

THOMAS PAINE

Author(s): James A. Roberts

Source: *The Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association*, APRIL 1920, Vol. 1, No. 3 (APRIL 1920), pp. 73-86

Published by: Fenimore Art Museum

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43564372>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Fenimore Art Museum is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association*

JSTOR

---

---

# The Quarterly Journal

of the New York State Historical Association

---

---

## THOMAS PAINE<sup>1</sup>

“ Poor Tom Paine — here he lies,  
Nobody laughs, nobody cries;  
Where he’s gone and how he fares,  
Nobody knows and nobody cares.”

This contemptuous, and, I think, contemptible doggerel, published in a New York paper shortly after the death of Paine as a proposed epitaph, did not express the real popular sentiment of the time, nor the feeling toward Paine that has been handed down even to our own time. Another sentiment was far more active. Conway in his life of Paine has put it better when he says that Paine “was put in the place of a decadent Satan, hostility to him being a sort of sixth point of Calvinism, and fortieth article of the Church.”

It is admitted that his writings did more than those of any other to arouse and crystallize the feeling of the people of the Colonies in favor of the Declaration of Independence, and to maintain the spirit of patriotism during the Revolutionary War. Is it not worth our while, indeed is it not our duty as just and patriotic Americans, to look carefully into the life and work of this man and learn if there be a sound basis for the envenomed hostility that attaches to his memory, or whether he may not be the victim of the proverbial ingratitude of republics? It is within the memory of many of us that our great American historian, Motley, rescued the name of one of the greatest statesmen and patriots of the Dutch struggle for inde-

---

<sup>1</sup>An address delivered at the Rochester meeting of the New York State Historical Association, October 9, 1919.

pendence, John of Barneveld, from the odium and disgrace which had buried his memory for a century and a half, and showed his work to be in the highest degree patriotic and of greatest value to the United Netherlands. Like Paine he was socially crucified, largely because he was not in accord with the majority in religious and political opinion.

Paine is one of the most interesting characters and careers in our history. He was born in England in 1736, just at the time when people were beginning to question the right of Kings to autocratic rule and to ask if the people had not some rights which even Kings were bound to respect. His father was a Quaker of the early type, one who distrusted revelation in the form of the direct communication of God's will to man as it is set forth in the Scriptures, and who relied rather upon the wonders of creation and upon the inner light. A part of Paine's unpopularity in his last years was due to his devotion to the religion of his father.

Paine's business career was not a successful one. He had read and thought, however, and he had been an active member of literary and debating societies, in which public questions, the rights and wrongs of the people, were the popular subject of discussion.

In November, 1774, Paine landed in Philadelphia, bearing a letter from Benjamin Franklin introducing him as "an ingenious worthy man." His first real work in Philadelphia was as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. The proprietor's attention was called to him by an article contributed by him to the magazine against African slavery. It has been said that all the real arguments against slavery which filled volumes during the anti-slavery movement were concisely set forth in the article by Paine. In his brief editorial career, he published articles against duelling and cruelty to animals and in favor of greater rights for women. These were all new questions and it took a century to bring the country up to the advanced ground where Paine planted his standard. But these efforts, while they show the direction of Paine's thought toward equality of right and opportunity for all humanity and his sympathy for all created beings, were not the great work for which he was foreordained.

It cannot be necessary before a society such as this to go into much detail as to the public sentiment of the colonists on the question of independence shortly before its declaration. Samuel Adams believed in it, but his following was small. In March, 1775, Franklin assured Chatham that he "had never heard in America an expression in favor of independence from any person drunk or sober." In May of that same year Washington on his way to Congress, when warned that the path he was pursuing might lead to separation from England, replied: "If you ever hear of my joining in any such measures, you may set me down for everything wicked." Four months after Lexington, Jefferson wrote of "looking with fondness toward a reconciliation." This undoubtedly represents the general sentiment of the time among the colonists. They wanted wrongs redressed and certain principles established, but no separation.

This, however, was not the sentiment of Thomas Paine, particularly after the bloody 19th of April, 1775. He devoted the autumn of 1775 to the preparation of his pamphlet, "Common Sense," and it appeared in print early in January, 1776. Its effect was dynamic. One hundred and twenty thousand copies were put out as fast as they could be printed and distributed—an unprecedented sale and, considering the times and the small population, marvelous. There was no argument for separation which Paine did not embody in his pamphlet with a directness and cogency that compelled conviction. Many may have felt, but Paine gave their feelings expression. To us who have inherited from long lines of ancestry a full belief in the principles for which our forefathers fought in the Revolutionary War, such an argument almost seems superfluous, but the feeling of the colonists until April 19, 1775, toward separation had been hostile, and even after that tragedy it was dormant, not even nascent.

