

# David Henley

## *Thomas Paine: An Emerging Portrait*

*Tom Paine practically started this whole country.*  
Billie in Garson Kanin's *Born Yesterday*

With Thomas Paine it's all or nothing – there's very little middle ground. As we have repeatedly heard in this Colloquium, his unparalleled advocacy of the universal democratic/republican principles of self-determination and freedom gave rise to the establishment of the U.S. and the U.N.; yet, as we have often been reminded, he is virtually overlooked in connection with both. Indeed, this is the very first scholarly conference that I am aware of that is solely devoted to the subject of Thomas Paine; that this unprecedented and historical event is finally taking place right here in the world's top political forum is perfectly illustrative of my point. So be it. This lofty level of inquiry is, in my opinion, commensurate with the importance of the subject. To the sponsors, organizers, and participants go the honor, enlightenment, and joy of being the first to gather in this manner of scholarly acclaim of our most cherished founder. It is better to start at the top than not at all. Isn't this the way of the visionary?

My purpose here is to focus upon this anomalous treatment of Thomas Paine by briefly reviewing some of his more notable achievements that are not always fully recognized, and, at the same time, identifying (and complaining of) some of the more flagrant abuses. This inconsistent historical portrait of Paine will be considered in the framework of three pictorial dimensions: (1) a *self-portrait* as drawn by the man himself, by the imprint of his direct involvement in the momentous events of his day, and by the effect of his writings with pen and ink on paper (fortunately, acid-free at the time thus virtually indestructible); (2) a *historical portrait* painted over time by others such as biographers and historians, admirers and detractors; and (3) three actual *artistic portraits* rendered in oil on canvas (or engravings) by master portrait artists of the late eighteenth century.

Regardless of general neglect, Thomas Paine has been recognized by devotees as deserving credit for more notable and diverse achievements than any other person of his era. We are well aware that:

- He was the first to publicly, unequivocally, and effectively denounce chattel slavery in America;

- He was the first to propose and implement through brilliant persuasion *both* our independence from England and our representative form of government;
- He was the first to call for a constitutional convention and supply an outline for our constitution;
- He coined the term 'United States of America';
- He nurtured the Revolution through immortal words and practical deeds such as initiating the first fund-drive for the war effort, which resulted in his being the first subscriber to the Bank of North America, and he secured finances from France for the decisive battle of Yorktown;
- He was among the first to express concern for animal rights and nature;
- He was the first to delineate the social welfare system we take for granted today;
- He carried the American Revolution to Europe, resulting in the democratic movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which ultimately led to the Third World Revolution of the twentieth;
- He was the first to publicly call for the overthrow of the French monarchy and wrote the French Declaration of Rights;
- He was the first to propose an international peace organization;
- He was the first to propose international arbitration and copyright;
- He founded the world's first Deistic Church which formed the basis for contemporary Humanist-Ethical-Unitarian movements;
- He pioneered the development of the metal arch-bridge, the steam boat, and the internal combustion engine;
- He was the first to propose the development of the Northwest Territories and purchase of the Louisiana Territory;
- In terms of per capita readership at the time of publication, he wrote four of the greatest selling books in the history of writing: *Common Sense*, *American Crisis*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason* – no political writer of the eighteenth century has more books still in print.

One must admit, however, that in spite of the above record of achievement, only *Common Sense* receives any degree of recognition today in our history books, and this only sparingly and begrudgingly. In reviewing the typical chapter dealing with that glorious year of 1776, it is notable that the chronology of events almost always begins with the publication of *Common Sense*; and *Common Sense* is almost always the last notable utterance mentioned as having occurred directly prior to the

writing of the Declaration of Independence. The typical American History under consideration usually glosses over this interconnected chain of events in two or three paragraphs (rarely exceeding a page), while including a brief (but inspiring) quote or two, together with no significant background and discernable future. A few of the more enlightened historians will add that as he was the one that commenced the hostilities of 1776, with *Common Sense* in January, he was also the one to end the year in December by supplying both the motto and much needed reassurance for the Revolution in his immortal opening lines of the *American Crisis*, 'These are the times that try men's souls.' Washington, seeking a battle cry and backbone for his deserting army, recognized that both had arrived in the nick of time, supplied by Paine's pen. Washington then mustered his entire army to stand at attention for the first military inoculation on record, by having read to them the entire magnificent text (and some say he included *Common Sense* in the dissertation). It must have worked, for coincidence or not, the first victory was won immediately thereafter, to close out the year in question.

