is a simplicity of manner, a goodness of heart, and a strength of mind in him I never knew a man before possess.’ And Paine was generous also to his enemies, even saving the life of a hot-blooded young British captain who assaulted him at a dinner party without knowing that the death penalty had been imposed recently for attacking deputies. Paine’s house was frequently host to large numbers of democratic exiles. No doubt, too, he enjoyed life, though there is

probably no substance to the report that he had been caught by a fellow deputy 'in the very act of measuring his wife ... *for a pair of stays*' while singing 'ça ira, ça ira, ça ira'.¹⁹ Paine's friends, however, began to lose the upper hand. Amongst the casualties of the assault upon the Girondins which began in April 1793 was the constitution at which Paine, Condorcet and others had long laboured. Its adoption was delayed for several months and, after being accepted in late June, its implementation was quickly suspended. At the same time Marat and Robespierre moved quickly to eliminate their opponents.

Marat in particular saw Paine as threatening the revolutionary dictatorship the Jacobins were anxious to introduce, since he had already condemned the American presidency as concentrating too much power in one individual. Marat suspected Paine's loyalty for other reasons, too. Paine knew some people, like Gouverneur Morris, who thought little of the revolution. He had defended the Spanish-American General Miranda against Jacobin charges of treachery and knew General Dumouriez, who had been accused of seeking a constitutional monarchy and had then defected to the enemy in April 1793. He was friendly with others, like Condorcet, who were themselves increasingly isolated. Marat's opportunity to damage Paine arose in April 1793 when, apparently after hearing rumours of Marat's desire to see his idol executed, a young English devotee of Paine's named Johnson attempted suicide in Paris, leaving a note, which Paine published, accusing Marat of 'assassinating' the cause of liberty. At this time Marat was himself on trial for threatening a dictatorial coup against the Convention. Cleverly exploiting this opportunity, he shifted the focus of the trial to the question of whether his writings had incited Johnson's action and emerged victorious by proving that Johnson was imbalanced. He then accused Johnson of in fact seeking to denounce Paine. The latter survived the charge, but by publicizing Johnson's actions he accidentally paved the way for the Girondins' downfall as well as his own later arrest.

Paine now worried seriously about the course of the revolution, not, as he wrote to Danton in early May, because of France's enemies, but rather 'the tumultuous misconduct with which the internal affairs of the present revolution are conducted'.²⁰ Warning that too little attention was being paid to moral principles, and that the widespread tendency to denounce political enemies as traitors would undermine public authority, Paine insisted that only establishing a constitution would secure the accomplishments of the revolution. In early June the Convention moved against the Girondins. Paine's position initially remained secure, however, and he was exempted from a law permitting the arrest of foreigners, since both he and the Prussian Anacharsis Clootz were delegates. Condorcet, Brissot and others fled,

leaving Paine to represent their views in the Convention. His French, however, was too poor for the cut and thrust of debate and others were now reluctant to translate for him. Even Paine's pen was withdrawn from service, no printer being willing to take his work. But he continued to seek American support for France and helped secure much needed shipments of grain and rice.

Abandoned and depressed, Paine began to drink to console his fears and disappointments, though far less than his later detractors claimed. He found some solace in the company of other exiled radicals like Mary Wollstonecraft, Joel Barlow and Thomas Christie, who often met at Paine's lodgings, three rooms in the rue Faubourg Saint-Denis adjacent to an acre garden of fruit trees, where they played chess and card games, talked politics and offered one another moral and intellectual support.