The hostility to Paine has, during the past one hundred years, been so strong that the inevitable tendency of history has been to minimize the effect of Paine's work, but every careful student of history must admit that it was tremendous. Joel Barlow long afterwards said that "the great American cause owed as much to the pen of Paine as to the sword of Washington."

Edmund Randolph ascribed our independence first to George III and next to Thomas Paine. Washington said his book "worked a powerful change in the minds of many men," and that "its doctrine was sound and reasoning unanswerable." Dr. Benjamin Rush said, "'Common Sense' burst from the Press with an effect that has rarely been produced by types and paper in any age or country!" It will be remembered that New York was the last of the colonies to agree to a separation and its dominant thought was at first to answer Paine, but after an effort it concluded that it could not find the arguments.

Paine was too recently from England not to know something of the tendency and ambition of the British Government. History shows us now that George III made the last fight for arbitrary power in England, and the American Colonies were to receive the first effects of its exercise. "Common Sense" denounced such power and is all clear statement and close reasoning, but it also abounds in terse philosophical statements which could not fail to arrest attention. I quote a few: "Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness." "Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one." "Male and female are the distinctions of nature, good and bad the distinctions of heaven; but how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest is worth inquiring into." "When we are planning for posterity we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary."

But with the Declaration of Independence, to the accomplishment of which Paine had so largely contributed, his work for the freedom of the country was but well commenced. We find him enlisting as a private in a Pennsylvania company, and when that was disbanded he received an appointment on General Greene's staff, and he performed the duties of this office during the remainder of the war, except as he was called away to do other and more important work. He was the first Secretary of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Continental Congress, had charge of its correspondence, and so was virtually our first Secretary of State. From this position he shortly resigned, on account of disagreement with prominent members of Congress.

over Silas Deane's actions in France. Subsequent disclosures show that Paine was right and the Congressmen wrong.

When Congress, in 1780, found French help absolutely necessary, they asked Colonel John Laurens, of Washington's staff, to go to France to lay the situation before the French Government. This, he reluctantly consented to do, provided Paine would accompany him. Paine accepted the appointment and was influential in the negotiations which brought the much needed help. Lamartine said that "the King loaded Paine with favors." But these services, important as they seem, were nothing in comparison with the work of his pen.

It was a gloomy outlook for the patriots at the end of 1776. The American forces had lost the battles at or near New York, had retreated across New Jersey and, ill clad, ill fed, had assembled on the Delaware. Desertions were frequent and Washington's letters were full of dark forebodings. Paine had participated in the hardships of the army on this retreat and, at night, worried and worn, he had written his first "Crisis," which appeared December 19th. It was read by the camp fires with inspiring effect. Its beginning has passed into the common speech of man, "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis shrink from the service of their country; but he who stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman, . . . What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; it is dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated." And then he shows how much had been accomplished and that perseverance and fortitude alone were needed to achieve a glorious issue. It was a trumpet call to the wearied soldier and the blast rang in his ears a week later at the Battle of Trenton. Paine's bitterest enemy wrote of its effect, "hope succeeded to despair, cheerfulness to gloom, and firmness to irresolution." Washington expressed his "lively sense of the importance of your (Paine's) works."

But the ink was hardly dry on this "Crisis" before Paine was at work on another which was to bring back into line those who

were allowing Lord Howe's proclamations and propaganda to shake their loyalty. So at every dark and trying time in the Revolutionary War a "Crisis" appeared which did wonders to uphold the weak-hearted and enable the Government and Washington to pursue their ways. In all, fifteen of these publications appeared. They all abound in striking statements. I quote: "Britain was too jealous of America to govern it justly; too ignorant of it to govern it well; and too far distant from it to govern it at all." "Those who expect to reap the blessing of freedom, must, like men, undergo the fatigues of supporting it."

Again at a time of a great money stress when the Government could not meet the most pressing demands, we find Paine instituting a popular subscription and heading it with a personal contribution of \$500 from his own scanty means—and thus a serious situation was met. An incident which shows the public recognition of the value of Paine's services was the conferring on him of the degree of M. A. by the University of Pennsylvania on the fourth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. But the importance of Paine's work was more fully published in a letter signed by Robert Morris, Robert Livingston and George Washington, setting forth the value of his past services and the need for future work by him and recommending that he be paid \$800 per year from some national fund to cover his pressing necessities, and again by a resolution of Congress "that the early, unsolicited and continued labors of Mr. Thomas Paine, in explaining and enforcing the principles of the late revolution by ingenious and timely publications upon the nature of liberty and civil government, have been well received by the citizens of these States and merit the approbation of Congress." One may say that all the great leaders of the Revolution highly appreciated and approved Paine's work.