Paine's blazing self portrait became as clear as the words that spoke for themselves. In going on to consider the historical portrait as painted by others, I would like to focus particularly on Paine's stature as it emerged from his writings of 1776, because this was the period that basically determined his rightful claim as co-founder of the nation. A few thematic quotes by several notable admiring historians and biographers concerning the impact of *Common Sense* may serve to reinforce for us the emerging historical portrait we see today. A thousand words, in this case, are worth one indelible *historical picture*:

**Table I. Quotes from historians on the effects of  
*Common Sense* on American Independence**

It came from the press in Philadelphia early in January, 1776, the year the Congress uttered its Declaration of Independence. It was hard to resist its quick, incisive sentences, which cut so unhesitatingly to the heart of every matter they touched; which spoke, not the arguments of the lawyer, and were as direct and vivid in their appeal as any sentences of Mr. Swift himself could have been. They were cast, every one, not according to the canons of taste, but according to the cannons of force, and declared, every one, without qualification, for independence. Upon that, the issue was joined.<sup>91</sup>

With the publication of *Common Sense* in January, 1776, Thomas Paine broke the ice that was slowly congealing the revolutionary movement.<sup>92</sup>

Thomas Paine's famous pamphlet, *Common Sense*, convinced thousands of Americans that reconciliation was a dream and independence was a practical necessity. Thus was the spirit of independence unleashed.<sup>93</sup>

In January, there appeared in Philadelphia a pamphlet by Thomas Paine entitled *Common Sense*, which was to sell by the hundred thousands and to do more than any other utterance to turn the tide definitely toward independence.<sup>94</sup>

In by far the most famous publication of the time, *Common Sense*, it was urged that nothing short of a continental government could insure domestic peace; and this publication was endorsed by zealous Whigs from Massachusetts to Carolina.<sup>95</sup>

There was no doubt the business was progressing. Yet, the people continued hesitant, fearful. The radical leaders themselves were not fully aware of what it was that kept the body of their supporters from coming out openly for independence. To perceive it, interpret it, above all to give it voice, required not a statesman but an artist. And in the very nick of time, the very hour and second of indecision, the artist appeared.<sup>96</sup>

His book was to the American Revolution what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to the Civil War ... The value of Paine's book to the Revolutionary cause was enormous. It was a crystallizer, everything it said was already floating around nebulously, and without center of gravity, in the American mind; *Common Sense* brought the whole galaxy of revolutionary ideas into coherent form.<sup>97</sup>

... Paine's services to the Revolution were beyond calculation.<sup>98</sup>

**Table II. Quotes from biographers on the effects  
of *Common Sense* on American Independence**

Paine was the man who started the American Revolution, by his pamphlet *Common Sense*.<sup>99</sup>

It supplied the common people with reasons, and gave statesmen arguments.<sup>100</sup>

... the influence and power of this fifty-page pamphlet can hardly be exaggerated.<sup>101</sup>

The publication of *Common Sense* was like the breaking of a dam which releases all the pent-up water that stood behind it.<sup>102</sup>

It was the first argument for separation, the first assault upon the British *form* of government, the first blow for a republic, and it aroused our fathers like a trumpet's blast ... No other pamphlet ever accomplished such wonderful results ... Everywhere the people responded, and in a few months the Continental Congress declared the colonies free and independent states ... It is simple justice to say that Paine did more to cause the Declaration of Independence than any other man.<sup>103</sup>

