

The Years of Obscurity

Thomas Paine was born on 29 January 1737 in the old English country town of Thetford in Norfolk. His family name was Pain and he himself usually spelt it in this way for the first half of his life, insisting on the final 'e' only when he emigrated to America in 1774. Nevertheless, as he became historically famous as Thomas, or Tom, Paine, I shall so refer to him from the start.

Thomas Paine's father, Joseph Pain, was a Quaker who kept a shop in Thetford as a staymaker, in modern terms a maker of women's corsets. In June 1734, he married Frances Cooke, a woman eleven years his senior, the daughter of a Thetford attorney. In George Chalmers's hostile *Life of Thomas Paine*, published in 1791 under the pseudonym of 'Francis Oldys', she is described as a woman of 'sour temper and eccentric character'. Whether this description is accurate or not she appears to have had little influence upon her son, who was, however, closely attached to his father. The couple had a second child, a girl who died young. Frances Cooke was an Anglican and the marriage took place in a parish church. Tom Paine was consequently baptized, and later admitted to confirmation by the Bishop of Norwich. Nevertheless he was mainly brought up as a Quaker, apparently without opposition from his mother.

Joseph Pain ran a small farm besides his staymaking business and he made enough money to be able to send his son to the local grammar school, where he remained from his sixth until his fourteenth year. Surprisingly he learned no Latin there, let alone Greek, but was taught history, mathematics and science. We shall see that he had a scientific bent and at a later period he might well have started to be trained as an engineer.

As it was, he returned to his father's shop to pursue his apprenticeship as a staymaker. Three years later, at the age of sixteen, he ran away to Harwich with the object of enlisting as a seaman on the privateer *The Terrible*, commanded by a Captain Death. His father pursued him and reached him in time to prevent his enlistment. He returned to his trade at Thetford for a further three years but continued to nourish his romantic vision of a naval career. The result was that when England went to war with France in 1756, the outbreak of the Seven Years' War, Tom Paine again ran away to sea and this time succeeded in joining the crew of the privateer *The King of Prussia*, under the command of Captain Mendez. It would seem that the actual conditions of a seaman's life in the mid-eighteenth century did not match Paine's expectations, for he served on *The King of Prussia* for no longer than a year.

Though this was the whole of Paine's experience as an active seaman, he frequently allowed himself to assume, in his later writings, the character of a naval expert, though admittedly one more concerned with finance than with tactics. It is interesting that when he does support an argument with a reference to an actual naval engagement he cites not *The King of Prussia* but *The Terrible*, on which he never served. In an attempt to show in *Common Sense*, written in 1775, that the ability of the American colonies to build a fleet that will be a match for Britain's will not be frustrated by their lack of trained seamen he argues that not more than a fourth of those who man a ship need be sailors. The only evidence he gives for this implausible proposition is that

The Terrible privateer, Captain Death, stood the hottest engagement of any ship last war, yet had not twenty sailors on board, though her complement of men was upwards of two hundred. A few able and social sailors will soon instruct a sufficient number of active land-men in the common work of a ship.¹

It is not known how Paine contrived, in time of war, to serve for so short a period on *The King of Prussia*. He resumed staymaking but did not return to Thetford. He went to work instead for a staymaker called Morris who kept a shop in Hanover Street, London. On his own showing, Paine took advantage of his living, for the first time, in London to pursue his scientific interests. He attended 'philosophical lectures' and managed to make the acquaintance of at least one future Fellow of the Royal Society, Dr Bevis, an astronomer.

¹ Paine, *Common Sense*, Penguin Classics, p. 104.

One might have expected Paine to do his utmost to prolong his stay in London but either he fell out with his employer, or the restlessness which had taken him away from home again overcame him, so that he kept his job with Morris for no more than a year. In 1758, he went to work for a Mr Grace in Dover, and in the following year he moved nearby to Sandwich, where he set up in business on his own as a master staymaker. It is not known how he obtained the capital. In September of 1759, he married Mary Lambert, a maid in the house of a local woollen draper.