Can there be any doubt even from this brief statement of Paine's activities during the "times that tried men's souls," that he deserved well of the Republic?

But the war was over and a mind like Paine's, active and ingenious, could not drop into "innocuous desuetude" when the storm and stress were passed. He had great inventive talent, and in the years immediately following the conclusion of peace

he developed several useful devices. The idea which chiefly absorbed his mind was the conception of a bridge constructed of iron. The most of his correspondence of the time was concerning the bridge. In Franklin and Jefferson he found sympathetic auditors. At this time when almost every stream, great or small, is spanned by iron or steel structures, it seems almost incredible that a little more than a century ago almost everybody was "a doubting Thomas" on the question of building bridges of iron except the *real* Thomas. At his own expense he built and exhibited at Philadelphia a span of sufficient size to show the strength and practicability of the construction. Paine was a poor man and feeling that his idea had value and that he should get value out of it, he determined to exploit it in Europe. He took it first to Paris and after demonstrations and tests, his idea or invention received the endorsement of the French Academy of Sciences. He next went to England expecting to receive government approval and protection for his patent from that country. Suffice it to say that while the Paine idea has been used in every steel or iron bridge, except the cantilever type, built since that time, Paine never received a dollar for his really great invention.

It was while Paine was engaged in promoting his bridge enterprise in 1790 that Burke published his long pamphlet "Reflexions on the Revolution in France," that paper so condemnatory of all patriotic French acts and aspirations and so contradictory to Burke's whole career and oft expressed beliefs. This pamphlet was a clarion call to battle for Paine; he dropped everything else and in the shortest space of time wrote and published his "Rights of Man." Conway says "the political student may find in Burke's pamphlet the fossilized, and in Paine's the living, Constitution of Great Britain." Burke was looking backward but Paine was looking hopefully forward. "The Rights of Man" was pronounced by Jefferson, Madison and Andrew Jackson to be an exposition of what had been contemplated in the government of our country. It was probably the earliest complete statement of republican principles. It had a circulation in England of nearly 200,000 the first year. It was translated into French and was enthusiastically received by the people of France.



The latest *Encyclopedia Britannica* says of it that "those that know the book only by hearsay as the work of a furious incendiary will be surprised at the dignity, force, and temperance of its style." The English government of the time did not find its style temperate. Its circulation was suppressed and an indictment was found against Paine for treason. He was tried and convicted in his absence, for at the time of his trial he was in France, and a sentence of outlawry pronounced against him. This result may have been due to the exigencies of the situation. Pitt is quoted as saying, "Tom Paine is quite in the right, but what am I to do? If I were to encourage his opinions we should have a bloody revolution."

But how different was Paine's treatment by France. He was made a French citizen by the National Assembly and was elected a delegate to the French Convention by three different departments — Oise, Puy de Dôme and Pas de Calais. He accepted his election from the last named constituency and took his seat in the Convention. He was promptly made a member of a committee of nine to frame a constitution for France — being second only to Siéyès on the committee. No man did nobler work on that committee than Paine. The result of the work might almost be called Paine's constitution, so much of its substance was due to him. This constitution was adopted by the Convention, but its operation was suspended and it did not go into effect until after the downfall of Robespierre and "The Mountain."

Paine's influence in the Convention was reduced to a vanishing point during the rule of Robespierre and his associates. Paine took strong ground against the execution of the King. His cry was, "Kill the King but spare the man." Danton's answer to Paine's appeal for the life of Louis was, "Revolutions are not made of rosewater." It was his attitude in this matter that aroused the relentless hostility of Robespierre. Perhaps this hostility was increased by Paine's unswerving belief in God. A careful examination of Paine's conduct during the French Revolution fails to show any act or word which was not in full accord with the true spirit of that great movement. Despite this, when Robespierre secured control of the government, Paine was thrown into prison and kept there for more than ten months

and until the overthrow of "The Mountain." It is a sad illustration of the ingratitude of republics that the incarceration did not call for a protest from our country until James Monroe succeeded Gouverneur Morris as Minister to France, and then Monroe on his own initiative took active and successful measures to secure Paine's release.