Paine's 'Common Sense' prepared the public's mind for Independence and presented some of the outstanding reasons which were embodied in the Declaration of Independence, which was adopted six months thereafter.<sup>104</sup>

That the fourth of July, 1776, would not have witnessed the Declaration of Independence but for the timely appearance of 'Common Sense,' no candid, impartial student of history would for a moment question.<sup>105</sup>

Important as were some of Paine's mechanical inventions, they seem to me of minor interest, however, when we consider Paine's planning of this great American republic, of which he may very justly be termed the real founder.<sup>106</sup>

I have already noted the causal relationship between *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence. Several of the above quotes bear witness to the inseparability of the two. I have not the space here to support in depth the claim of Paine's actual authorship of the original Declaration. Sufficient for the purpose of this paper on oversights is to point out that there is a large and compelling literature relating to the subject and that this available published evidence is being systematically ignored. Aside from the merits of the case, the refusal of almost all contemporary Paine biographers to even indicate in their bibliographies that there are several serious studies which conclusively confirm Paine's authorship, is the most blatant example of continuing neglect that I know of relating to Paine scholarship.

Personally, it makes me feel better to know and espouse that a non-slaveholder and a somewhat more enthusiastic patriot wrote the founding document of this nation.

Believe me, dear sir, there is not in the British empire a man who more cordially loves a union with Great Britain than I do.<sup>107</sup>

Compare that quote from Thomas Jefferson with Paine's summation from *Common Sense*:

... nothing can settle our affairs so expeditiously as an open and determined DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.<sup>108</sup>

Please note that both of the above statements were written at approximately *the same time*. Not that Jefferson could not have changed his mind. Indeed, his position on the necessity of separation changed quickly and radically, in all likelihood, as with all of the other founders, with an irresistible assist from *Common Sense*. It is understandable that Jefferson scholars avoid the controversy over the original authorship like the plague, for it is an embarrassment to them. (Not one Jefferson biography, or specific history of the writing of the Declaration of Independence, attempts to refute the arguments supporting Paine's authorship; in fact, they usually ignore him all together.) Paine biographers, likewise, either totally ignore the subject or merely make a weak point that Paine is only tangentially associated with the Declaration. So be it. If they are afraid to confront the issue or think that it does Paine no good from a historical perspective, they should at least reference the relevant literature in their bibliographies so that readers are aware of the controversy and can make up their own minds as to the merits and importance of the case.

The above quote from *Common Sense* at least shows that to Paine goes the honor of being the very first person to actually *write* the words 'DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.' The following works present the case that he first wrote more than the title:

**Table III. Works supporting Paine's authorship  
of First Draft of Declaration of Independence**

- *Junius Unmasked; and Thomas Paine Author of the Declaration of Independence*, Joel Moody, 1874.

- *Modern Thinkers*, Van Buren Denslow, 1880.
- *Who Wrote the Declaration of Independence?* Wm. M. Van der Weyde, 1925.
- *Thomas Paine, Author of the Declaration of Independence*, Joseph Lewis, 1947.
- *Mysteries of History, No. 33, Who Wrote the Declaration of Independence?* Albert Payson Terhune, 1928.

All of the books listed above, with the exception of Joseph Lewis's, are very scarce and can be found only in rare book libraries, or Thomas Paine archives such as the American Philosophical Society Library in Philadelphia, and the Thomas Paine National Historical Association Library in New Rochelle. The above work by William M. Van der Weyde, the Association's long-time president, shows that the question of Paine's authorship was of great import to the members in the 1920s. Oh, were it so today!