At the time of his marriage Tom Paine was twenty-two years old. By most accounts, he was a handsome man, at least five foot nine inches in height, which was reckoned tall in those days, slim, well proportioned, with strong features, a mass of dark wavy hair, a high forehead and bright blue eyes. His portrait by George Romney, painted in 1792, shows that he kept his looks into late middle age. He was not a dandy but the innuendoes of his critics that he was slovenly in his appearance seem not to have been justified. His addiction to drink, which is not disputed, was not yet in evidence.

Whatever his skill in staymaking, Tom Paine was not a gifted man of business and his venture in Sandwich failed almost immediately. He moved with his wife to Margate where she died within a year of their marriage. A natural inference would be that she died in childbirth, but there is no record of this nor is any other cause of her death known. There is no reference to her in any of Paine's published writings or in any of his correspondence that survives.

This marriage did, however, have one important effect on Paine's career. Mary Lambert's father had been a customs officer or excise-man, as it was then commonly known, and Paine decided to adopt this profession. It promised him neither prosperity nor prestige but it would at least afford him an escape from staymaking, an occupation in which by then he can hardly have had much hope of achieving any lasting satisfaction.

Accordingly, Paine returned to his father's house in Thetford in 1761, to prepare himself for admission to the Excise. He needed a personal recommendation to enter the service, and obtained one in time to become a supernumerary officer on 1 December 1762, with the responsibility of examining brewers' casks at Grantham in Lincolnshire. It was not until August 1764 that he was promoted to being a regular officer, being allotted the more dangerous duty of patrolling a section of the Lincolnshire coast on horseback, with the object of intercepting smugglers. He escaped being harmed by the smugglers

only to be dismissed from the service in August 1765 for the misdemeanour of stamping a consignment of goods which he admitted that he had not examined. There has never been any suggestion that he was bribed. His offence, which was quite common, was due to the fact that more work was expected of excisemen than they could conscientiously carry out.

Having no other resources, Tom Paine returned to staymaking and accepted employment under a master at Diss in the neighbourhood of Thetford. He had, however, reason to hope that he would be allowed back into the Excise and a humble letter of apology, written in July 1766, procured his reinstatement. Unfortunately, there was no immediate vacancy in the service for him to fill.

Rather than continue to be employed as a staymaker until a suitable vacancy arose, Paine made his way to London and for the remainder of 1766 taught English at what would appear to have been an elementary school, for a salary of £25. In January 1767, he moved, presumably to a better position, at a school kept by a Mr Gardiner in Kensington. In Chalmers's hostile biography it is asserted both that Paine was disliked by the boys for his strictness and that he forsook the school after three months in order to become an itinerant preacher. There is no supporting evidence for either statement and the second at least is improbable. Even if he had not been deterred by the risk of preaching deism, his doing so would have created a stir of which some record would have remained. It is, indeed, more likely, especially in view of the appeals to scripture that we shall discover in his *Common Sense*, that he had not yet turned against theism, but there is no warrant at all for supposing him to have been a religious enthusiast. The fact is that we have no reliable evidence at all about the way in which Paine lived in London in 1767 or the acquaintances that he made. All that we learn from Paine himself is that he was not then interested in politics.

Having courageously refused the offer of a post in Cornwall, Paine was appointed Officer of Excise at Lewes near the Sussex coast on 11 February 1768. It was an important but also a dangerous post, as smuggling was almost a recognized profession in Lewes and Officers of Excise were not popular. Fortunately for himself Paine was accepted as a lodger in the house of Samuel Ollive, a tobacconist who was then one of the two 'Constables' who were chiefly responsible for what we should now call local government. They were assisted by two so-called Headboroughs, and both sets of officials received their powers from an organization called 'The Society of Twelve' of which Paine somehow became a member. He was also admitted to the Vestry of St Michael's

church. At that date Vestries, at least in country towns like Lewes, had not yet acquired the power and responsibilities that were later to render them the prototypes of borough councils. They were mainly concerned with the administration of public charities. What is remarkable is that Paine was so quickly introduced into the inner circle of local government in Lewes.