In mid-July Charlotte Corday assassinated Marat, which raised some hope that the imprisoned and exiled Girondins might be reinstated. Instead Robespierre's rise to power not only doomed many of his erstwhile Convention associates, but nearly resulted in Paine's execution as well. Robespierre had hitherto been friendly with Paine, protecting him from attacks by others and conferring with him occasionally. In August, however, he instigated an address to the Convention from Arras stating that confidence in Paine's abilities was wanting. Paine himself could not understand Robespierre's antagonism and only several years later discovered that Gouverneur Morris, now American ambassador to France and an anti-republican in Washington's cabinet, had accused him of opposing American interests.²¹ Since the United States was France's sole ally, such charges were very damaging. Moreover, Morris also suggested that Paine was English rather than American and hence no longer neutral. It was this act, by a fellow American, which would nearly cost Paine his life. In early October he was denounced in the Convention for associating with the imprisoned Girondins, who were executed a month later, and for attempting to defend Louis. Several friends living at Paine's house now fled abroad, warrants for their arrests following a few days later. Watching his own fate unfold, and not knowing whether his own life would be spared, Paine laboured feverishly over his vindication of pure religion, *The Age of Reason*, the first part of which was completed barely hours before his arrest.

Once Paine had been categorized as an Englishman by the Committee of General Security, he was clearly doomed. Two days after Christmas 1793, at three in the morning, he was seized with his landlord and confined in the Luxembourg prison, a former palace which now held British prisoners and some French aristocrats. Though Joel Barlow and others immediately petitioned for his release and offered to

take him to America, Paine was to remain in prison for nearly a year, with the Convention blandly justifying itself by arguing that while Paine had been 'the apostle of liberty', none the less 'his genius has not understood that which has regenerated France; he has regarded the system only in accordance with the illusions with which the false friends of our revolution have invested it' (meaning the Girondins), which contradicted 'the principles admired in the justly esteemed works of this republican author'.²²

Paine was none the less still of value to the Convention. Further action against him was evidently delayed by Robespierre to allow Paine to enlist more sympathy for the French cause from Washington. Morris not only lent Paine no assistance, but may even have conspired to suspend his right of correspondence. Moreover, Morris told Jefferson that Paine was acknowledged as an American in Paris, which hindered further action on his behalf in the United States. In all this Morris colluded with his own agent in the French government, as Moncure Conway discovered in the late nineteenth century, though the Foreign Minister who conspired with him, Deforgues, soon lost his own head after a brief stay in the Luxembourg.²³

One evening it seemed Paine's own end had also finally come. It was the height of Robespierre's Terror, and some 160 prisoners were due to be executed the following day. The cell doors of the condemned were first indicated with a chalk cross mark. But Paine's door happened to be open when this was applied, 'if happening is the proper word', he later recalled, preferring to assume providential intervention. Consequently the cross was on the inside when the gaolers came, and his life was spared.²⁴

The fall of Robespierre paved the way for Paine's release. Fortunately Morris had been succeeded by James Monroe in the summer of 1794. Paine managed to get a letter to him and Monroe agreed that he was an American citizen, assuring him of Washington's continuing friendship as well as that of the American people. None the less Morris had not yet left Paris and Monroe's response took a month to reach Paine, by which time the former minister had safely reached Switzerland. He later argued for the restoration of monarchy in France.

On 4 November 1794, his American citizenship acknowledged, Paine was released. The Convention restored him to its ranks, while a governmental committee proposed to grant him a pension for his literary efforts on behalf of the revolution. Paine refused, deciding instead to return to America to recover from the illnesses he had suffered in prison. Monroe suggested that the Convention send Paine home bearing the treaty of friendship just signed between the two nations. Paine was thankful for such official attention at last, though he was very reproachful towards

Washington, even terming him ‘treacherous’ for having ignored his plight. But the Convention then refused Paine, as one of its members, a passport, arguing curiously that France required his services. Meanwhile the reintroduction of the constitution Paine, Condorcet and others had designed in 1793 was being proposed and Paine wrote his *Dissertation on First Principles of Government* to argue against reviving the monarchy, any property qualification on the suffrage, and an overly powerful central executive where the constitution did not restrain partisan enthusiasm.

