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In the Footsteps of Thomas Paine

It seems to me that my only justification for speaking today, since I have nothing new to add to the story of Thomas Paine, is that my own enthusiasm might perhaps be said to represent, idiosyncratically, some of the many Paine enthusiasts around the world who are not engaged in historical studies or research, but whose lives have been affected in some way by Paine's life, actions, or writings.

For a great many years my knowledge of Thomas Paine was limited to a perception of him as a figure of opposition in England, even a folk hero, mainly on account of his subversive writings, and his participation in the American and French Revolutions. Although his name was one to which I responded, this response had nothing to do with the history that I was taught at school. Indeed, when I began high school, in England, at the age of eleven, our class was taught history by the physical education instructor who had formerly served in the Navy. Our first year of history was confined exclusively to the life of Francis Drake, our second year solely to the life of Horatio Nelson. In the third year I learned something about the English three-field system, and then we dropped history permanently.

On reflection, I think that I first came across Paine's name in a Penguin paperback book on William Blake by Jacob Bronowski, and perhaps simultaneously in Blake's own verse, also in Penguin, notably in the revolutionary pantheon in his poem *America* that included: Washington, Franklin, Paine, and Warren; and at different times: Gates, Hancock, Green, Allen, and Lee.

The next occurrences of Paine's name that I remember were during the 1960s when I lived in Hastings in Sussex. This town has had a brief modern history, and is sometimes known as Mugsborough, which pseudonym was given to it in the pioneering Socialist novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* [1914] by Robert Tressell. My discovery of this book, by friendship with the author's biographer, and the general political climate, led me to take a keen interest in the history of the common people in rural Sussex. In this way I became acquainted with the impact of Paine's *Rights of Man*, as well as becoming aware of his

name, often in the company of William Cobbett, not to mention such characters as Captain Swing [fictional name of a rebel in the protests of impoverished farm workers across the agricultural south of England in 1830]. I also began taking library science at a London Polytechnic and here came across two books: [R. K.] Webb's *The British Working-Class Reader*, and [Richard] Altick's *The English Common Reader*, which I am sure mentioned Paine and his writings. I even began to read [Alfred Owen] Aldridge's biography of Paine, *Man of Passion*, but I did not get very far with it at the time.

I spent the next eight years working in London at the Chelsea School of Art, but my increasing involvement with art did not give Paine much of a look in. Then I was offered a job here in New York. The timing was perfect since I was feeling uncertain what my future might be in England. I arrived in New York in 1977. For a year or so I had a temporary work visa, and then finally got my 'green card,' otherwise known as my 'alien registration card.' Looking back I now realize that not only was I an alien, but I was also alien-ated from much that I found in the USA. The extent of this alienation was not really apparent to me at the time, and now I think that those people who listened to my criticisms of the USA were very forbearing in their response to the shallowness of my understanding of America. But I was serious about staying in the USA, for I had sold my house in England and brought my family with me. Indeed after a while I began to consider whether I should become an American citizen, instead of a permanent guest in the country. What I had difficulty with, however, was establishing roots, although hearing the statistic that 32% of Americans can trace their ancestry back to England, Scotland, or Wales gave me more of a feeling of kinship with Americans.

As a result of thinking about citizenship I read the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, became interested in Jefferson's role in this process, and began to read histories: Nevins & Commager, Nye & Morpurgo's Pelican history, then Charles Beard, Edmund Morgan, and Eric Foner's *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* – all paperbacks that I could pick up easily in new or secondhand bookstores.

From my reading I began to understand that America's independence from Britain was a very close-run thing, and that the recently-arrived Englishman, Thomas Paine, had a pivotal role in the decision to become

independent. Eric Foner's book, in particular, also helped me to visualize Thomas Paine in Philadelphia, which by that time I knew quite well. I began to feel an empathy for Thomas Paine, especially with regard to his arriving in America from England and having to acclimatize himself to a somewhat different culture (and a different climate!), and at about the same age as myself when I arrived. I also developed immense respect for the fact that he became a major player on the stage of American history a mere fifteen months after he arrived in this country for the first time.

At about this time, several coincidences accelerated my interest in Thomas Paine. I saw a movie entitled *La Nuit de Varennes*, directed by Ettore Scola, which revolves around Louis XVI's flight from Paris in 1791, two years after the French Revolution. The director and his co-author invented a plot that could actually have taken place – though it did not, in fact – whereby the aging Casanova, representing the old world, played by Marcello Mastroianni, and Restif de la Bretonne, representing the revolutionary new world, played by Jean-Louis Barrault, find themselves chasing Louis XVI across France, accompanied by Thomas Paine, played by Harvey Keitel. The beauty of this near-factual fiction really intrigued me. Although Thomas Paine is a minor figure in the movie, the fact of his historical involvement in French affairs, as well as English and American, was brought home to me very forcibly.

Another event that drew me closer to Paine was that Penguin Books in the USA began to remainder their paperback copies of *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*. Many of the bookstores that I visited in New York City seemed to have dozens of copies of those two books at less than a dollar each. Inevitably, I bought one of each for myself and began to taste Paine's distinctive prose, and relish his ideas expressed in his own words.