No doubt it was mainly due to the strength of his personality. By now he was thirty-one years old and had begun to take a lively interest in politics. He joined a social club which met regularly at the White Hart Inn and took a prominent part in its debates. There is no evidence that he had yet become a Republican, but he sided strongly with the Whigs and is reported to have received three guineas for writing an election song on behalf of the Whig candidate at New Shoreham. He is said to have been a forceful and witty speaker, vehement in the expression of his views, and reluctant to make any concessions to his opponents in argument.

In July 1769 Samuel Ollive died, leaving a widow, three sons and a daughter, Elizabeth, who had been born on 16 December 1749. Tom Paine left the house but went into partnership with Mrs Ollive in what had become a business of selling groceries as well as tobacco. He returned to live in the house after he married Elizabeth on 26 March 1771. Surprisingly, he is described on the marriage certificate as a bachelor. This might be taken to imply that he concealed the fact of his previous marriage from the Ollives, though there seems to be no good reason why he should have done so.

Thomas Paine had come to feel that he had the right, or even the duty, to speak for his fellow excisemen and in 1772 he composed and published a pamphlet setting out their grievances, mainly on the score of pay. Though officers of his standing carried a heavy load of responsibility, they were paid only £50 a year and Paine alleged that this was effectively reduced to £32, since it cost them £18 to maintain a horse. He argued, persuasively, that the revenue was actually diminished by this parsimony, since their low wages made the excisemen less zealous in the conduct of their duties and also more susceptible to accepting bribes.

Paine printed four thousand copies of his pamphlet and priced it at three shillings a copy. Though some of his fellow officers contributed to the cost of publication, the bulk of it fell on Paine himself and it can be taken for granted that he suffered a financial loss. In the winter of 1772-3 he was in London distributing copies of the pamphlet to Members of Parliament, and other prominent persons including Oliver

Goldsmith, with whom he made friends at least to the extent of their taking a drink together.

The pamphlet, though clearly written and well argued, did not induce the authorities either to lighten the duties of the Officers of Excise or to increase their wages. It may have cost Paine his job, though the official reason given for his dismissal on 8 April 1774 was that he had left his post without the Board's leave and that he had gone off on account of the debts which he had contracted.

This second charge refers to yet another failure in Paine's commercial career. He had just gone bankrupt and had been forced to sell his household goods, and the contents of his shop. He managed to satisfy his creditors, but his comment 'Trade I do not understand' is one that he might have taken to heart some time before. What is curious is that he never hesitated in his later writings to make confident pronouncements at least about governmental trade.

Two months after Paine's failure in business, in June 1774, he and his wife separated. The cause has never been made known. Thomas, 'Clio', Rickman, who became a friend of Paine's and published a eulogistic biography of him in 1819, states that Paine was not impotent but that nevertheless the marriage was not consummated. Rickman was born in Lewes but only in 1761 so that he was not a contemporary witness. He claims to have obtained his information from a Lewes doctor. The parting seems to have been amicable, in that Elizabeth, who eventually set up house with one of her brothers and lived until 1808, the year before Paine himself died, could never be induced to denounce him to his detractors, and, according to Rickman, Paine occasionally sent her sums of money anonymously. He also resigned his rights over her property, signing a document in which he permitted her to carry on such trade and business as she should think fit, 'as if she were a femme sole', and promised not to lay claim to any money that she might receive from the sale of the house or any other goods that she might acquire.

It would have been a matter of principle for Paine not to take advantage of the law which subordinated wives to their husbands in respect of property. Nevertheless it cannot be said that he comes entirely well out of this affair. Initially, he left his wife almost wholly unprovided for. By obtaining her consent to a legal separation rather than a divorce, he prevented her from remarrying. Even if he did occasionally send her sums of money, and that anonymously, he took hardly any further interest in her. In 1800 she was able to state in a legal document that 'Thomas Paine had many years quitted this Kingdom

and resided (if living) in parts beyond the seas, but had not since been heard of by the said Elizabeth Pain, nor was it known for certain whether he was living or dead'.