After his release Paine returned to the Convention only once, in July 1795. He was weak and a secretary read his speech in French, but Paine’s attack on the attempt to restrict citizenship to direct taxpayers and war veterans, or only half the existing population, was vigorous none the less, though it met with ‘cold indifference’ from the assembly. With the dissolution of the Convention and creation of the Directory in October 1795, his role in the revolution seemingly came to an end. His health threatened to fail him completely in the autumn, when Paine put the finishing touches to part two of *The Age of Reason*. Still angered by America’s role in his imprisonment, too, Paine also wrote a strongly worded *Letter to George Washington* in early 1796 attacking the President’s competence as both general and politician and insinuating that his proposed commercial treaty with Britain would undermine American independence. This was a sad ending to twenty years’ of political association and warm friendship and it cost Paine many friends in America, for Washington was widely respected.²⁵ None the less Paine continued to aid Franco-American relations at a critical point in their history, for with the passage of Jay’s Treaty between Britain and the United States in 1794, important trading rights were extended to Britain, and her differences with America seemed largely reconciled. The French were horrified at what seemed an outright insult given their assistance during the American revolution, if not an abrogation of American neutrality. Paine, however, assailed the British government as if American policy had remained unchanged, and drew up plans for reinforcing commerce with France. Monroe was particularly appreciative of Paine’s support of America’s reputation.

For some months Paine lived at Monroe’s house in Paris, slowly recovering his health but depressed both by the course of the revolution and British criticisms of *The Age of Reason*. In early 1796 he moved to the countryside near Versailles as the guest of a wealthy but radical Paris banker, Sir Robert Smith, whose wife he had befriended (they wrote innocent poems to one another). In April he completed *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*, which predicted the collapse of the funding system under the stress of war and domestic oppression. It met with considerable acclaim in France and Britain, and was soon widely translated.

Characteristically, Paine donated the proceeds to relieving debtors imprisoned in Newgate, London.²⁶

In 1796, in an effort to combat the danger of atheism he perceived around him, Paine founded the small sect of Theophilanthropists. In an important tract published in England the following year, *Agrarian Justice*, he further refined his views on property and poverty. But he was still anxious to return to America. Monroe was recalled in August 1796, possibly in part because Paine had stayed with him while continuing to write – despite Monroe's remonstrances – against Washington and American policies. Paine travelled with him to Le Havre on his departure, but was deterred from embarking by the presence of so many British warships on the open sea (spies were everywhere: Monroe's ship was in fact stopped and Paine carefully searched for). But Paine's role in France was not yet played out. Returning to Paris, he announced that the war could be successfully ended only if France invaded England, sent George packing to Hanover and established a republic. These sentiments reached important ears and Paine was invited to dinner with Napoleon, who flattered him that he slept with the *Rights of Man* under his pillow, said that every city should have a golden statue of its author erected and consulted Paine on a possible invasion of England. Paine later claimed that he would have accompanied Bonaparte in order 'to give the people of England an opportunity of forming a government for themselves, and thereby bring about peace', and worked for some time on the project, even subscribing 100 livres of his own money. But after Napoleon had built some 250 of a planned 1,000 boats the expedition was abandoned, and Paine later became hostile to Bonaparte, terming him overly bloodthirsty and 'the completest charlatan that ever existed'.²⁷

Now residing with Nicolas de Bonneville, the printer of the French edition of *The Age of Reason*, Paine received large numbers of visitors, amongst whom was the inventor Robert Fulton, who later credited him with having been amongst the first to propose steam-powered navigation. Paine's repose was not long-lived, however. Napoleon's *coup d'état* of November 1799 was roundly criticized by Bonneville, who was immediately imprisoned, though Paine himself seems to have preferred Napoleon to the prospect of the return of the monarchy. Bonneville was released, though reduced to severe financial straits, and Paine remained with him, now writing on the necessity for peaceful commercial relations on the high seas. But when his relations with Bonneville incurred further official suspicion he again considered returning to America.

There were further setbacks before Paine's long exile in France came at last to an end, however. Having prospered for a time, the cause of Theophilanthropy met an

unsavoury end after Napoleon's concordat with the Vatican in July 1801. In his efforts to expunge republicanism, moreover, the French leader even had Paine's works taken out of the Bibliothèque Nationale. In March, Jefferson, now Vice-President, wrote Paine that an American vessel was available if he required passage to the US. But this invitation was leaked to the American newspapers, and Jefferson was accused by the Federalists of offering to send the ship for the sole purpose of fetching Paine, who thereupon delayed his return once again.

