

Epilogue

The prejudice against Paine's deism did not vanish with Paine's death. In 1819 Richard Carlile and his wife were sent to prison in England, he for three years and she for two, and fined £1,500 and £500 respectively, for publishing Paine's works. In spite of undergoing further prison sentences, Carlile persisted in his attempts to publicize not only Paine's religious but also his political views. How successful he was is shown by the fact that the leaders of the Chartist movement which covered the decade of 1838-1848 appended their Charter to an edition of Paine's *Rights of Man*.

They were justified in doing so, since their demands for manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, annual parliaments, voting by ballot, payment of Members of Parliament and absence of a property qualification for them to become Members, had, with the exception of the ballot, all been advocated by Paine. Unfortunately, the Chartist movement petered out, and their demands for equal electoral districts and annual parliaments have not yet been met, though the others have. In the case of annual parliaments this is just as well.

The defeat of the Chartists may explain why Paine had very little political influence throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, and even in the first quarter of the twentieth. Three favourable biographies of him by Richard Carlile, his friend Thomas ('Clio') Rickman and William Sherwin appeared in 1819. An American free-thinker, Gilbert Vale, published a *Life of Paine* in 1841, but it was not until 1892 that Moncure Daniel Conway brought out his admirable two-volume *Life of Thomas Paine* to be followed by his four-volume edition of *The Writings of Thomas Paine* of which the first two appeared in

1894 and the others in 1899. Since *Common Sense* and the *Rights of Man* are independently available as Penguin Classics and *The Age of Reason* in the Thinkers Library, no inference needs to be drawn from the fact that I have used Conway's work in preference to the later edition of Paine's writings by Philip S. Foner (1945), which is recommended by the Thomas Paine Society. I shall be referring to the emergence of this society later on.

My present concern is to show how little attention was paid to Paine in the aftermath of his death. The year 1819 is exceptional because it was in that year that William Cobbett disinterred Paine's corpse and brought it back to England. Cobbett, who had emigrated to America in 1792, had been shocked by Paine's attack upon George Washington and had himself come to Washington's defence in a pamphlet which he published under the pseudonym of Peter Porcupine. He had read the mischievous life of Paine which George Chalmers, using the pen-name of Francis Oldys, had published in 1791 and incorporated its malice in his own brief sketch of Paine. However, his opinion of Paine changed almost immediately to admiration when he read Paine's pamphlet *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*, and although there is no evidence that the two men ever met, they had friends in common and in 1818 Cobbett announced his intention of writing a life of Paine. He went so far as to obtain a quantity of material from Madame Bonneville but made no serious attempt to fulfil his undertaking.

Cobbett's loss of interest in his proposal to write Paine's life was matched by a loss of interest in the disposal of Paine's physical remains. After exhibiting them proudly on their arrival at Liverpool and failing to arouse enough enthusiasm to raise funds for a monument to be erected to Paine, he took them south and kept them in a box. After Cobbett's death in 1835 his son included them in an auction sale of his father's effects, but the auctioneer refused to put them up for sale. Cobbett's son appealed to the Lord Chancellor, who ruled that Paine's bones should not be regarded as a marketable asset. According to Conway they then somehow came into the possession first of a day labourer and then of a furniture dealer in London, who presumably removed them from the 'empty coffin', with a silver plate bearing the inscription 'Thomas Paine died June 8th 1809, aged 72', which a gentleman at Guildford owned in 1849. Five years later the Reverend R. Ainslie, a Unitarian clergyman, claimed to own 'the skull and right hand of Thomas Paine'. There is evidence that the remains of Paine had been in the possession of various persons in the interval, but it is not

known how the skull and right hand came to be detached from the rest of the skeleton nor what subsequently became of them.

Audrey Williamson, who published a painstaking but excessively discursive life of Paine in 1973, supplies a few additional details. She writes of Paine's skull as having been acquired at some stage by a Brighton phrenologist. Though she fails to mention the Reverend R. Ainslie, she asserts, quoting Conway as her authority, that Paine's hand and skull were examined by a professor of the Royal College of Surgeons, who described Paine's hand, on account of its smallness and delicacy, as 'the hand of a female'. On her own account, she refers to a rumour that Paine's 'main skeleton' was buried in 1849 in the churchyard of Ash, a village in the neighbourhood of Cobbett's house in Guildford, but she quotes no source for the rumour or any evidence for its truth.

Our ignorance of the final disposal of his corpse is something that Paine shares with Voltaire and Rousseau. What he does not share, as I have already said, is the constancy of their fame. In the latter half of the nineteenth century he was better remembered in the United States than in England. The monument to him which was erected in New Rochelle in 1839 was repaired and rededicated in 1881 and a bronze bust unveiled in 1889. A portrait of Paine was accepted for Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 1875 and a marble bust in 1905. These honours were paid to him in recognition of the part that he played in the American Revolution, rather than as a mark of the acceptance of his political programme. *The Age of Reason* also assisted the development of free-thinking in the United States, as indeed it did in England, though there the diminution of religious belief, putting such deism as Paine's itself at risk, owed more to the growth of the science of geology and, as we have remarked, to the development of Darwinism.