There is no evidence that Paine entered into any other liaison. His correspondence, especially in later life, shows him not to have been uneasy in the company of women, but the obvious implication is that he was not much interested in sex.

It is not known how Paine earned a living when he came to London in June 1774. He renewed his acquaintance with his scientific friends and one of them, George Lewis Scott, who was also a member of the Excise Board, introduced him to Benjamin Franklin. Long a famous man, Franklin aged sixty-eight, had first come to London in 1757 as an agent for the American colonies and returned there in 1764. Though Paine was to claim when he reached America that he had always had an inclination to see the western side of the Atlantic, since he had picked up and read as a schoolboy a natural history of Virginia, it was probably Franklin who persuaded him to emigrate. Franklin supplied him with a letter of introduction to his son-in-law, Richard Bache, in Philadelphia. It was not and at that time had no reason to be a particularly warm recommendation; rather the sort of testimonial that one supplies to a second-class pupil.

The bearer Mr. Thomas Pain is very well recommended to me as an ingenious worthy young man. He goes to Pennsylvania with a view of settling there. I request you to give him your best advice and countenance, as he is quite a stranger there. If you can put him in a way of obtaining employment as a clerk, or assistant tutor in a school, or assistant surveyor, (of all of which I think him very capable,) so that he may procure a subsistence at least, till he can make acquaintance and obtain a knowledge of the country, you will do well, and much oblige your affectionate father.

Paine set out for America in the last week of September, the voyage taking him just over two months. There was an epidemic of scurvy on the ship. Paine caught the disease and very nearly died. When he was well enough to present his letter of introduction, Richard Bache quickly found him a job as a tutor, from which Paine almost immediately escaped into journalism. At one of the several taverns at which informal debates took place, as at the White Hart at Lewes, Paine met Robert Aitken, a printer who was starting a new monthly periodical called the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, and was invited to write an introduction to the

first number. This took the form of an argument in favour of the superiority of the modern to the ancient world, with special reference to America. 'Those who are conversant with Europe,' he wrote, 'would be tempted to believe that even the air of the Atlantic disagrees with the constitution of foreign vices; if they survive the voyage, they either expire on their arrival, or linger away in an incurable consumption. There is a happy something in the climate of America which disarms them of all their power both of infection and attraction.'

Aitken was sufficiently pleased with Paine to make him managing editor of the magazine and Paine repaid him by increasing its list of subscriptions from six hundred in January 1775 to fifteen hundred in March. He wrote his own contributions under pseudonyms, most often 'Atlanticus' or 'Amicus'. Aitken had undertaken in his prospectus to avoid matters of religious and political controversy, so that Paine had to confine the expression of his radicalism to social issues. He did, however, allow himself to allude to the colonial question in some lines of verse. He was a much better writer in prose.

But hear, O ye swains ('tis a tale most profane),
 How all the tyrannical powers,
 King, Commons, and Lords, are uniting amain
 To cut down this guardian of ours.
 From the east to the west blows the trumpet to arms,
 Thro' the land let the sound of it flee,
 Let the far and the near – all unite with a cheer,
 In defense of our *Liberty tree*.

He also published an article in which he criticized the thoroughgoing pacifism of the Quakers. 'I am thus far a Quaker,' he wrote, 'that I would gladly argue with all the world to lay aside the use of arms, and settle matters by negotiation, but unless the whole will, the matter ends, and I take up my musket and thank heaven he has put it in my power.' This is a proposition to which almost everyone nowadays pays nominal assent, although there does not appear to be any widespread disposition to lay aside the use of arms.

The most interesting of Paine's contributions to the *Pennsylvania Magazine* is a short piece in which he undertakes to publish a plan for raising a fund to assist young people at the outset of their careers and another fund for the support of persons in their old age. He fulfilled this undertaking over twenty years later in a pamphlet the contents of which were fully summarized in its title.