In mid-1802 Paine finally bid farewell to 'restless and wretched Europe'. He was deeply unhappy with the course the revolution had taken, though insisting that its fate had much to do with 'the provocative interference of foreign powers'. He lamented to one of his last visitors, an English radical named Henry Redhead Yorke, 'Republic! do you call this a republic? Why they are worse off than the slaves of Constantinople; for there, they expect to be bashaws in heaven by submitting to be slaves below, but here they believe neither in heaven nor hell, and yet are slaves by choice. I know of no republic in the world except America ... I have done with Europe, and its slavish politics.'²⁸ He was also extremely unhappy that *The Age of Reason* had proved so unpopular in England. His advice and good intentions seemed everywhere to have been misunderstood, or defied by powers greater than himself. Only in America, with the election of Jefferson in 1800, did the forward march of political progress seem secure.

Paine set sail from Le Havre on 1 September 1802, with Rickman coming from London during the brief Peace of Amiens to see him off. Reaching Baltimore on 1 November, aged 65, he was delighted to find that friends had maintained his property. When invested, the £6,000 it was now worth brought him a sum sufficient to live on. He had been unable to save any money in France, having refused an offer of £3,000 for his two bridge models and given away the proceeds of almost all his writings. But this was to be the best news to await Paine. He expected that at least in republican America, where Jefferson and others had declared his principles to be virtually identical to those of the nation, public approbation for his exertions in Europe and a warm welcome might greet him. But again he was to be sorely disappointed.

Theology was the chief cause of this misfortune. Though deist republicans applauded his return, Paine now found himself not only a pawn in American partisan struggles, but prey, in what Rickman called 'a country abounding in fanatics', to religious enthusiasts of all types. Thousands of republicans turned their backs on him, while his political opponents gleefully seized upon his religious views, with John Adams's Federalists in particular using Jefferson's friendship with the author

of the notorious *Age of Reason* as an excellent pretext for assailing both. Jefferson anxiously avoided religious controversy, even refusing to allow his private letters on the subject to be printed, and consequently was reluctant to meet Paine, though finally inviting him for a visit. But Paine was now everywhere else on the defensive, his political ideals seemingly neglected, the theology he had articulated only as a means of shoring up these ideals condemned. In some places he was jeered by pious mobs egged on by Federalists. At least once he was refused a place on a stagecoach. He was pestered in his private life. One day, during his nap, an elderly woman intruded upon him to warn that Almighty God had sent her to warn him to repent or be damned, to which Paine – his usual sympathy for women deserting him – replied that she obviously could not have been sent ‘with any such impertinent message ... He would not send such a foolish, ugly old woman about with His messages.’ Someone even shot at his house.²⁹

Paine none the less was not to be intimidated and wrote a series of eight public letters defending his views and continuing to support prominent deists like Elihu Palmer. He also vindicated Jefferson on several occasions, particularly where his relations with Paine were concerned. He applauded the purchase of Louisiana and suggested to Jefferson the best means of amalgamating it into the union, later lambasting the Federalists for first urging its seizure by force, then denying its importance after Jefferson’s proposed acquisition. He further tried to persuade Congress not to retain slavery there and urged Jefferson to reconsider his views when the United States refused entry to slaves fleeing Santo Domingo in case they incited slave uprisings in America too. Paine’s main interest, however, was again building his bridge, and he exerted considerable effort in showing his models to all who were interested. He also planned to reprint his existing works and manuscripts.³⁰