The reason for American indifference may not be far to seek. Paine's "Rights of Man" aroused almost as much antagonism in government circles in this country as it did in England. We are loath to believe that the great leaders of the Federalist party were strongly in favor of a monarchical form of government, and were hoping and working for its adoption in this country—but such is the fact. Jefferson, late in life, wrote of the time of his return from France to New York to become Secretary of State in Washington's Cabinet: "but I cannot describe the wonder and mortification with which the table conversation filled me. Politics was the chief topic, and a preference of kingly over republican government was evidently the favorite sentiment." Alexander Hamilton believed republicanism to be an "iridescent dream." He wrote, "It is a King only, above corruption, who must always intend the true interest and glory of the people." Parton says, "It was the great aim of Hamilton's public life to make the Government of the United States as little unlike that of Great Britain as the people would bear it." His frequent expression was "men in general are vicious," and he was disgusted with the "town meeting" government and anxiously awaited the time when our government should essentially conform to the English model. John Adams fully believed in the hereditary principle—the government by the "well born." He wrote, "to the landed and privileged aristocracy of birth, Europe owes her superiority in war and peace, in legislation and commerce, in agriculture, navigation, arts, sciences and manufactures." Washington was a thorough aristocrat, who brooked no familiarity from his associates.

A veritable volume of utterances of similar import could be quoted from great Federalist leaders. Nor were they unconscientious and self-seeking men who thus thought. As they looked about in the world the only great governments were run

on the hereditary monarchical plan and a conservative mind not unnaturally asked if it were not safer to follow a long line of precedents rather than to pursue a new and untried road. To combat these views and tendencies was Jefferson's great work from the time of his return from France until his death, and how well he succeeded is a large part of the history of that same period. Jefferson did much to save democracy to our country and so to the world. Paine's book "The Rights of Man" did powerful service in creating the public sentiment which followed Jefferson to the end. Jefferson appreciated this influence and he wrote to Paine shortly before the latter's return to this country—"I am in hopes you will find us returned generally to sentiments worthy of former times. In these it will be your glory to have steadily labored, and with as much effect as any man living. That you may long live to continue your useful labors and to reap the reward in the thankfulness of nations is my sincere prayer."

But to the man of opposite belief who conscientiously favored the hereditary monarchical form of government because he thought it safest, or to the self-seeker who favored it because he hoped to be Earl of Boston or Duke of New York, Paine's "Rights of Man" with its unanswerable logic was inopportune—it was vicious. Here began that unpopularity which followed Paine to his death. He had alienated and made hostile a large and influential body of men. To this as a basis of unpopularity, Paine added a structure, which has ever since been the subject of strong attacks, and which alienated a much larger body—the orthodox churches. As I have said, Paine was born of Quaker parents. His father at least was a deist, who did not believe in any revelation nor in Christ's divinity, but held that our guidance in life is the "inner light." These beliefs Paine imbibed. Both father and son believed fully in the existence of God. Scarcely any writer has stated more emphatically a belief in God or argued more cogently in support of such belief than has Tom Paine, the so-called atheist. May I quote a few illustrative sentences from his works: "We are unavoidably led to a serious and grateful sense of the manifold blessings which we have undeservedly received from the hands of that Being, from

whom every good and perfect gift cometh." "I believe in one God and no more; and I hope for happiness after this life." "It is only in the *Creation* that all our ideas and conceptions of a *word of God* can unite . . . Do we want to contemplate his power? We see it in the immensity of the creation. Do we want to contemplate his wisdom? We see it in the unchangeable order by which the Whole is governed. Do we want to contemplate his munificence? We see it in the abundance with which he fills the earth. Do we want to contemplate his mercy? We see it in his not withholding that abundance even from the unthankful. In fine, do we want to know what God is? Search not the book called the scripture, which any human hand might make, but the scripture called the creation." "When we contemplate the immensity of that Being who directs and governs the incomprehensible WHOLE of which the utmost ken of human sight can discover but a part, we ought to feel shame to call such paltry stories the word of God." These quotations seem to me to give a complete idea of Paine's religious belief. You might almost express it in Kant's familiar statement, "Two things fill the soul with wonder and reverence, increasing evermore as I meditate more closely upon them: The starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." These are in reality Paine's "works of creation" and "inner light."

