A Few Lives of Thomas Paine
by Victor Madeson

Explanations for why the history of our hero is sometimes confused is not more complicated than "spin doctor" artistry. There were some who hated Thomas and would have had him executed if caught. The nation that helped defile his bones still has a warrant for sedition against him. Since they could not kill the man, they tried to kill his ideas by discrediting the source.

Gilbert Vale, author of an 1839 Life of Thomas Paine, noted that there were four other known biographies, none of them then in print in the United States. (Of course, Paine's major writings were still in print, as today). He made the point that (p. 3) that one of them was commissioned to George Chalmers (who falsely claimed to hold an MA degree from the University of Pennsylvania) by Lord Hawkesbury of Liverpool, and produced for political reasons in 1792, under the pseudonym of Francis Olyds. An 1809 volume by a political operative named James Cheetham was apparently meant "as a passport to the British treasury favor" and its reputation for calumny is second only to Olyds'. An 1819 Life by W.T. Sherwin, was "so exclusively adapted to a London reader, that it is deteriorated for this [U.S.] market."

The opinions of William Cobbett are sometimes found among the biographies. His initial view of Paine in 1792 had been confused by the Oldys work and an unfavorable view of the French Revolution. However, even if we accept his "born again" enthusiasm for Paine in subsequent decades, he is forever disgraced by discrediting Paine's grave without proper provision for re-interment. (Imagine if someone had done that with the bones of Benjamin Franklin!)

Vale makes some pleasant remarks about Clio Rickman's 1819 biography but asserts that it was "sullied by a little vanity" but it was probably more caution than vanity. Vale concedes that Rickman was "an excellent, amiable man, of the quaker profession, with whom Mr. Paine lived both in England and France, at different periods, and with whom he kept up a constant correspondence." (p. 4) In my opinion, the main fault of both 1819 biographies is that they were printed in London, so the editors had to be careful what they said about the king and the religious cat's paw of aristocracy. The Vale biography gave later biographers evidence against Paine's detractors. For me, the main value of Vale's work is in exposing lies and the liars - Chalmers and Cheetham - who told them. For example, his exposition of the Paine was a drunkard lie (pp. 12-13) was informative:

We know more than twenty persons who were more or less acquainted with Mr. Paine, and not one of whom ever saw him in liquor.... Mr. Paine was rather pensive in his old age. This, and this alone, is the only moral fault we find in his character, and we wish to his impartial historian.

Besides additions to correct understatement (directed to royal censors), Vale apparently relied heavily on Rickman's appraisal. The fault of Vale's biography, if any, is the "want of surplus funds" (p. 192) that probably condensed three years of manuscripts to a single volume. Anyway, by now the motives of his faint praise of Rickman might be more clear and we know which work better stood the test of time.

The next significant work, Life of Thomas Paine (two volumes, 1892), was done by Moncure D. Conway 2 and avoided some of the omissions that Rickman had felt compelled to make. It added an appendix with a previously unpublished sketch of Paine by William Cobbett. The later four volumes (of 1894-1896) were mostly a collection of Paine's writings and were again reprinted in 1908, apparently to compete against the ten-volume collection Life and Writings of Thomas Paine, edited and annotated by Daniel Edwin Wheeler.

The Wheeler work is based on the original collection by Clio Rickman but adds a number of "Appreciations" that enhance its value. If Mr Conway had not retreated to France and died in 1907, perhaps he could have added a few strong chapters to strengthen the literary value of his 1892 work. Fortunately we have Conway's Address of 29 January 1860, delivered in the First Congregational Church, and published in "The Dial" of Cincinnati. Ohio. It consists of about 5,200 words and serves as a reminder about the extent that religious, if not chattle, slavery had been imposed on the country. After giving a short summary of Paine's many accomplishments, he notes that the city council of Philadelphia had refused to place a portrait of Paine in Independence Hall.

Conway, asks about the cause of such base ingratitude; he answers: ...Paine believed, fifty years ago, what now the enlightened world believes, namely, that God is a Father, and not a Tyrant; that he does not send millions into this world, from day to day, in the sure knowledge that a large proportion of them will burn in fire and brimstone everlastingly; that God never said, "Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor;" nor that God ever made a Universe which at this or that period failed to work out by its own laws the best results, and so had to be eked out by a subversion of law, and patched up by special intervention....

Mr. Conway's full speech is worth reading because it is also a call for action today, as it was then, and not only against those who some might describe as the religious fanatics. But this is a topic for longer discussion. Here our emphasis has been to understand the various biographies of Thomas Paine.

From a technical point of view, regarding the later four volumes by Conway and ten volumes by Rickman (per Wheeler) each amounts to some 725,000 words that consist mostly of the writings attributed to Thomas Paine. That is also the main content in modern books, like those of Foner, which keep some letters and essays organized as haphazardly as Rickman's 1819 edition. Since examples of the writings are the essence of any literary biography, exclusion would not be preferable to concision but we would probably like more of a "what was he thinking" kind of commentary. In particular, if the importance of Thomas Paine is in defining the epitome of American values, then his retrospective opinion of those values deserves more attention.

Most of the Paine biographies can be faulted for failing to examine properly his last six years. His condemnation of the American legal system in an 1805 "Letter to the Citizens of Pennsylvania" with attached "Compass" is especially important (I placed a full copy of both into Supreme Court legal filings). But that is a story for some future time.

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In conclusion, the scientific process begins with observation, as in the examination of Thomas Paine's life and writings. From there it moves into study aimed at some sort of understanding, which is where the connective tissue between individual writings becomes more important. Ideally, the outcome of such understanding will be constructive action, or at least better definition. These are individual pursuits that add direction away from defaming the messenger, and in this case towards his worthy message.

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1 Gilbert Vale, *Life of Thomas Paine, Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, The Age of Reason, &c., &c., With Critical and Explanatory Observations on His Writings; and an Appendix, Containing His Letters to Washington, Suppressed in His Works at Present Published in this Country*, 1839-41, New York: Beacon. (Vale was editor of the Beacon.)


4 *Thomas Paine: A Celebration*, delivered by M. D. Conway, Minister, in The First Congregational Church, Cincinnati, Ohio, January 29, 1860, Published at the Office of The Dial, No. 76 West Third Street, Cincinnati Ohio, 1860

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