Disappointed that no official post was given to him, Paine left Washington in early 1803 and settled in the country near New Rochelle, New York. Besides some 240 acres, his farm consisted of two oxen, a horse, a cow and ten pigs. Here he lived a plain but wholesome life, content to call himself the possessor of six chairs and a table, a straw bed, a feather bed, a tea kettle, an iron pot, a baking and frying pan and a few other implements. His diet was composed primarily of tea, milk, fruit pies, dumplings and an occasional piece of meat. At New Rochelle he continued to receive visitors, and observers noted his kindness to children and animals, his clean appearance and his moderate drinking, if liberality with the snuffbox. But he had not yet retired. In 1803–4 he assisted the Connecticut republicans’ effort to secure a constitution to replace the state’s royal charter.³¹ In 1805 he again defended Jefferson against the Federalist press and involved himself in a debate originating in

the New York State legislature on the issuing of charters and, on another concerning Pennsylvania, on several constitutional issues.³² He also wrote on subjects as diverse as yellow fever, gunboat-building and the origins of Freemasonry.

By 1806 Paine was in financial straits again. For several years he had supported the family of his last French hosts, the Bonnevides, until this burden forced him to sell his Bordentown property. Though his health troubled him again, Paine was still restless and asked Jefferson if some post could be found for him in Europe if war ended between Britain and France. The poor hospitality America had offered him was now compounded when his right to vote was denied by a few Tories in New Rochelle in 1806, on the grounds that Gouverneur Morris had not recognized him as an American and Washington had not aided him.³³

In 1807 Paine's powers began to ebb. He continued to ply Jefferson with suggestions and urged mediation between England and France in the interests of peace. In late 1808 he became friendly with a Quaker preacher and watchmaker named Willett Hicks. Early the next year he moved to the house of a niece of Elihu Palmer's and her husband, but here he began to fade rapidly. Even in his last days, however, Paine retained a sense of humour in the face of his opponents. On one occasion an American minister insisted he had recovered the true key to the Scriptures after it had been lost for 4,000 years, and Paine replied only that it must have been very rusty after so long. Nor is there evidence of any death-bed recantation of his religious beliefs, though his enemies whispered that deists plied him with alcohol to stave off a reversion to orthodoxy. Shortly before he died early in the morning of 8 June 1809, two clergymen found a means of entering his room in the hopes of restoring him to the true faith. Paine said only, 'Let me alone; good morning.' His enemies were again disappointed.

Even in death Paine remained a controversial figure. His funeral procession was described as composed of Negroes, drunken Irishmen and an Irish Quaker; in fact two blacks did travel twenty-five miles on foot to offer respects to one who had so often pleaded their cause, while the Quaker was Willett Hicks. To their discredit, however, the local Quakers refused Paine's request to be buried in their cemetery and he was accordingly interred in an orchard on his farm. Ten years later, the English radical William Cobbett reclaimed Paine's bones for England, evidently in the hope of using them as relics to garner support for the reformers' cause. But after he died, Paine's remains disappeared, and no trace of them now exists.³⁴ No grand tomb will thus ever commemorate Paine's final resting place. But as Andrew Jackson once remarked, he needed 'no monument built by hands; he has erected a monument in the hearts of all lovers of liberty'. Why his principles came to be so loved, but also so hated, we must now consider.