That the political works of Paine should never have exercised much posthumous influence in the United States is not surprising, in view of the poor showing that has always been made there by any approach to Socialism. What is more remarkable is their failure to play any conspicuous part in the recovery of English radicalism from the defeat of the Chartists or even in the Republican movement which was gathering momentum in the nineteenth century until the longevity of Queen Victoria and the amatory indiscretions of Sir Charles Dilke snuffed it out. It may be the case that Disraeli claimed to be reviving the doctrine of Tom Paine when, as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Lord Derby's Conservative government, he was primarily responsible for carrying through the Second Reform Bill of 1867. But while the Bill did

extend the franchise by reducing the property qualification, it fell a long way short of fulfilling Paine's aspirations. So much so that no mention of Paine occurs in the index of Lord Blake's monumental life of Disraeli, any more than it occurs in Sir Philip Magnus's comparable biography of Gladstone. Neither did the Fabians make a hero of Paine, though they did put up a commemorative tablet to him in 1892 at an inn in Lewes which he frequented. The White Hart Hotel at Lewes was the venue in 1904 for what was described as 'The First Paine Celebration in England' but the celebration was for Paine's anti-Christian rather than his political standpoint. Bertrand Russell, who had written a letter of apology for his inability to take part in the celebration, contributed an essay on 'Thomas Paine' to a volume entitled *Great Democrats* which appeared in 1934, but the flavour of its attitude to Paine is indicated by its being reprinted many years later in an expanded version of Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*, which was originally published in 1927.

Very much the same applies to Bernard Shaw. Rather surprisingly, the anniversary of Paine's death was commemorated in 1909 both in Thetford and in London, and *The Times* found space for a special article, mainly appreciative of Paine, in which he was truly described as 'the most famous native of the little borough town of Thetford'. This gave Shaw occasion to remark on the importance of the principle of toleration in the course of his attack upon censorship which occupied his very long preface to the text of his minor play *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*. On the other hand, in the index to his major political work, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, which was published in 1928, the name of Thomas Paine does not appear. Paine is indeed mentioned in Shaw's *Everybody's Political What's What*, which was published in 1944, but not primarily as a politician. *Rights of Man* is overlooked but it is said that people used to be transported for reading Paine's *The Age of Reason*. The two other passages in which Paine's name occurs are not entirely consistent. In one it is implied that 'our rulers' are still being taught at schools like Eton and Harrow, Rugby and Winchester that 'Deists like Voltaire, Rousseau and Tom Paine were villainous atheists';¹ in another that whereas 'in the nineteenth century, Shelley, Tom Paine, and Mary Wollstonecraft were ostracized as enemies of God they are now famous for their public virtues'. Shaw, however, goes on to say 'But in private they behaved scandalously.' The point which he is concerned to make is that this is no longer held

¹ G. B. Shaw, *Everybody's Political What's What* (1944), p. 147.

against them, but it would seem to be a proposition which he himself accepts. We have seen that in Paine's case at least there is no good reason for thinking it true.

The rejection of Paine in the nineteenth century was exemplified in the hostile account of his character which Leslie Stephen contributed to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, of which Stephen was the first editor. This evoked rejoinders from Moncure Conway and the formidable Rationalist J. M. Robertson, and Stephen had the grace to admit that he had been misled.

The only Fabian Socialist, if he can fairly be so described, to do full justice to Paine in the early part of this century is H. N. Brailsford, who devoted a chapter to him in his book *Shelley, Godwin and Their Circle*, which was first published in September 1913. The conclusion of Mr Brailsford's essay appears to me so apt and eloquent that I intend to purloin it for my own peroration.

The rehabilitation of Thomas Paine, which has increasingly gained momentum since the conclusion of the Second World War, is due almost entirely to the work of one man, Joseph Lewis, the American publisher and free-thinker, who lived from 1889 to 1968. Though he enjoyed no success either with his book *Thomas Paine, Author of the Declaration of Independence*, or with his play about Paine, *The Tragic Patriot*, which he wrote in 1947 and 1954 respectively, he had managed as early as 1936 to persuade the Popular Front government of Léon Blum to erect a statue of Paine in the Parc Montsouris, Paris, which was dedicated in 1948. He was also able to raise money for the erection of a statue of Paine, which was dedicated in 1950 in Morristown, New Jersey. Lewis published a monthly journal which was given the title of *The Age of Reason* in the 1950s and he was the organizer of the Thomas Paine Foundation in the United States. Independently, a Thomas Paine National Historical Association had come into being in 1906, and in 1910 had reconstructed Paine's cottage at New Rochelle not far from its original site.