Agrarian justice, opposed to agrarian law, and to agrarian monopoly, being a plan for meliorating the condition of man, by creating in every nation, a national fund to pay to every person, when arrived at the age of twenty-one years, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling, to enable him or her to begin the world! And also, ten pounds sterling during life to every person now living of the age of fifty years, and to all others when they shall arrive at that age, to enable them to live in old age without wretchedness, and go decently out of the world.

This is Paine at his best and a remarkable anticipation of the humane principles of the Welfare State. We shall see later on how far he was ready to go in this direction.¹

The first article which Paine published in America under his own name appeared in a newspaper called the *Pennsylvania Journal* on 24 November 1775. Written in collaboration with Thomas Prior, an officer in the Continental Army, it explains a process for making saltpetre to be used for ammunition. Further details of this method of what Paine called 'extracting' one of the secrets of nature were furnished in the next issue.

It is probable that a letter signed 'A Lover of Order' which appeared in the same issue as the first of these articles was also written by Paine. It consisted in an attack on the Pennsylvania Assembly for instructing its delegates to the Continental Congress to 'dissent from, and utterly reject, any propositions, should such be made, that may cause, or lead to, a Separation from Our Mother Country, or a change of the form of this Government'. Paine's argument was that the Assembly was exceeding its powers. 'The Delegates in Congress are not the Delegates of the Assembly but of the People, - of the Body in Large.' The implication was that the delegates should express the views of the People, though Paine did not say how this was to be effected.

This letter was seen, no doubt correctly, as a veiled plea for independence and produced two rejoinders, to one of which Paine is thought to have replied under the pseudonym of 'A Continental Farmer', probably an allusion to the pseudonym 'Pennsylvanian Farmer' employed by John Dickinson, the most prominent enemy to independence in the Pennsylvania Assembly. Apart from adding actual criticism of the instructions which the Assembly had issued to its delegates, and repeating his argument that it was misusing its authority, Paine's main point was that when it came to such a question,

¹ See ch. 6.

the Assembly should abandon the limited outlook shown by its claiming to speak 'in behalf of this colony'. 'I despise,' he wrote, 'the narrow idea of acting PROVINCIALY, and reprobate the little unworthy principle, conveyed in the following words, "In behalf of this colony", and the more so, because by a late resolve, all Colony distinctions are to be laid aside. 'TIS THE AMERICAN CAUSE, THE AMERICAN CONGRESS, THE AMERICAN ARMY, &c, &c, Whom God preserve.'

In less than a month Paine was to publish the pamphlet *Common Sense* which turned the tide of American opinion in favour of independence. It may be instructive to outline the historical circumstances which helped to make this possible.

When Thomas Paine arrived in Philadelphia in November 1774, relations between the British government and its thirteen American colonies had been rapidly deteriorating for over a decade. The starting point of this decline was the conclusion in 1763 of the Seven Years' War, which had been partly fought upon the American continent. Here England had been signally victorious, acquiring not only the whole of French Canada but nearly all the territory east of the Mississippi except Louisiana. These victories had, however, been costly both in men and money and the costs did not end with the ending of the war. The enlarged empire had to be defended. This would be an expensive business, and it seemed only reasonable to George Grenville, who had just become King George III's First Minister, that the colonists should bear their part of the expense. He estimated that a standing army of ten thousand men would be needed to protect the American empire and that their maintenance would cost £300,000 a year.

To avoid trouble with the Indians, Grenville laid an embargo on any further settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. This was infuriating to the colonies, whose population had increased in the past sixty years from about a quarter of a million to over a million and a half, thereby affording encouragement not only to land speculators but to the pioneering spirit which both in fact and fiction has animated Americans throughout their history. But what annoyed the colonists still more was the set of financial measures which Grenville imposed on them in the course of the next two years. The Navigation Acts, which required that all goods imported to America should be heavily taxed, unless they were shipped by way of England, were reinforced. The so-called Sugar Act imposed further duties and restrictions on American trade. The Quartering Act threw the cost of supplying British troops in colonial barracks on to the local governments.

The Stamp Act imposed a duty on all newspapers, advertisements and legal documents. It was at a conference in New York, attended by delegates from nine colonies, that the famous protest against taxation without representation was made.