The lesser known, but equally important, question concerning Paine's unattributed writings revolves around the mysterious Letters of Junius. Junius, for those unaware, was the pen name of an unknown British author of a series of masterful political letters published (1768-1772) in London, exposing the corruption of the British ministry and ineptitude of the King. It was the first effective blast directed at the heart of the royal power structure. It was an immediate sensation, for Junius not only reintroduced and popularized the classic polemic style of journalism, he was in effect, the 'Deep Throat' of the 1760s. He devastatingly revealed the court's dirty secrets and vowed to go to his grave without revealing the source of his information or his own true identity (much to the rage and frustration of his targets). The letters were collected by Woodfall the publisher in 1774 and issued in a two volume set, which was an immediate best seller, and is among the most popular political writings of the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the fact that almost every publisher at the time put out an edition. Rare is the rare bookstore of today that does not have a dusty, leather bound, two volume set of *Woodfall's Letters of Junius*. I consider each and every volume a work of Thomas Paine.

Again, without attempting to speak to the merits of Paine's authorship of these letters, I wish to point out the existence of such a case. There are some Paine detractors (Cheetham, Chalmers) that wish us to think that

before coming to America he had no background of note and instead popped out of a (rum) bottle, immediately thereafter setting the political world on its head. Other modern detractors (Fast, Aldridge) portray Paine as popping up out of a London gutter. Biographers in general, with two notable exceptions (Denslow and Williamson), simply follow this unsavory lead and thus minimize the importance of Paine's life prior to his American phase, while imagining that immediately upon arriving in 1774 without significant writing experience, he secured the editorship of a leading literary journal, the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, wrote therein several absolutely original essays on human rights, and then wrote the all-time best selling self-help book on freedom – all without any meaningful literary background and, indeed, came to these shores precisely because he was a total failure at everything he had tried heretofore. Not likely so.

Biographers would like for us to believe that Paine's was a life of pure coincidence: As he was fortuitously residing in Philadelphia at the precise time that the Declaration was being written in the Spring of '76, so likewise he had just become situated in the environs of London at just the time that Junius commenced his journalistic attack; mysteriously the pen of Junius went silent at just the time that Paine moved out of London and relocated to Philadelphia. In fact, the pen of Junius did not skip a beat – he only changed his address, pen name, and broadened the scope of the issue. In addition to the books referring to Junius in the aforementioned list on the Declaration, there is one additional study which needs to be especially noted: William H. Graves, who (together with Denslow and Moody), makes the most complete case for Paine being the real Junius in *Junius Finally Discovered*, 1917.

In the nineteenth century, Denslow, in *Modern Thinkers*, provides a much needed review of Paine's background and connections prior to his coming to America. Of present day biographers, Audrey Williamson has presented the best study in this regard. Both reveal much new information concerning Paine's younger life that 'fits' the Junius profile. It is about time, in my opinion, for Paine biographers to acknowledge this old and new material, and open their eyes and recognize a fascinating and vitally important thesis pertaining to Paine scholarship. That this question also involves the truth concerning Junius, Jefferson, and our founding charter makes it a priority for research in the future. Nothing could be lost by this inquiry. Understanding would be gained



and Thomas Paine could not as easily be ignored or disparaged. I am asking only that this inquiry be taken out of the rare book rooms and archives and put before the public for fair consideration.

As for the *artistic portraits* of Paine, the story of each individual canvas is as incongruous as the word portraits, if not more so. Thomas Paine's portrait was painted by almost all of the master portrait artists of his day in the three major countries, the U.S., England, and France. As of the end of WWII, there was not one single life portrait of Paine known to be in existence anywhere. What happened? This bizarre disappearance of irreplaceable artistic treasure would make an interesting sociological investigation in and of itself. I plan to pursue such a study in the future. Typically, Paine is the only founding father who lacks a definitive historical survey of his portraiture. I look forward with pleasure to correcting this glaring deficiency because in addition to discovery of new information is the possibility of finding more old portraits during my investigation.