In the year that Lewis died the United States issued a postage stamp on 29 January to commemorate Paine's birthday, two hundred and thirty-one years earlier, but the Foundation did not survive. In the meantime, however, Lewis had helped to raise money for a statue of Paine to be erected in Thetford. Previously there had been only a bronze plaque, paid for by American airmen who had been stationed near Thetford in the Second World War. The statue, situated in a dominant position outside the office of the Town Council, was unveiled on 7 June 1964. A vigorous if rather contorted work, sculpted by Sir

Charles Wheeler, at one time President of the Royal Academy, it suffered from being defaced by local vandals and the covering of gold paint which now protects it is excessively bright. Tom Paine is represented with a quill pen in his right hand and in his left a copy of *Rights of Man*, upside-down and with the lettering awry. A Conservative councillor resigned in protest at its erection, on political, however, rather than aesthetic grounds.

The political dispute over the erection of the statue had one good effect in that it led to the founding of The Thomas Paine Society of which Michael Foot became and remains the President and R. W. Morrell the Secretary. The Society issues a quarterly bulletin and a newsletter twice a year. Whereas the two hundredth anniversary of Paine's birth had achieved little more notice than a dinner at the Guildhall in London, the Society saw to it that the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary, in 1987, was widely acclaimed. There were meetings at Sheffield, Leicester and Nottingham, an exhibition displayed at the library of Alford in Lincolnshire, where Paine had been a customs officer, and a celebration luncheon and a festival of liberty at Thetford, where there was also an exhibition at the Ancient House Museum of works by and about Paine and objects relating to him, the most interesting being a set of metal tokens which were put into circulation at the time of his trial in 1792. With one exception, all of them were hostile, varying in their invective and having in common the depiction on one of their faces of Paine hanging on a gibbet.

Not quite so much attention was paid to this anniversary in the United States, but a dinner organized by the Thomas Paine National Historical Association took place in New Rochelle. Three hundred persons were charged for their attendance and the proceeds served to modernize and extend New Rochelle's Thomas Paine Memorial Museum. A message was sent by President Reagan in which he paid tribute to Paine for the famous passage in his Crisis letter beginning 'These are the times that try men's souls,'¹ a letter that 'provided invaluable inspiration for the men of the Continental Army at a time when the American Revolution seemed in danger of being crushed'. The President went on to quote Paine's dictum 'Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it', and deftly hinted at its contemporary application. He chose to overlook Paine's onslaught on Christianity, or possibly it had escaped his notice.

¹ See above p. 45.

There is no safe decision procedure for subjective conditionals in history and I should not venture to assert that but for Tom Paine the American States would never have been united or made themselves independent of Great Britain. There is, however, no doubt that his *Common Sense* and other early writings were major causal factors in the actual development of the American Revolution. It would perhaps not be fair to say that he took his political philosophy from Locke, since he claimed never to have read him, but he occupied the same theoretical position. What he did was to give Locke's principles a more radical application. We have seen that his gallant attempt to guide the course of the French Revolution was unsuccessful, and while in the first volume of *Rights of Man* he enjoys a logical triumph over Burke, the Conservatives who think of Burke as supplying them with a political warrant are perhaps not greatly susceptible to logic. The second volume is remarkable for its blueprint of a Welfare State, but I doubt if either the New Dealers in America or the politicians who built up the Welfare State in Britain were consciously influenced by it. As for *The Age of Reason*, its deism needs a stronger defence and its way of discrediting the Bible appears old-fashioned, though I suspect that it is still capable of making converts, especially among younger readers.

I conclude that the importance that has recently accrued to the memory of Thomas Paine is mainly symbolic. Democracy is a term to which governments of almost any type are now obliged to pay lip-service. Except that he did not go beyond manhood suffrage, Paine genuinely believed in it. He thought that all men without exception should have as large a say as was practically possible in the management of their own affairs, and he combined this with a recognition of the need for society to take responsibility for those of its members who were not in a position to fend adequately for themselves. Conversely, he repudiated unearned privilege. He was willing that men should battle for their rights, but assumed that once they had obtained them they would be bound to perceive the futility of war. There are very few people who would openly reject these propositions, but it is only to a very limited extent that they have ever been translated into practice. That is my reason for saying that the importance attached to Paine's ideas is mainly symbolic, though I hope to have made it clear that I myself take them seriously. It should also be added that his scientific claims were not at all chimerical. As a designer of bridges, he has an honourable place in the history of architecture.

Personally he was vain, with the acceptable excuse that he had not been accorded the recognition that he had earned, not over-polite, and in old age probably uncouth. But these are minor faults to set against his courage, integrity and eloquence. When it comes to that, there is no point in my attempting to improve upon the conclusion of Brailsford's essay:

The neglected pioneer of one revolution, the honoured victim of another, brave to the point of folly, and as humane as he was brave, no man in his generation preached republican virtue in better English, nor lived it with a finer disregard of self.