The Stamp Act was indeed repealed by Rockingham in his short-lived ministry of 1765–6 but the advent of Charles Townshend as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1766 made things worse. He imposed duties on glass, lead, tea and paper and took steps to see that they were paid. Again the reaction was not limited to verbal and written protests, though they were abundant. There was a boycott of English goods, and Englishmen, especially officers, and their property were subjected to violence. The British government foolishly replied in kind. They already had garrisons in America but kept them mainly on the frontiers. In 1768 they sent troops into Boston. In 1770 a riot which started with an English sentry's being snowballed ended in shooting, whereby three Americans were killed. Samuel Adams labelled it 'The Boston Massacre'.

The leading American colonists were respectable merchants and lawyers, who had a strong sense of their rights, but no taste at all for riots, and the effect of the Boston Massacre was to make them consider that a compromise with England, on terms favourable to themselves, might be preferable to a declaration of independence which might result in bestowing more political power on the less prosperous members of American society. The British government, for its part, decided that it had gone too far. The Townshend duties were abandoned except for the duty on tea, and for some three years the counsels of moderation prevailed on both sides.

It was tea that broke the truce. To rescue the East India Company from impending bankruptcy, the British government granted it a monopoly of the tea trade in America. This was politically offensive to the colonists and injurious to the colonial shippers. Their protest culminated in the famous Boston Tea Party on 16 December 1773 when a group of white men, disguised as Indians, boarded the Company's ships in Boston harbour and, watched by a large and enthusiastic crowd, threw 342 chests of tea into the sea.

Lord North, who had become George III's First Minister, reacted as though he had received a personal affront. He altered the Charter of Massachusetts to give the Governor more power, strengthened the Quartering Act, and closed the port of Boston until the tea was paid for and an assurance given for the payment of all other English customs duties.

These measures, denounced by their victims as 'the Intolerable Acts', provoked great resentment not only in Massachusetts but throughout all the colonies. The first Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in September 1774 and was attended by representatives of all the colonies except Georgia, where the Governor had managed to prevent any from being selected. The Congress issued a strong manifesto of rights, foreshadowing the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. More practically, it resolved that no goods of any kind were to be imported from England after 1 December and that if this did not cause the British government to mend its ways, no American exports were to go to England after 10 September 1775.

Not all English politicians desired to meet this challenge. Chatham, speaking in the House of Lords, espoused the case of the Americans and urged the government to allay their grievances, on grounds both of principle and of prudence. Edmund Burke made the same plea in several eloquent speeches in the House of Commons. Something stronger than moral support was advocated by Radicals, both in and out of Parliament. But this had only the effect of stiffening the attitude of Lord North's government. Its response was to blockade the whole of New England.

This led almost immediately to the outbreak of war. Some colonists of Massachusetts set about assembling military supplies at Concord. On 18 April 1775 Paul Revere earned himself a place in history by riding through the night from Boston to warn his countrymen that General Gage, the military Governor of Massachusetts, was sending troops against them. There were skirmishes at Lexington and Concord and a bloody retreat by the British, who suffered very heavy casualties on the road to Boston.

It was consequently in a changed climate that the Second Continental Congress met at Philadelphia in May 1775. The number of delegates who were in favour of independence had grown but they were still far from being in the majority. It was the publication of Tom Paine's pamphlet on 10 January 1776 that turned the scale. Massachusetts was the first colony to instruct its delegates to vote for independence. Other colonies gradually followed suit. Pennsylvania, held back by John Dickinson, was one of the last to come round. Early in June the delegates from all the States except New York voted for independence. The final draft of the Declaration of Independence was adopted on 4 July.

As we shall see, Tom Paine was a brilliant journalist. His style of writing was clear and forceful, adorned with striking images. Some of

his radical proposals were far in advance of his time. He did not, however, make any original contribution to political philosophy. The foundations of his political theory had already been laid and he wrote for an audience which was familiar with them. It will be worth our while to devote some space to examining what these foundations were. The two concepts which particularly call for our attention are those of the social contract and of natural rights.