Progress *is* being made with respect to locating original life portraits of Paine. Since WWII at least four major works have surfaced. John Trumbell painted a miniature portrait of Paine as a gift to Jefferson in 1788, together with a matching miniature portrait of Jefferson. Both miniatures hung together in the main parlor in Monticello during Jefferson's life. The Jefferson portrait hangs there now. The Paine miniature was lost when Jefferson's artifacts were dispersed in the 1840s. In the later 1940s, references to this painting were noted in the Jefferson Papers while they were being edited for the Library of Congress. The renewed interest led to its discovery in New England in a shoe box. It was the only life portrait then known to be in existence and was forthwith returned with great fanfare to Monticello, where it has remained safely out of sight in a desk drawer since 1948. It was brought out for a much needed restoration recently and a beautiful job was accomplished to ready it for public display. As mentioned, the Jefferson miniature has been hanging in the parlor all along, perhaps wondering what happened to its twin. It may also be wondering when its twin is going to be returned to its rightful place in the parlor. They are, after all, like two beautiful peas in a pod and should be hanging together as Trumbell obviously intended, and Jefferson effected. I have never been able to understand why these two masterpieces are not hanging together, where they belong. Therefore, I can be of no help in explaining this lack

of historical and artistic sensitivity. I would suggest that your questions be directed to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Society, which looks after Monticello and neglects the Paine miniature to this day.

The next painting to emerge was the portrait rendered by John Westley Jarvis in 1807 while Paine, at age 72, was residing in Jarvis's home in Greenwich Village. This painting was thought lost until one of Jarvis's biographies mentioned Paine's sitting for the portrait. A reader came forward in 1949 and said that the painting in question had been hanging in her home ever since she could remember. This painting was immediately donated with great fanfare by the family to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where they stuck it in their storage basement and kept it there in the dark through the Bicentennial and up until 1983, whereupon, without being displayed once in the early American collection, it was summarily transferred over to the National Portrait Gallery, where all this time they had never acquired an oil portrait of Paine, though at least one to my knowledge was presented for their consideration.

In a way, the Smithsonian, which administers both galleries, managed to kill two birds with one bureaucratic stone: The National Gallery of Art staff was under pressure by the Thomas Paine Historical Society in Washington to display the Jarvis portrait and refused because they said it had no historical or artistic merit. Anyway, they got rid of it, and the National Portrait Gallery, to their credit, finally knew a good work of art when they saw one and promptly placed the work on permanent display, thus filling the artistic vacuum which had existed in their institution and in Washington, D.C. for many years. They think I should be happy with this arrangement but, at the risk of being greedy, the Jarvis portrait should, in my opinion, be returned to its rightful owner, the National Gallery of Art on the Mall and put on permanent display in the early American exhibit. They now have some forty Gilbert Stuart paintings hanging in this collection and not one Jarvis to be found. Since all major early American artists are supposed to be represented in this exhibit, such reinstatement and prominent exhibition would correct this oversight and bring Paine home to the Mall where he belongs. The National Portrait Gallery can then go out and find their own oil portrait of Paine, two of which (original life portraits) have been recently located by the writer. I will briefly mention each and close.

The first known life portrait of Thomas Jefferson was rendered by the British/American artist, Mather Brown, in London around 1785.

Jefferson liked the portrait so much that he commissioned Brown to paint his two good friends, John Adams and Thomas Paine. The Jefferson portrait by Brown (perhaps the best looking portrait of Jefferson) is now in the possession of the Adams family in New England. The famous John Adams portrait by Brown is now hanging in the Boston Atheneum Museum.

The Paine by Brown is in my possession as a result of its being offered in a family estate sale in Baltimore. More research needs to be done before this portrait can be conclusively shown to be Paine and attributed to Brown because its provenance is still a mystery. I am satisfied, based on appearance and comparison with known Paine life-portraits and with known Brown works, that it is the original Brown portrait of Paine commissioned by Jefferson.