Notes to Chapter 1: The life of Thomas Paine

- 1 E.g. H. Mackenzie (1793), J. Gifford (1792).
- 2 A good review of Paine's early biographers is G. Vale (1841), pp. 4–15. The best modern biography is A. Aldridge (1960), a Basic English version of which has appeared in French, Arabic, Bengali and Urdu. The most detailed early study is M. Conway (1892), though T. Rickman (1908) is valuable for the insights gleaned from personal friendship with Paine. Also helpful are W. Sherwin (1819) and R. Carlile (1819). This chapter is much indebted in particular to the former two of these works. Useful recent treatments include A. Williamson (1973) and D. Powell (1985).
- 3 Paine (1945), Vol. 1, pp. 496–7. All further references to Paine's writings will be to this nearly complete, standard edition. For works not included in it, see below, n. 14 and p. 61, n. 26. A more accessible collection of Paine's major writings is Paine (1987).
- 4 See Paine (1945), Vol. 1, p. 405, and A. Barry (1977).
- 5 T. Rickman (1908), p. 17; *Public Advertiser*, no. 197 (22 August 1808), p. 2; G. Vale (1841), p. 26; Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 3–15, here p. 9. On Paine's charitable activities see A. Williamson (1973), p. 37.
- 6 Philip Foner claimed that a 1775 essay for a Pennsylvania magazine entitled 'Reflections on unhappy marriages' was Paine's, in which case it was doubtless partly autobiographical (Paine, 1945, Vol. 2, pp. 1, 118–20). This ascription, however, is denied by A. Aldridge (1984), p. 287.
- 7 Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 1130, 16–40, 52–60.
- 8 Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 182–3.
- 9 See Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 96–188.
- 10 For details of Paine's bridge project see W. Armytage (1951).
- 11 E. Burke (1978), Vol. 5, p. 412; Paine (1908), Vol. 1, p. 329.
- 12 J. Alger (1889), p. 85; E. Burke (1978), Vol. 6, pp. 67–76.
- 13 See Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 517–19.
- 14 Internal evidence suggests that the early nineteenth-century attribution to Paine of *Old Truths and Established Facts* (1792) was probably accurate, though it has not been discussed in any subsequent study of Paine. The 13-page pamphlet repeats Paine's earlier view that Parliament acted contrary to 'all natural rights' (p. 5) in permitting the slave trade and refers to natural law arguments about legitimate and illegitimate enslavement (p. 9).
- 15 TS11/965/3510A. On the British colony in Paris see D. Erdman (1986), especially pp. 223–43. On Barlow's relations with Paine see J. Woodress (1958), especially pp. 129–41.
- 16 TS 11/965/3510A. See Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 466–9 for Paine's account of his escape.
- 17 See Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 551–60.
- 18 *Trial of Thomas Paine* (1792). A full account of Paine's trial is also in T. Howell (1817), Vol. 22, cols 357–471.
- 19 M. Conway (1892), Vol. 1, p. 358; Add. MS. 16924 f. 35. On Paine and French politics see Z. Libiszowska (1980).
- 20 Paine (1945), Vol. 2, p. 1335.

- 21 Morris also sided privately with Britain against France and was linked to various intrigues to secure Louis's escape. See Morris (1939) for his own account of the revolution.
- 22 M. Conway (1892), Vol. 2, p. 110.
- 23 M. Conway (1892), Vol. 2, p. 121. Less convincing is A. Aldridge (1960), p. 212.
- 24 Paine (1945), Vol. 2, p. 921.
- 25 Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 691–723. For hostile responses to Paine see *A Letter to Thomas Paine* (1797), [W. Cobbett] (1797), P. Kennedy (1798).
- 26 Responses to the *Decline and Fall* include S. Pope (1796), who thought it largely repeated Price's objections to the funding system.
- 27 H. Yorke (1804), Vol. 2, pp. 368–9; Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 680, 1415–16; M. Elliott (1982), pp. 59–61. See Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 675–83 and A. Aldridge (1957) for details.
- 28 Paine (1945), Vol. 2, p. 683; H. Yorke (1804), Vol. 2, p. 342; M. Elliott (1982), p. 279.
- 29 T. Rickman (1908), pp. 4, 74. On Paine's reception see J. Knudson (1969).
- 30 Paine's writings from this period are not all included in Paine (1945). For some omissions see A. Aldridge (1953).
- 31 See R. Gimbel (1956b) for details.
- 32 For Paine's anti-Federalist writings see especially (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 1,007–10.
- 33 Paine (1945), Vol. 2, pp. 1487–8. Cheetham later asserted that Mme Bonneville had been Paine's mistress, but lost the case when she sued him for libel. None the less the judge commended Cheetham's 'useful' biography for helping to curtail Paine's influence (Vale, 1841, p. 153).
- 34 Paine's bones were last seen in the possession of one B. Tilly, of 13 Bedford Square East, in March 1844 (W. Cobbett, 1847, p. 5). Mysteriously, Romney's famous portrait of Paine also disappeared at some point.