There was yet another coincidence. My brother and his wife and family have lived in different locations in Lincolnshire in England over the last decade. Several years ago they moved to Alford, a really beautiful small town, and inevitably I visited them there. On one visit my brother showed me a plaque on the side of the Windmill Hotel in the middle of his town that said that Thomas Paine had lived there from 1764 to 1765! But that was not all. When I was staying with my parents in Hurstpierpoint in Sussex, at about the same time, my father, responding to my enthusiasm for Paine, asked me if I realized that there was a house in the town of Lewes only eight miles away, in which Thomas Paine had

lived in the 1770s! As you can imagine, these coincidences accelerated my interest in Thomas Paine still more. I now had a really personal involvement in his life story, and this led me to look for recently published biographies to discover more details of his life in England, and to see if my perception of him as a life-long radical was correct. Another thing that I did was to apply to join the Thomas Paine Society in England, and the Thomas Paine National Historical Association in the USA.

My interest in art and visual information caused me to be curious about Paine's features. The most ubiquitous image, to my mind deservedly so, was his friend William Sharp's engraving after Romney's 1792 portrait. But at the American National Portrait Gallery and at the Library of Congress, both in Washington, DC, I began to track down other images, including engravings after a lost portrait by Charles Willson Peale. It was there, too, that I saw for the first time the late-in-life oil painting of Paine, by another friend, John Wesley Jarvis.

Another visual aspect of Paine's life was his designs for bridges, and the bridge seemed to be a very appropriate symbol to be associated with him. I became eager to see the results of his visual imagination. Bridges and their builders had interested me for a long time, perhaps because of my own father's beginnings as an engineer, perhaps on account of a symbolic value that they had for me, certainly for their aesthetics. Recently, my father gave me his volumes of Samuel Smiles's *Lives of the Engineers*, which he had been given when an apprentice. The volume on roads and bridges, on Metcalfe and Telford, had an engraving of the iron bridge over the Wear River at Sunderland, said to have been derived at least in part from Paine's designs. (Recently, I went to see the iron bridge over the Wear.)

I think that I have talked enough about these coincidences, because in the end such coincidences are of no consequence if the figure to whom they refer is of no interest. Paine *was* of interest to me, and not just because I could use his odyssey as a way to create a meaningful place for myself in my new country, the United States. Although I had mixed feelings on leaving England in 1977, especially since my parents and my brother and his family were still there, I was not sorry to leave England during the ascendancy of Margaret Thatcher. The United States under Jimmy Carter seemed somewhat less reactionary than Britain would be under Thatcher. However, within a couple of years of my arrival in the

USA, Ronald Reagan was elected, and it became apparent that the Western world was undergoing a convulsion.

I do not mention the names of these two politicians to make a small point. In the early 1980s the swing to conservatism profoundly affected my personal optimism. For the first time in my thinking life, my belief in progress was very seriously dented. I could not believe that I was living in a time when so many prehistoric and reactionary ideas were given such currency, and in addition were unchallenged in the mainstream media. I was totally out of sympathy with the times. I began to understand that the notion of progress that I believed in had historical roots. My scientific education had also contributed to a belief in reason and logic, and in evolutionary progress. (As it happens, at the same time I was also experiencing a certain detachment from the more conspicuous varieties of contemporary art, which also seemed reactionary, and was seeking a more encompassing idea of what modernism might mean.)

All these factors led me back to the eighteenth century, and specifically to the Enlightenment. I had also, for many years, been very interested in such people as William Hogarth and Lawrence Sterne, the author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, who in their respective spheres seemed to me to possess 'modern' sensibilities. I began to make a deeper acquaintance of Voltaire and Diderot as thinkers and as writers; I began to take an interest in the history of science itself. It seemed to me that the eighteenth century not only marked a rupture with a past that I had difficulty in entering, but was also a period which seemed very accessible to me. One of the missing elements in the pantheon that I was making for myself, representing what I felt was the beginning of a kind of modernism, was a more purely political figure. It was here that Thomas Paine also fitted in. His contributions to the histories of two countries that underwent revolutions, and to the history of a third that suffered great strains but unfortunately did not undergo a revolution, seemed seminal. In addition, his ideas and writing struck some personal chord in me.

Thomas Paine became to me a true 'Founding Father' of the United States, and indeed of the modern world, to whom one could return in order to set one's compass through this time of reaction. Thomas Paine's clear expositions of his views: on the irrelevance of royalty and aristocracy; on the reactionary nature of organized religion; on the rights of all peoples, particularly as expressed through his attention to the rights

of woman and the iniquity of slavery; on cooperation and coexistence between nations, but opposition to the tyranny of one nation over another; on the futility of war; on freedom of thought and freedom of speech; on the state's obligation to its weak and deprived citizens; and on many more matters, reflect his civilized attitudes and his continuing relevance. I sympathize with these essential ideas, and find myself drawn irresistibly to this rational man so uncommonly endowed with abundant common sense, and this citizen of the world.