The final life portrait to be mentioned is the most important. George Romney, in 1792, immortalized Paine by rendering the image with which we are now familiar in the history books and biographies. As soon as the painting was finished, it was engraved by William Sharp. It then disappeared and was thought to be lost forever. (In fact, Cooper, the original owner, brought it to America shortly after the commission.) The image survived, however, because Sharp's engraving was issued at the time of the publication of *Rights of Man*, which, it will be remembered, was one of the world's all-time best selling books. The unprecedented circulation of this particular image of Paine has led over the years to it being the stereotypical face that we all recognize. To my displeasure, it reflects a harsh, abrasive, almost smirking expression that was subtly engraved into the portrait by Sharp, apparently to enhance the sale by presenting a hard-nosed trouble-making façade of the author of *Rights of Man*. The original oil portrait by Romney was rediscovered by Moncure D. Conway, the foremost authority on Paine, at the turn of the century, and has ended up, blessedly, in the Thomas Paine Museum, headquarters of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association in New Rochelle, New York. It is especially pleasing to me that this original Romney portrait is now available to be seen by the public because, characteristic of the artist, it shows a very colorful, pleasant looking, philosophic Thomas Paine. Romney was not trying to sell engravings; he was painting his friend.

This portrait, believe it or not, has never been locked away since resurfacing, but has been on constant display by the Association since it was donated in 1927 and has been described by Van der Weyde as their

most important possession. The attribution of this portrait to Romney has not yet been confirmed, but as Moncure Conway is my source, I am confident that its authenticity will stand up, hereafter changing for the better the public image of Paine. Biographers and historians, please take note.

As can be seen, the three-dimensional pursuit of Paine's portraits, as they emerge in newly discovered writings, canvasses, and interpretations, is an exciting and provocative quest. I could go on and relate additional horror stories of neglect and omission (such as the Paine portrait and bust being kicked out of Independence Square in Philadelphia by the National Park Service; or the adamant refusal to allow Paine's statue in Washington, D.C. or New York City), but I would rather end on the happy note of the George Romney and the Mather Brown portraits being rediscovered and now enjoyed in New Rochelle by those who care. I can only hope that from now on there is a greater willingness by academicians, bureaucrats, and citizens to respond to any new information regarding Paine as it is discovered or uncovered. It does no good to find lost portraits if they are not hung where people can see and appreciate them. Heretofore unattributed works such as the Junius letters and the Declaration of Independence must be proclaimed, first, to the open-minded and interested; and the closed-minded need to be challenged and corrected when they stand in the way of truth concerning our hero. We need Thomas Paine now, more than ever. We need all of the Paine we can get; artifacts, newly attributed writings, and fresh insights. I am glad that such a multi-dimensional portrait is still emerging.

I close by offering my own personal word portrait of Paine in form of contemporary lyrics of a song I have composed. The tune, as my friends involved with Paine know, is in my head.

#### THOMAS PAINE

Thomas Paine was the greatest name  
In the Halls of History;  
Yes, that's the way it was back then,  
It's the way it ought now to be ...  
It's the way it ought now to be.

When he wrote *Common Sense*, its direct consequence  
Was a great nation's liberty;

Now it's common silence,  
A small nation's gratuity ...  
A small nation's gratuity.

'THESE ARE THE TIMES THAT TRY MEN'S SOULS.'  
Immortal words he wrote when *Crisis* came;  
And with this motto, going forth,  
We overthrew the priest and the king ...  
We overthrew the priest and the king.

Jeff and George and John and (even) Ben  
Were sore afraid to break away;  
Until they were led by what Tom Paine said,  
O were he here to lead us today ...  
O were he here to lead US today.

Now, tell me city bird, when last you laid your whitish turd  
On the noble statued-head of Thomas P.?  
God knows they're hard to find, but he's a friend of yours and mine  
His *Rights of Man* and *Age of Reason* read ...  
His *Rights of Man* and *Age of Reason* read ...

(Play it again, Dave)  
Thomas Paine is the greatest name  
In the Halls of History;  
That's the way it is, my friend,  
It's the way it ought to be ...  
It's the way it ought to be.