The French Revolution was not only a dynastic upheaval but a religious upheaval; it sought not alone relief from the feudal and hereditary systems, but sought also relief from the tyranny of the church. The pendulum swung beyond limit in both cases. Robespierre, with a large and increasing following, was an avowed atheist, whose only acknowledged god was reason. Danton, on the contrary, claimed to be religious, and he searched the scriptures diligently for precedents for his cruel and nefarious acts, and his search was too often successful. And these were the men who seemed for the time to be shaping the destinies of a great nation. It was in this unsettled state of thought that Paine wrote, had translated into French, and published his "Age of Reason." I hardly think it can be doubted that Paine believed this work was as necessary to the accomplish-

ment of a great purpose, namely, that of staying the growing tide of atheism and stopping the misuse of the Bible, as was the publication of "Common Sense" or the "Rights of Man." All were a necessity of their time, necessary to great ends.

I confess that theological distinctions are often beyond my limited comprehension. Paine fully believed in God, in a future life, in the guidance of the "inner light," but he did not believe in the Trinity nor in revelation. Have there not been many, prominent in the social, political and literary life of our country whose belief was essentially that of Paine? To distinguish his belief from that of the others, it has been said that he was a rationalist. Theologically the rationalist "believes as probable the existence of a God and the immortality of the soul, and as indisputable facts the great principles of the moral law," whether contained in the Scriptures or in the works of philosophers. This was Paine's belief, if you eliminate the words "as probable" and insert "as undoubted." Exactly where this doctrine leaves off and liberal Unitarianism, liberal Universalism or Hicksite Quakerism begins, I am unable to determine. Is there so essential a difference between Paine's doctrines and those of many highly honored of our citizens to account for the vast difference in treatment?

On any rule of right or fair dealing, it cannot be explained. The treatment of Paine and of his memory cannot be accounted for by his manner of life. There was a short time in Paris, when his intimate associates among the Girondists were being led daily to the guillotine, that he drank to excess, but at other times, in all his public life, he lived temperately, and the attempt to show that he led a licentious life has signally failed. Joel Barlow, who knew Paine intimately, bore testimony to his high character and said: "He was always charitable to the poor beyond his means, a sure friend and protector to all Americans."

There may be some explanation, though no excuse, for the treatment accorded Paine by his countrymen in the last years of his life and to his memory since his death. Whatever Paine had to say, he said clearly, tersely and emphatically, and with small regard to the opinions and feelings of opponents, so that his statements concerning the Bible in his "Age of Reason"

were to the Trinitarians not only false but dangerous and brutal. In his critical analysis of the Bible and in his criticism of the authenticity and authorship of its various books, he was a pioneer, and forgiveness does not come readily to a man who starts a revolt against a long established system. Conway, in his introduction to a recent edition of "The Age of Reason" says of Paine: "He plagiarized by anticipation many things from the rationalistic leaders of our time, from Strauss and Baur, being the first to expatiate on 'Christian Mythology,' from Renan, and notably from Huxley, who has repeated many of Paine's arguments." But the battle for freedom of thought in religion had to be fought, not only in France but in England and America, and Paine's "Age of Reason" has been the leader in that contest. A hundred years ago this book was publicly burned in England and many a man was prosecuted for printing and circulating it, but to-day, it is free and many of its teachings are generally accepted. Canon Bonney, of Manchester, in 1895, the centennial of the publication of the complete edition of the "Age of Reason," said: "I cannot deny that increase of scientific knowledge has deprived parts of the earlier books of the Bible of the historical value that was generally attributed to them by our forefathers. The story of creation in the Book of Genesis, unless we play fast and loose with words or with science, cannot be brought into harmony with what we have learned from geology. Its ethnological statements are imperfect, if not sometimes inaccurate. The stories of the Fall, of the Flood and of the Tower of Babylon are incredible." Does this not represent intelligent evangelical belief to-day? If so, what a change a century has wrought! A man who bore any part in effecting such a change must have been a force.

Such, in brief, was the eventful and stormy life of Thomas Paine during his public career. He returned to this country and shortly retired to a farm near Mount Vernon, New York, which had been given to him by the State of New York in recognition of his aid to our cause in the Revolutionary War. There he lived, practically neglected by his former friends and ostracized by general society. There he died and was buried. But Fate seemed to have denied peace to his body either in life

or in death. His body was removed from the grave a few years after burial by William Cobbett, that stormy petrel of journalism, who was a great admirer of Paine. He removed the body with the intent of taking it to England for interment. Where his body at last found rest, no one knows. I believe, however, that some angel of God upturned a sod and laid the patriot there.

JAMES A. ROBERTS.